

Attn: Hon. Julia Gillard AC

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

via email to RoyalCommissionECEC@sa.gov.au

I write to the Royal Commission to express my concerns in relation to the complexities of accessing early childhood education and care (ECEC) and Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) in the remote community of Kangaroo Island, South Australia.

Access to ECEC and OSHC services in regional and remote locations can be limiting, extremely challenging and for many families non-existent. The difficulties we have faced accessing these services in western Kangaroo Island (KI) are shared experiences amongst many regional communities in South Australia. Whilst I discuss the challenges we have personally experienced through-out my submission, I would like to acknowledge that many communities face similar barriers to access.

Benefits of providing an ECEC service in Parndana, Kangaroo Island

Establishing an ECEC service in our community will provide significant economic growth for our region. With an estimated 6 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions being created at the ECEC service, and up to 25 FTE positions expected to be generated externally within the region.

Beyond economic benefits, the ECEC service will offer numerous advantages for children and families in our community. In the first 1000 days, children will have access to early education, social experiences, and early intervention health care. This will set better lifelong projections for the children in our community, with research providing evidence of higher education attainment and greater lifelong learning, social and wellbeing outcomes.

The service will attract families to relocate and remain in our community, promoting population stability and growth. It will also provide the opportunity for primary carers to access much needed respite, leading to improved wellbeing and mental health outcomes for both parents and children alike.

An ECEC service will serve as a safe environment for children at risk, providing them with the necessary care and support. It will also create opportunities for both parents within a family to seek employment if they wish, leading to better financial outcomes and improved quality of living standards for families.

Early Childhood Education & Care concerns and constraints from a regional perspective

The lack of accessibility to ECEC services in regional and remote areas is a critical social and economic issue, that provides disadvantages for families, primary carers, and the community. Majority of the primary carers located in western Kangaroo Island are women, and the lack of accessible and available ECEC services in our region predominantly affects women.

In majority of cases due to market failure, regional families are left to find their own solutions to the lack of ECEC services in their communities, with little support from local, state, or federal

governments. This is frustrating, considering the current skills shortage across KI and nationally, where a significant portion of the workforce, including skilled workers, are unable to work due to the lack of accessible childcare.

The absence of regulated ECEC services in our region, has led families to seek unregulated care being provided by individuals within our community. This poses significant risks for children, as unregulated care leaves children exposed to many vulnerabilities. It also costs significantly more for families to use unregulated care services.

Other members within our community have also assumed caring roles, including relatives and grandparents. This has subsequently limited their capacity to contribute to the workforce, whether in paid or voluntary roles. The implications of these arrangements influence regional workforce availability and the overall well-being outcomes of the community.

The lack of accessible ECEC services also directly affects family planning and population growth. Some parents in our community have limited the number of children they have in their families, due to the caring arrangements affecting prolonged absences from the workforce and financial disadvantage.

The impact also extends beyond individual families and into the growth and development of regional and remote areas. It becomes a barrier for families considering relocating or already living in our region. If families are not relocating or staying in our regions, it affects the ability of our communities, clubs, businesses, and schools to thrive and flourish.

History of progressing ECEC & OSHC services in Parndana, Kangaroo Island

My personal experience of a lack of access to ECEC and OSHC services, stems from being located on a primary production property in remote western Kangaroo Island, approximately 20km from my nearest township, Parndana. Kangaroo Island is classed as a *MM7: Very Remote Community*, the highest remote ranking category under the Modified Monash Model (source: <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2019/12/modified-monash-model---fact-sheet.pdf>). This level of remoteness affects a community's access to essential and non-essential services, social and education opportunities, employment, and the overall standard of living.

The township of Parndana, although with a small population of only 150 people, services many families across the whole western region of Kangaroo Island. Geographically this equates to approximately 70% of the Island.

The pathway I have undertaken to becoming the Chairperson of the Parndana Community Children's Centre, Governing Council, commenced in 2018 when I had my third child. Until that point, my career had been focused in management within both the South Australian Local and State Governments. I was employed in the main KI township of Kingscote where I had access to an ECEC service. The difficulty arose when planning my return to work in Kingscote after maternity leave. Neither my husband or I would be available to care for our school aged children after school. With no ECEC or OSHC services in Parndana, we investigated alternate care options with no success.

