

# Unlocking Aspiration, Outcomes and Equity by unpacking Childcare Issues in the Wimmera Southern Mallee

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## RESEARCH REPORT

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Status: FINAL REPORT || Date: 4 December 2020

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## Executive Summary

### Background

The *Unlocking Aspiration, Outcomes and Equity by unpacking childcare issues in the Wimmera Southern Mallee Project* (the project) explored issues in childcare provision and access across four rural local government areas (Hindmarsh, West Wimmera, Yarriambiack and Northern Grampians) within the Wimmera Southern Mallee. The intent of this work was to inform the ByFive Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) Early Years initiative (ByFive), a place-based community collaboration. ByFive was initiated by the WSM regional partnership in 2018, after the community nominated early childhood as their highest priority. The Victorian Government provides funding to ByFive to work together to redesign and improve early years' service delivery within the WSM. Through this work the ByFive collaboration seeks to overcome disadvantage and inform whole of government system change to address a range of issues impacting the social, health and developmental outcomes of children by the age of five in the Wimmera Southern Mallee Region.

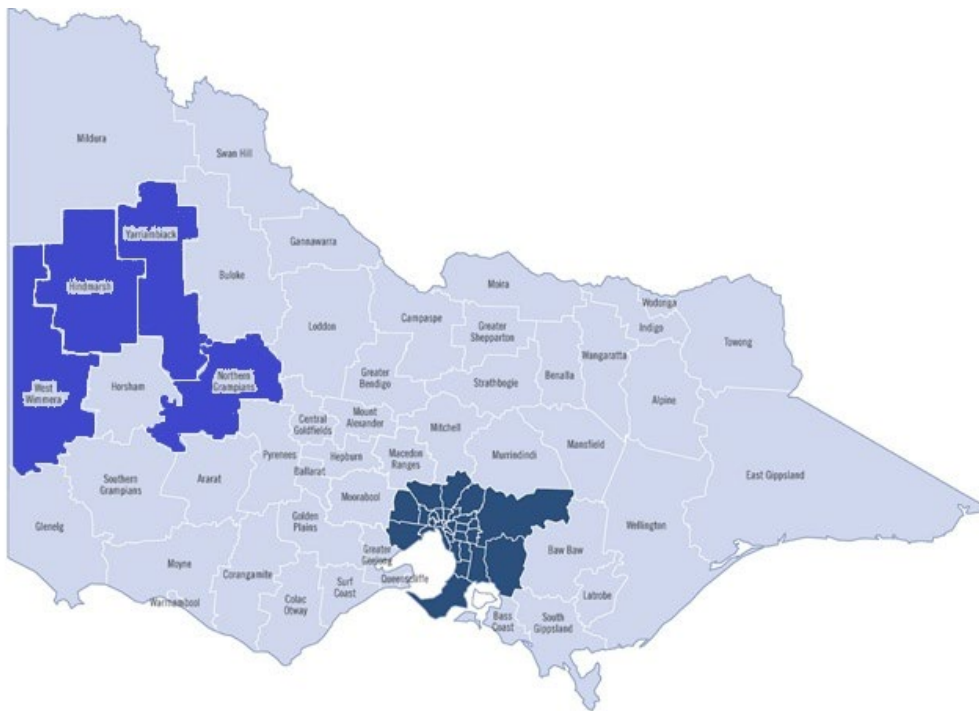


Figure 1: Victorian Local Government Areas – Local Government Areas included in research study are highlighted. (Victorian Councils, 2020).

This research project has been funded by Regional Development Victoria with the intent of improving regional understanding of issues relating to the provision of childcare in rural communities.

The study has been designed to collect information about what may be preventing effective childcare provision in rural towns within the Hindmarsh, Northern Grampians, Yarriambiack and West Wimmera local government areas in the Wimmera Southern Mallee. This is intended to inform activity with regard to advocacy and support for parents and service providers in these communities.

It is noted that during the completion stage for this research, the State Government announced funding to provide three-year-old kindergarten free of charge in 2021. This may assist some rural municipalities to temporarily alleviate some childcare provision issues, however, it does not resolve the findings and recommendations presented in this report.

## **Research Questions**

The project considered the following research questions:

What are the policy, practical, financial, workforce and geographical factors that influence childcare provision and access in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region?

