

20 October 2022

Committee Secretary  
Senate Education and Employment Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**RE: Kingston Early Learning and Childcare Services Working Group (KELCS)  
Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry into  
Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Cheaper Childcare) Bill 2022**

Dear Committee Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee's inquiry into Family Assistance Legislation (Cheaper Childcare) Bill 2022.

The Kingston Early Learning and Childcare Services Working Group (KELCS) was established in 2019 as a subcommittee of the Kingston District Council. KELCS is comprised of representatives of the Kingston community, the Kingston District Council, Kingston Early Learning Centre, Kingston Community School. The purpose of KELCS is to investigate short and long-term solutions to solve access to childcare and early education opportunities in the Kingston area.

KELCS would welcome further opportunity to discuss our submission with the committee. Please contact Kirsty Starling, Chair KELCS, or Natalie Traeger, CEO Kingston District Council, if you have any queries.

Yours faithfully,

Kirsty Starling  
Chair  
Kingston Early Learning and Childcare Services Working Group

Natalie Traeger  
CEO  
Kingston District Council

Submission for Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Cheaper Child Care) Bill 2022

**Submission to the senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee from Kirsty Starling, Fiona Rasheed, and Kristen Wilks on behalf of the Kingston Early Learning and Childcare Services Working Group (KELCS).**

The Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Cheaper Child Care) Bill 2022 purpose is to make early childcare education and care more affordable for 96 per cent of families currently using childcare, with no families being worse off<sup>1</sup>. This proposed Bill will be of significant financial value to all families with access to childcare, but for families located in regional, rural, and remote parts of Australia, such as Kingston SE, an absence of accessibility to any or all childcare services will leave children, families, and communities continue to be disadvantaged and worse off.

Recent studies support this assertion that children in regional and remote areas suffer from poor access to childcare<sup>2</sup>. It shouldn't matter what the child's postcode is, they should have access to early learning. Every child in every community should be given equal opportunity to grow and thrive<sup>3</sup>. The AEDC recognises that early childhood development is foundational for children's later health, wellbeing, and life chances. In 2021 there was an increase in developmental vulnerability for children living in regional and remote areas, driven primarily by fewer children on track in their language and cognitive skills<sup>4</sup>.

As rural women, re-entering the workforce after having children was an enormous challenge due to the lack of accessibility of formal childcare options in Kingston. Travelling a 100km round trip twice a day to another town to access care, working limited hours and calling on local family and friends to care for their children were common strategies, but we have also frequently resorted to grandparents driving a 650km round trip to support our return to employment when no local options were available. This challenge is commonplace for families in rural, regional, and remote areas, and such strategies continue to be used by local families today, not through freedom of choice but because of necessity.

### **Kingston's Story**

Kingston SE is a rural coastal town of approximately 2000 residents located in the Limestone Coast of South Australia, 300km from Adelaide. The shortage of accessible childcare services within our town has had significant and ongoing impacts on the developmental vulnerabilities of children, the health and wellbeing of families and prosperity of businesses in the Kingston area for over 40 years.

We are community members and mothers, who have been advocating for increased access to childcare services in Kingston since 2017. In 2019 we approached the Kingston District Council for support in addressing the issue, which resulted in the formation of the Kingston Early Learning and Childcare Services Working Group (KELCS) as a subcommittee of the Council.

The purpose of KELCS is to investigate short and long-term solutions to solve access to childcare and early education opportunities in the Kingston area.

---

<sup>1</sup> Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Cheaper Child Care) Bill 2022 Explanatory Memorandum

<sup>2</sup> Hurley, P et al, 2022

<sup>3</sup> Thrive by Five

<sup>4</sup> AEDC National Report 2021

Kingston SE has an Early Learning Centre which originated as a Kindergarten established on community donated land located in a residential area of the town. It has a total site capacity of 45 children and the current governance model prioritises children utilising the Pre-School (Kindergarten) service with respect to the number of children accessing the centre at any one time.

In 2002 the Kingston community pushed to establish a formalised childcare service. In 2007 a small Rural Care service commenced in a side room on site at the Kindergarten. Through persistent advocacy from 2017 to 2019, the service increased from catering for 4 children to a maximum of 18 children 3 days per week.

### **The Issues/Challenges**

Rural communities are negatively impacted through decreased parental participation in the workforce, limited access to further education, workforce attraction and retention for local businesses and availability of equitable educational, social and developmental early years learning opportunities for children and families.

There are many childcare service options available in urban areas and families are well supported by federal funding through childcare rebates, but in regional areas where accessibility is limited or non-existent, the needs of families are not equally supported. We want equality of support for families in areas that fall outside the urban boundaries and access to the fundamental services and funding that are required to provide this support.

Kingston District Council, on behalf of KELCS, conducted 2 community surveys in 2019 and 2021 to establish the need for childcare in Kingston and the impacts lack of childcare were having on businesses. These surveys highlighted the far reaching economic and social impacts on the community due to the lack of accessibility to childcare. 88 surveys were completed and of those 83% of the respondents said lack of care impacted their ability to take up work or study. 93% of respondents would access childcare and Out of Hours School Care (OHSC) if it were more readily available.

There has never been a purpose-built childcare centre in Kingston SE. The community has been actively working for 20 years to establish an adequate childcare service that meets the needs of families in the area.

Kingston's site is now at capacity with respect to the governance and service provider limitations of funding and staffing, and with no room to physically expand the site because of land size. Yet demand for quality care has been increasing for many years with a wait list for families to access childcare that currently sits at 41 children (October 2022).

### **The way forward**

KELCS has determined that the most effective and desirable long-term solution for the Kingston community is to establish a purpose-built Early Learning Centre incorporating Pre-School (Kindergarten) and childcare centre on the site of the Kingston Community School.