Due to these circumstances, I had to cease my career working in the corporate sector and assume a full-time caring role for our children. My frustration about the lack of ECEC services in our region affected me both personally and professionally.

A short time thereafter, I made contact and discussed the issue with other primary carer's in our region and found that many of them were also needing ECEC services. Previous investigations into the

need for ECEC services in Parndana had been conducted, but did not result in any progress. The desperate need from our family and so many others in our region for ECEC and OSHC services, led me to partnering with other likeminded community members to develop a childcare working group to find a solution.

The voluntary working group consisted of four members and we investigated all feasible options that would provide a timely and effective start-up ECEC and OSHC service in Parndana. We surveyed the community to get a gauge on what the demand would be for the services. The results indicated in October 2018 that there were 29 families, and a total of 61 children who would use a ECEC and OSHC services in Parndana. In September 2020, another survey was distributed to families and 45 families responded, with a total of 75 children now requiring ECEC and OSHC services in the region.

Interestingly, we surveyed the primary reason families would use care in September 2020 and the results were as follows:

- 64% to return to work
- 25% for respite and/or to support children's emotional and social wellbeing
- 6% to engage in further study
- 5% other

Initial Rural Care Model Investigation (July 2018 – April 2019)

In July 2018, we approached the Department for Education (DfE) requesting the development of a Rural Care Program to operate alongside the Parndana Preschool service. The preschool operates part-time, 5 days a fortnight, and the space could effectively facilitate the service. Approximately eight months after our initial request and after consultation and numerous meetings with the DfE, we were advised that they would not consider opening a Rural Care service at Parndana.

The explanation provided as to why a Rural Care service could not be operated at Parndana Preschool, was due to the school, Kangaroo Island Community Education (KICE), '*needing to focus on the education needs of children and young people in preschool and school.*'

Private provider Kangaroo Island Children's Service providing a service at Parndana Preschool Investigation (May 2019 – March 2020)

The DfE formally proposed an alternate pathway to address the issue, offering that a private provider could operate a service from the Parndana Preschool. We embarked upon this next phase of the process and engaged Kangaroo Island Children's Services (KICS) who were already operating ECEC services in the main townships of Kingscote and Penneshaw, to support being a private provider for a service at Parndana Preschool.

The ECEC services in both townships of Kingscote and Penneshaw are operated by KICS on co-located sites within the DfE Preschool facilities. The working group thought this provided a strong precedent and that it would be feasible to replicate this model at the Parndana Preschool.

In March 2020, after pursuing this option for over 12 months the DfE withdrew their support for any service to operate from the Parndana Preschool, citing the reasonings above (as per the withdrawal of Rural Care Program support).

At this point, we no longer had a facility that we could use in Parndana for a ECEC service.

Emergency Ad-hoc ECEC Service run from Parndana Preschool (post bushfire March 2020)

In January 2020, the Black Summer bushfires significantly impacted the western end of KI, with 49% of the Island burnt and impacted. This event unfortunately also personally affected our family, we lost our whole farm property, business, and our home.

Following the bushfires, the need and urgency for ECEC services for families in western KI was desperate. Families had no access to an ECEC service unless they travelled a minimum daily 200km+ roundtrip, which was not feasible. Many families had no option other than to take their children out to their properties to undertake the clean-up and address the immediate aftermath of the fires. It was an unsafe environment and traumatic to the children to re-live the bushfire experience. Some families had support at times from other family members or friends. However, it was not long term, consistent and did not meet the families need for ECEC services.

A local community member who had employed a private nanny to care for her children set up a makeshift childcare centre in her shed after the bushfires. Recognising the desperate need for childcare in the community, she offered the service free of charge to all bushfire affected families. For many of us this was our saviour, we were still out on the fireground trying to protect our properties, manage injured livestock and gather the basics. We were in a disaster area; many people had lost everything, had nowhere to live and what felt like limited support for children through this period. The makeshift service had so much demand that another nanny was employed to assist with managing all the children.

In early February 2020, the working group became aware the Department of Human Services (DHS) was operating an Emergency Ad-hoc ECEC Service in Lobethal, Adelaide Hills. This service opened directly after the bushfires to support families and children who needed ECEC, due to a lack of services being available in the area.