What is the available support for individuals and communities to access childcare, and what are the implications for equity in this region? Do barriers to the supply of childcare result in missed opportunities for economic and social participation, child development and family safety?

What structural changes are recommended to improve the equity, efficiency and availability of childcare services in rural communities across the region?

## **Method**

The research approach was informed by a literature review targeting issues of access, staffing and service provision from a rural perspective, where possible. The literature review also explored childcare's role in supporting participation as well as financial, emotional and educational wellbeing for parents and children.

The research provides an ecological systems theory approach using ethnography to explore structural barriers and inefficiencies that are limiting the provision of childcare services within the study area. The research team individually interviewed seven (7) childcare and kindergarten service providers from council, social and community services and the not-for-profit sector operating within the region. This represented all providers within the study area. The project also engaged with six (6) current or potential service users (parents) within the rural local government areas in the study. This allowed the research team to capture issues from both the perspective of those who delivered services, and that of services users. Only rural local government areas were considered within the study. Horsham was excluded as its situation as a regional centre supports greater economies of scale regarding childcare provision.

All interviews were of approximately thirty minutes duration and were conducted via telephone due to COVID-19 restrictions preventing in-person meetings. Participants were asked open ended questions covering issues relating to the provision of childcare from financial, workforce, geographical and policy perspective. Participants were also queried on the support and assistance measures available and whether there were structural or systemic changes that would better support efforts to provide childcare services in the region.

Participants were sourced through existing networks within council and service provider agencies and with the support of the ByFive network, which engages with parents and early years' service providers across the study area.

## Overview of the findings

The study is intentionally broad, with the aim of capturing the range of issues associated with childcare provision in the study area. As a result, there are a large number of findings from the research. These are summarised here as follows:

1. The delivery arrangements for kindergarten and childcare in the four rural councils has been established by historical precedent. With limited exceptions, delivery continues to follow an approach that prioritises the provision of kindergarten. This is due in large part to the historical conventions established around council provision of kindergarten education.
2. Market failure is occurring in the Wimmera Southern Mallee regarding the provision of childcare.
3. Historical differentiation of levels of funding and quality and regulations between kindergarten and childcare is impacting how these services are managed in rural and regional areas. 'City centric' policies in both sectors privileges locations with growing populations and greater infrastructure, which limits smaller localities' ability to provide both childcare and kindergarten services.
4. In contrast to kindergarten, there is no organisation taking responsibility for assessing local needs and provision of childcare when the private sector fails, with neither councils nor the community services sector having direct responsibilities in this area. Because of this, efforts to deliver childcare rely significantly on volunteer advocacy and the goodwill of Councils.
5. Rural people, and most particularly women, are impacted by limited childcare availability. This is affecting their workforce participation, financial stability, career goals and independence.
6. There is a culture of acceptance that geographic dispersal prevents adequate childcare service delivery. There is some evidence to suggest this is preventing advocacy and engagement in local solutions.
7. Staffing is a major concern for childcare and kindergarten provision, and there are too few trained, skilled staff in these professions to meet existing needs.
8. Training and staffing for childcare and kindergarten incurs significant churn and professional isolation is a contributor to this. The siloed nature of the two sectors is also preventing staff migrating between the childcare sector and the kindergarten sector.
9. Responsibility for childcare is gendered, and there are issues for equity resulting from limited rural provision of this service and support.

10. A one-size fits all regulatory structure can prevent innovation and change. This is being addressed through a reported positive working relationship between the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) and service providers, which provides individual and temporary solutions.
11. There is a lack of understanding by the community about the practical challenges of childcare costs, staffing and delivery.

### **Impacts on Wimmera women and their families**

Discussions with service users also highlighted several consistent concerns which demonstrated the impacts of a lack of available childcare. These can be summarised as follows:

1. Women from smaller towns are making choices to work in larger centres (like Horsham or Naracoorte in South Australia) because of childcare availability. While many could work in their local smaller home town (and some did before having children) they find this impossible after having children because they have to leave town to find childcare. They reported that it is more convenient to work where their children are being cared for as this reduces the overall travel and time requirement.
2. Childcare waiting lists can be long in smaller communities where limited services may be available, and some women reported waiting over a year to access local care. They were funding private care in the interim, or travelling to larger centres to drop off children in childcare.
3. The costs on women not able to access approved care are significant, with women reporting paying up to \$150 per day in private care for a child.
4. Women are uncomfortable relying on grandparents (grandmothers) to fill care gaps. This was expressed by several women who felt that grandparents are not a workable substitute for a qualified childcare provider. One woman succinctly explained why this is not an option, saying “everyone works. Its not grandma at home baking scones all day for the kids anymore. They’re career women.”
5. Women are travelling up to two hours per day to access long day-care that meets the needs of work. Those interviewed noted long hours (7:30am to 6:30pm) and how challenging this was with small children who are tired. They also noted significant fuel costs and travel expenses in doing so.
6. Women acknowledge significant benefits from having their children attend childcare and listed social skills as a key area where they felt children benefited from being in care. One spoke about additional support from skilled professionals at childcare to assist with addressing developmental delays in her child.
7. Several parents reported that a lack of after school care in their communities meant that they are also considering sending their children to school in a larger town as well, which has flow-on effects for the viability of smaller schools and townships.



8. Women want kindergarten and childcare (long daycare) aligned so that the systems can operate in a way that allows them to work normal hours, rather than reduced hours to fit in with kindergarten. As one woman said: "I want to work. I didn't go to uni for six years not to work."
9. Women also highlighted intractability in achieving change to childcare provision and kindergarten delivery models. They talked about difficulties in addressing issues with Councils and what they perceived to be a lack of interest in developing services.
10. Women want qualified staff looking after their children, and approved care models. They acknowledge concerns around adequate availability of staff but have a strong preference for formal care over private casual arrangements which many are using to address gaps in childcare provision now.
11. Women noted that some community services (particularly healthcare and allied health) can be at risk in smaller communities if women cannot access childcare, as these women are unable to work due to childcare limitations.

## Recommendations

There is enough evidence to suggest that childcare provision needs to be more deeply considered as a social, economic and equity issue for the region. The evolution of early years supports for parents is yet to be fully embraced and responded to in order to accommodate changing expectations regarding work and care. Childcare is being defined as an individual problem for individual parents, when it is in fact a structural problem managed by a regulatory environment and subsidy scheme that disadvantages people in areas where approved care is unavailable. The result is an approach to childcare in rural areas within the Wimmera Southern Mallee that is strikingly similar to the depiction of childcare in the 1950s and 1960s, as documented by Brennan (1998):

"...most women appear to have coped with the lack of childcare services by calling upon friends, neighbours and members of their extended family to provide help. They managed in private, individualized ways. Women with young children were not supposed to be employed outside the home, and if they 'chose' to do so, dealing with the ensuing tensions was their own responsibility" (p 53).

This report makes several recommendations for change in response to the research findings to help address the main challenges identified in the report and progress opportunities for childcare in the region. These recommendations are as follows:

| RESEARCH FINDINGS   | RECOMMENDED ACTION   |
|---|--|
| 1. The delivery arrangements for kindergarten and childcare in the four rural councils has been established by historical precedent. With limited | a) Kindergarten and childcare are different with different funding streams, but they engage the same cohort of parents and children and are subject to the same regulatory and quality frameworks. In areas where market failure is occurring, kindergartens and |