The benefits of the creation of an all-encompassing Early Learning Centre on site at the school are far reaching. They include efficiency gains through sharing of infrastructure, equipment, resources, facilities and staff, early integration into the school and community facilities with the reduction of

school transition issues, increased exposure to critical allied health services, a single drop point for parents and equitable social, emotional, and educational outcomes for children through increased accessibility to care.

To achieve our goal there are three key requirements:

- provision of funding for the design and construction of the infrastructure (facility);
- attraction of a childcare service provider and implementation of a governance structure for the centre; and
- recruitment of adequate numbers of qualified childcare staff.

### Infrastructure

KELCS and the Kingston District Council have been actively working to attract funding to establish a new childcare centre. Following the devastating bushfire event at Keilira in 2019/20, Kingston District Council applied for Black Summer Bushfire funding to build a childcare centre but was unsuccessful in its application. Kingston District Council has limited resources with significant budgetary limitations including a forecast \$1m operational deficit in 2022-2023, massive coastal erosion and infrastructure issues, a small ratepayer base (\$4.5m this year) and therefore has no financial capacity to fund a project of this size.

The pursuit of other avenues of funding has been relentless, culminating in Council being given a bi-partisan pre-election commitment of \$1.8m to assist with the capital build of a new childcare centre at Kingston. We are still awaiting on the outcome of the federal budget in October 2022 to see if this funding will be forthcoming.

**Many regional, rural, and remote communities such as Kingston are currently faced with a similar scenario with a lack of funding to develop, renovate or obtain the critical infrastructure, resulting in a significant barrier to accessibility of childcare.**

### Governance

The governance of a childcare service is a complex undertaking for rural, regional, and remote communities such as Kingston. These towns are typically varied in population, size and demographics, have unique idiosyncrasies, but rightfully deserve equity in social and educational outcomes for children and families within their communities.

The provider of the current Rural Care service in Kingston is the SA Department for Education, however they are currently reviewing the Rural Care model and have not given a commitment that they will continue to provide the service at a new site.

Kingston as a town and community has long outgrown this governance model of care and are in desperate need of a new way forward.

Thin markets have prevented the attraction of private providers in small regional towns such as Kingston as the profitability of smaller childcare centres is not sufficient to attract large commercial operators. Rural and regional communities are forced to find alternative ways to address this market failure. Some communities operate centres through a not-for-profit governing board which is run by volunteer community members. The burden of responsibility for volunteers operating in a complex and regulatory environment such as childcare provision is enormous. Small communities are already facing volunteer fatigue and such an option is simply not viable for many communities – ours is no exception.

In some areas the local Council has stepped in to become a childcare service provider in the absence of other options. Many of these Councils operate the service at a loss, at least initially, but do so because of the desperate need to reduce the impacts of childcare shortages on local families and businesses. It does not seem just that this financial burden for the provision of childcare services should be borne by Local Government ratepayers in rural and regional areas.

In Kingston the identification of a service provider and development of a governance model is still to be finalised, but we are currently working with the SA Department for Education in a positive and progressive manner to seek reform and find solutions to deliver a high-quality early year's system fit for the future.

**If governance of childcare services in regional, rural, and remote Australia is not strategically addressed in a united, universal approach it will continue to be a significant barrier to accessibility of childcare.**

#### Qualified staff

The nation-wide shortage of qualified childcare staff is an issue that affects rural and regional towns like Kingston. Cost and accessibility to training as a childcare worker are some of the barriers that are preventing the uptake of this crucial work in our area.

Affordable housing is a significant challenge in rural Australia, and this is also impacting on the ability to attract and retain qualified staff to the area.

Wage differentials across the childcare industry is another major area of concern that requires close attention from the Commonwealth and childcare industry.

**We need industry reform with respect to wage equality, qualified staff will continue to be in limited supply which in turn is a significant barrier to accessibility of childcare.**

#### **Recommendations**

The Federal Government must coordinate and implement a universal strategic approach to improving accessibility to childcare in rural and regional areas in Australia to ensure the provision of equal access to quality childcare services that are comparable to those in urban areas. This approach should address the three issues that are acting as barriers in rural and regional communities:

- dedicated funding for infrastructure to expand or establish new childcare facilities;
- development of a service provider for smaller communities such as the State Government; and or working with larger private providers
- investigate options for addressing the childcare worker shortage such as a nationwide increased award rate to attract and retain workers including more affordable access to training

#### **Summary**

The story of Kingston highlights the problems faced by many rural, regional, and remote towns across Australia in addressing deficiencies in childcare accessibility. Infrastructure funding, governance and childcare worker shortage issues are not being strategically addressed by state or federal governments. The absence of coordinated policy approaches is leading to communities reaching crisis point.

The proposed Family Assistance Legislation (Cheaper Child Care) Bill 2022 focuses on financial roadblocks to childcare. This is an important barrier to address, however for rural, regional, and remote Australia, the key issue is equity of accessibility. If there is no childcare to access, then financial subsidies are of very little benefit.

The Bill refers to the human right implications: the rights of parents and children, the right to work, the right to education and the right to equality and non-discrimination. Families living in rural, regional, and remote areas deserve the same rights and opportunities as those in urban areas.

### **Ongoing Engagement**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. KELCS would welcome further opportunity to discuss our submission with the committee.

Please contact Kirsty Starling, Chair KELCS, or Natalie Traeger, CEO Kingston District Council, if you have any queries.

### References

Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Cheaper Child Care) Bill 2022 Explanatory Memorandum

Hurley P., Matthews, H., and Pennicuik, S (2022). Desert and oases: How accessible is childcare?  
Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

Thrive by five, Minderoo Foundation

Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021. *'Our Children. Our Communities. Our Future.'*