The working group immediately lobbied and requested to DfE and DHS that a similar service be established to assist families in western KI. We were eventually successful in our advocacy and the service commenced in the Parndana Preschool building in March 2020. It was immediately booked out to full capacity and unfortunately due to Covid restrictions the service had to cease operating two weeks after commencing.

During this period, we also investigated other models of care including the Local Government body, Kangaroo Island Council (KIC) opening and operating an ECEC service. We had explored this model of operation in other regional communities and it seemed to be successful. Being a small regional Council that is financially unsustainable, KIC did not support being involved in any capacity.

We also explored the possibility of operating a bus service that could collect children from the western KI region and transport them to the main township of Kingscote for childcare each day. This also wasn't viable due to the logistics of the bus transport and the lack of availability/vacancies in the Kingscote ECEC service.

Post Bush-fire Funding successfully gained to build and establish a ECEC service (Feb 2021 – current)

We were encouraged by the KI Bushfire Recovery Coordinator to apply for Local Economic Recovery Funding to build a childcare centre. With no available facility we could use in Parndana, the working group concluded that we could build a ECEC centre and develop our own childcare service as a solution. We put forward an application and our project was overwhelmingly supported by the KI Bushfire Recovery Committee and was voted the number 1 priority for funding out of 18 projects put

forward to the Committee. In February 2021, we were notified that we were successful in our grant application for \$1.8 million to build and establish a childcare service in Parndana.

We immediately established an Incorporated Association and Governing Council (GC) to manage the build and project for the community. As a dedicated group of volunteers all personally bushfire affected, the process has been taxing over the last two years. The Governing Council have so much drive and passion for the project, but have found it extremely difficult at times to project manage the build with limited external support.

Personally, I have been contributing a minimum of 15 hours a week voluntarily on the project over this period of time. All other members of the Governing Council also contribute a significant number of voluntary hours. It has been a long drawn-out process for us to get to this point, my youngest daughter born in 2017 started school this year and will not have the opportunity to attend the ECEC service. This also resonates with other members of the Governing Council. We are not undertaking this project for ourselves or for personal benefit. We are determined to see the success of the ECEC service for our whole community, so families and in particular women will not have to go through the hardships and challenges we have all experienced.

We initially thought obtaining the funding was going to be a difficult part of the process, however, have since learnt that there were much more complex challenges to follow. The Governing Council have managed a minimal building budget within an extraordinary difficult economic climate. Consequently, we have had to redesign and minimise the scope of our ECEC centre on three occasions. We have also experienced complications in obtaining a formal lease with the DfE for the land site, prior to commencing the centre build. Discussions were held over an extended period due to the process being an unusual request. This eventuated in the formalisation of a DfE Site Access Licence whilst building, with a formal Lease Agreement to be signed once the building is complete.

The workload of the Governing Council over the last two years has been much greater than we anticipated. We have negotiated insurance, independently fundraised and obtained grants for over \$100,000 to help fill the funding gap, conducted community consultations, developed a constitution and various policies, tendered and assessed applications for an architect/building superintendent/builder, developed a branding suite and a website, obtained Provider Approval for the centre through ACECQA, worked through major site issues including drainage, maintained reporting requirements for all grants, established a strong financial framework, procurement of all FFE and resources for the centre, designed the centre both internally and externally and progressed the business development for the ECEC centre operations. As we approach the timeframe soon where the building will be complete, we will need to commence regular working bees with the community to finalise the landscaping and outdoor learning environment.

The sheer volume of workload in building and developing an operational ECEC service is enormous. This level of responsibility on a voluntary community group such as a Governing Council to project manage a budget of this scale, is not sustainable or feasible. We do not recommend that this model be replicated in other communities, where a community based Governing Council is responsible for managing and developing a project and service of this scope.

Funding for building facilities in regional and remote communities is welcomed and encouraged. It's critical however moving forward, that there is more support provided around the governance of the building project management and ECEC service development. This includes investigating who is best positioned to be responsible for the project management of the design & build, business model

development, centre operations as well as who will provide the ownership and ongoing maintenance of the building.