|  |   |
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| <p>exceptions, delivery continues to follow an approach that prioritises the provision of kindergarten. This is due in large part to the historical conventions established around council provision of kindergarten education.</p>  | <p>childcare could have greater synergy, allowing staff and children to move more freely between the two systems. It is recommended that, where possible, childcare and kindergarten be managed by a single agency, to ensure there is local responsibility for both.</p>   |
| <p>2. Market failure is occurring in the Wimmera Southern Mallee regarding the provision of childcare.</p>   | <p>a) Consider working with councils to explore opportunities to streamline childcare services to support kindergarten participation. Research indicated that there are significant advantages achieved when kindergarten and childcare services are co-located and delivered by a single service provider. This should be further explored. The model used for some areas in Hindmarsh, which contracts Emerge (HDKA) to provide childcare and kindergarten services, is a promising model.</p> <p>b) There is significant potential with a larger entity providing childcare and kindergarten services to support movement and opportunities for staff across the region, and support educational, mentoring and resourcing initiatives. It is recommended that ByFive or WSM consider hosting a forum to discuss challenges and opportunities across Councils to share resources and streamline effort.</p> <p>c) Within a larger entity, potential for cost averaging should be explored to assess whether it is possible for delivery in rural centres to provide economic returns and what support would be needed to enable this. Emerge (HDKA) has done some work in this area which has potential for further exploration.</p> |
| <p>3. Historical differentiation of levels of funding and quality and regulations between kindergarten and childcare is impacting how these services are managed in rural and regional areas. 'City centric' policies in both sectors privileges locations with growing populations and greater infrastructure, which limits smaller localities' ability to provide both childcare and kindergarten services.</p> <p>4. In contrast to kindergarten, there is no organisation taking responsibility for assessing local needs and provision of childcare when the private sector fails, with neither councils nor the community services sector having direct responsibilities in this area.</p> | <p>a) Without legislative change, it is difficult to resolve this issue, but acknowledgement of the gap in responsibility that exists in this region regarding childcare provision is an important step. It is recommended that ByFive and WSM acknowledge and communicate this as a regional delivery gap requiring policy engagement at State and Federal levels.</p>   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>Because of this, efforts to deliver childcare rely significantly on volunteer advocacy and the goodwill of Councils.</p>   |  |
| <p>5. Rural people, and most particularly women, are impacted by limited childcare availability. This is affecting their workforce participation, financial stability, career goals and independence.</p>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Childcare is seen as an issue for parents (and particularly women) to manage individually in the region rather than as a broader systemic issue that impacts on women's careers and opportunity. The language around childcare provision needs to change to recognise the social, economic and gendered costs of the current approach.</li> <li>b) It is recommended that this work is supported by a survey of parents in the rural councils that collects data on the cost of being unable to work and of managing market failure individually.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>6. There is a culture of acceptance in the region that geographic dispersal prevents adequate childcare service delivery. There is some evidence to suggest this is preventing advocacy and engagement in local solutions.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Parents and families need to be communicated to regarding how childcare operates and how it can be supported.</li> <li>b) A process of regular engagement with parents (possibly through the maternal child health network) to assess childcare support needs across the region would help better understand demand. Working with councils to build a process to capture and communicate this data would further assist in this aim.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>7. Staffing is a major concern for childcare and kindergarten provision, and there are too few trained, skilled staff in these professions to meet existing needs.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Local career opportunities in early years education needs to be communicated to school students.</li> <li>b) A much stronger focus on local training arrangements is required. Efforts to develop Certificate 3 training as an option within VET in schools should be considered to engage with young people early regarding potential local careers in early years education.</li> <li>c) Consider working with the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) to better understand the needs of schools in supporting vocational training in childcare</li> <li>d) Consider advocating for funding to reimburse service providers that are funding travel for childcare and kindergarten staff to deliver at rural locations.</li> <li>e) Investigate opportunities for more streamlined and low cost bridging qualifications to support primary teachers who want to provide kindergarten education or childcare to better enable this transition.</li> </ul> |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>8. Training and staffing for childcare and kindergarten incurs significant churn and professional isolation is a contributor to this. The siloed nature of the two sectors is also preventing staff migrating between the childcare sector and the kindergarten sector.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Investigate options for a broader, regional effort to develop training and support opportunities for childcare and kindergarten staff that links to employment. The Yarriambiack Shire Council's scholarship program and not-for-profit providers have some insights into this area that could be more broadly extended in the region.</li> <li>b) Provide mentoring and support for staff undergoing training to support their educational development goals. The Yarriambiack support model (p 40) has potential to be broadened. This should include consideration of a regional scholarship program to support training.</li> <li>c) Consider increasing opportunities to encourage local Diploma and degree level training for childcare and kindergarten to support a higher standard of qualifications in the region.</li> </ul> |
| <p>9. Responsibility for childcare is gendered, and the impacts are issues for equity.</p>   | <p>See recommendations at #4.</p>   |
| <p>10. A one-size fits all regulatory structure can prevent innovation and change. This is being addressed through a reported positive working relationship between DET and service providers.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c) Participants acknowledged that a good relationship with the State Government existed to support Councils and service providers to deliver services within the regulatory environment. There was a reticence to challenge the regulatory environment and actions are being addressed at an individual level. There is scope to further explore the potential that some of these individual issues may be common across rural early years' service delivery more generally and could be addressed systemically at policy or regulatory level. To engage in this space, it is recommended that ByFive seek to engage with the Department of Education and Training (DET) regarding policy and regulatory issues impacting rural areas.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>11. There is a lack of understanding by the community about the practical challenges of childcare costs, staffing and delivery</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Early communication is required for parents regarding childcare costs, subsidies and why regular commitments are required. Parents need to be better informed of their responsibilities when participating, to ensure services are sustainable. It is suggested that rural areas consider establishing a childcare coordinator so that this effort is streamlined, rather than delivered at each site.</li> <li>b) Parents also need to be made aware of the educational role of childcare so that it is understood as not simply a transactional baby-sitting service. This is important for valuing the staff and the engagement provided by services. The development of an engagement strategy in partnership with DET should be considered.</li> </ul>   |

## Background & Review of the Literature

### Significance of the Study

This work brings together the broad range of challenges that are impacting on the ability of rural parents in the Wimmera Southern Mallee to access childcare supports. Issues of geography, rurality, market failure and responsibility are areas which appear to be underdeveloped in the academic literature. From a regional development perspective, the availability of childcare has an impact on workforce participation and engagement in regional and community development activity. Issues of inaccessibility to approved childcare in rural areas also has implications for equity for rural parents and directly impacts the level of financial support provided to rural areas through subsidy support.

For individuals, the availability of childcare also has impacts on social inclusion, independence and financial stability. This research has sought to bring together a qualitative understanding of the range of challenges childcare presents in the rural setting of the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

### Scope of the Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the structural barriers that impact on the ability of organisations to provide rural childcare services and on parents' access to formal childcare in the Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) region. The work also considers how barriers to supply may be affecting parental economic and social participation, child development and family safety.

The review focused on differentials in long term economic, educational and social/welfare outcomes for both urban and rural families utilising formal childcare services to inform further ethnographic research into issues of equity and access. An integrated methodology was utilised in order to develop an understanding of how barriers in accessing childcare impact on rural families' education, employment and social participation. The search strategy was based upon a foundational body of literature, preliminary interviews, working papers and peer-reviewed literature established by a partner researcher involved earlier in the process.

### Search Strategy

The initial literature collected as part of the greater ByFive research project was used as a basis for a further search to ensure that the literature examining issues of equity in childcare provision in urban and rural areas was collected. The research team used these articles and their bibliographies as a source for 'snowballing' for secondary resources before constructing a search strategy to apply in three major databases: Informit online, Wiley Science and SCOPUS. Additionally, a Google search was performed for relevant grey literature such as committee and organisational reports and submissions. Care was given to focus on an Australian and especially a Victorian, rural context wherever possible. However, literature was also drawn from the US, UK and Europe in order to examine the broader issue of childcare access and provision.

### Analysis

The articles, reports and papers retrieved were assessed according to their relevance to the key aims of the project. The selected materials were analysed according to four criteria: the theme(s) addressed, the date they were published, their relevance to the context of formal childcare provision and the services the articles

related to. Themes were determined based on adherence to the research objectives for the project and contribution to knowledge about challenges and opportunities for rural childcare provision.

Childcare provision in Australian academic literature has largely focussed on provision of this service within urban centres. Of the studies that have examined the rural experience, most have come from overseas investigations, where geographical and supply issues can be similar, but public policy responses may vary significantly. The intention of this literature review is to provide an overview of the depth of understanding with regard to childcare issues in rural communities such as the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

## Themes

### **The importance of accessible and affordable formal childcare**

Access to affordable childcare is central to diverse workforce participation and correlates positively with women's economic security and lifetime earnings (Wood, Griffiths & Emslie, 2020) regardless of location. In rural areas, access to childcare has been identified as a critical issue for female participation in the labour market (Flynn, 2017) and for the retention and development of professional rural workforces (Henning-Smith & Kozhimannil, 2016). However, in rural areas the provision of accessible childcare services has been more difficult to deliver. The challenges identified include economic viability resulting from thin markets (low number of providers and limited demand for services), staffing challenges for providers, and even cultural issues around expectations for women's participation and inclusion as mothers in the workforce (Halliday & Little, 2001; Eliot et. al 2018). Childcare has also been identified as providing significant benefits for children's early learning, cognitive and emotional development (Edwards & Baxter, 2013) and may also provide a buffering effect for exposure to family violence. (Kita, Sato, Sakka, Soejima, & Kamibeppu, 2020).