Analysis of governance structures for regional and remote ECEC & OSHC services

Market failure has greatly impacted the accessibility to ECEC services in regional and remote locations. In most regional locations, a commercial private enterprise cannot profitably operate ECEC services due to the small number of children who will be in attendance. Our Governing Council has conducted an analysis of the two main governance structures that were identified as viable for our ECEC service at Parndana. Those being, a DfE Rural Care Program and Incorporated Association community operated model with a Governing Council.

Key findings from the comparison between the DfE Rural Care Program and community Incorporated Association model:

- *Pre-existing facilities at schools can be used to operate a Rural Care service.* This minimises the cost and time provisions needed to establish, build and resource a ECEC service.
- *A Rural Care service can be established relatively quickly* due to facilities being available and, in most cases, fit for purpose.
- *A Rural Care Program can provide ECEC and OSHC services for a community.*
- A Rural Care service operated by DfE takes away the onus of a Governing Council (Incorporated Association) operating and managing the full liability and risk of ECEC service.
- *Succession for a Governing Council body is limited in regional areas* due to having a small pool of families who use the service eligible for the roles. To be successful, a Governing Council should have members from a broad skill base, with a high level of expertise and the ability and experience to manage a ECEC service.
- It is complex to manage the *financial sustainability and viability* of a small regional ECEC service operated by a Governing Council. Due to the smaller number of children attending a service, it increases the daily individual ECEC fees for families. For example, the current cost comparison between a child attending both services are as follows: Rural Care Program daily fee, \$86.00, and anticipated Parndana Community Children’s Centre Governing Council minimum daily fee, \$120.00.
- *High level of overall personal risk and liability for Incorporated Association Governing Council members.* A minimum of one Governing Council member must assume the role as ‘designated person’ under the Education Standards Board, Provider and Service Approval requirements. The ‘designated person’ assumes the whole legal and liability risk for the whole organisation. Once a ‘designated person’ leaves a Governing Council, there is a 14-day provision to renominate a new member to assume the position. They must undertake an assessment of the NQF through the SA Education Standards Board to be approved in this role.

Limitations and constraints experienced in relation to the Rural Care Program

The Parndana Community Children’s Centre Governing Council have thoroughly analysed the Rural Care Program and our position is, that the Rural Care Program provides the best form of governance for a ECEC service within our community. The current structure of the Rural Care Program has some constraints and limitations that affect the ability of the service to meet the diverse needs of all regions. We have also identified some feedback from experiences and dealings with the DfE in relation to obtaining a Rural Care Program for our region.

- *Timeliness in responses from DfE in relation to enquiries regarding Rural Care.* We have experienced delays in communication and correspondence when liaising with DfE in relation

to Rural Care. This has prevented us from exploring other care options for our community in a more prompt and timely manner.

- *A lack of transparency around the assessment process for the establishment of a new Rural Care service.* There is no defined pathway or policy on how applications to DfE requesting the development of a new Rural Care Program are assessed. Feedback from our application for a new service, did not specify what criteria we did not meet for the service to be developed. From my understanding, no new Rural Care services have been developed in South Australia in the last 5+ years. There are currently 17 Rural Care services operating across the state.
- *The limitation that a Rural Care Program must operate in a pre-existing Preschool facility.* Allowing a Rural Care Program to be held in other onsite DfE facilities (not within a preschool), will help to resolve issues around capacity for Rural Care and Preschool programs.
- *The limiting number of children who can attend a Rural Care Program does not meet the needs of regional communities.* This is due to the maximum capacity of 3 educators providing services each day. We have identified that the limited number of staff able to operate a facility, will not adequately address the full need for ECEC and OHSC within our region.

Recommendations

1. **The development and management of regional and remote ECEC & OHSC services is led by the South Australian State Government.** To ensure that children in regional and remote communities are provided with equitable access to ECEC & OHSC programs, and not disadvantaged due to the constraints of market failure and their location.
2. **A full consultative review process is undertaken on the DfE Rural Care Program & Policy.** To ensure that the program is a leading pathway, accessible and meeting the needs for ECEC & OHSC services in regional and remote South Australian communities.
3. **Exploration into funding models and opportunities to construct new regionally based facilities on DfE sites for ECEC & OHSC programs.** Potentially incorporating the co-design additional facilities such as three-year-old preschool programs and health consult rooms as a part of services offered at regional DfE sites.