### **Formal childcare and early education have significant benefits for children's learning and development**

A meta-analysis by Edwards and Baxter (2013) highlighted that children who attend childcare and early learning services have significantly better cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes than children who do not have access to those services. This is reinforced by other studies. Ansari (2018) undertook research into early learning effects in middle class children and found that preschool attendance correlated positively with achievement from the age of school commencement well into early adolescence. A study by Kalb (2017) found that high-quality, structured, formal childcare attendance can have a positive impact on a child's cognitive development. While disadvantage has been acknowledged as impeding a child's development (Lipscomb, Miao, Finders, Hatfield, Kothari & Pears, 2019), Kalb suggests that these negative effects can be partially ameliorated through attendance at a high-quality childcare or early learning service (2017). Kalb concludes:

The value of formal care relative to informal care is higher for these more disadvantaged families than for the average family, which makes access to formal care the more important (Kalb, 2017, pp.331-333).



In an Australian context, this finding has also been identified within indigenous communities, where a correlation between participation in early learning activities and indigenous children's cognitive outcomes has been identified (Azpitarte, Chigavazira, Kalb, Farrant, Perales & Zubrick, 2019). The work acknowledges and allows for variations in relative social and financial advantage of the cohort studied.

Recent studies have also identified that certain sub-populations of children are not attending childcare to the level that their advantaged peers are. These are children from low income families, children living with a disability, First Nations children and children living in regional, rural and remote areas (Kalb, 2017). This is despite the average usage of formal childcare having increased over time (Kalb, 2017). Such findings indicate that it is the more advantaged families who are predominantly accessing formal childcare, further entrenching the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged - particularly in rural and remote areas.

Kalb (2017) speculates that the disparities between rural and urban children attending formal childcare may be due to some regions in Australia being less well serviced than others. While in some cases there may be shortages in childcare generally, it may also be that parents are choosing to not send their children to childcare because the services available are not affordable and/or not high-quality. It is speculation because, as Kalb acknowledges, "Unfortunately little central (public) information is collected on the availability of childcare places at a local level" (Kalb, 2017, p 331).

## **Childcare and parental wellbeing**

Childcare has a positive impact on the wellbeing of parents, and mothers in particular. In a recent European study looking into the impact of publicly funded childcare on parental well-being, Schmitz (2019) found that when provided with access to publicly funded childcare, mothers' self-reported wellbeing demonstrably improved. Furthermore, the study found that childcare eligibility enabled mothers to shift time from activities such as housework and child rearing to paid employment, "resulting in potentially large direct or indirect pecuniary and non-pecuniary returns to maternal life satisfaction" (Schmitz, 2019, p 192). A similar positive correlation was found by Connelly and Haeck (2015) although in situations where government investment in childcare support was minimal (as in the US) this correlation was less positive for low-socioeconomic parents. They also noted a stronger correlation with negative outcomes in situations where both parents had a high level of education and pursued dual careers.

## **Childcare as a buffer for children in at-risk families**

The Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) has significantly higher rates of family violence reporting than the Victorian state average of 1,285 per 100,000 at 2,263 per 100,000 (WSM Regional Partnership, 2017). The WSM also reports higher levels of vulnerability in one or more early childhood development domains (Australian Early Development Census, 2020). Kita et. al., (2020) acknowledge that the effects of partner violence on children can have serious impacts on child wellbeing and development. Their research identified a positive correlation between engagement with childcare services and children's depressive symptoms. A positive correlation between childcare and the wellbeing of an abused parent identified childcare provision as an important health intervention for young children and caregivers. Similarly, Sandner and Thomsen (2020) found that child maltreatment cases dropped by 1.8 per cent when childcare availability was increased by

one percentage point. They argued that given the significant societal costs resulting from child maltreatment, universal public childcare can act as a preventative measure to insure against some of these long-term costs. Wise (2018) also identified childcare as a protective respite feature for foster and kinship carers in Australia.

### **Access to childcare reduces the financial and services gap between urban and rural families**

Limited childcare availability in rural areas impacts on the hours that women can work and the alignment of their work with professional fields of expertise. In the Wimmera Southern Mallee women are more than twice as likely as men to hold degree level qualifications or higher (Tischler, 2020) but women across the workforce are more likely to be in part-time work and considered the primary caregiver for children (Wood, Griffiths & Emslie, 2020). Henning-Smith & Kozhimannil (2016) identify this as a key issue for attracting and retaining professional workforces in rural areas acknowledging childcare as a health issue for rural communities in the “broader context of the health and vitality of rural communities, including the capacity to recruit and retain skilled professionals” (p 488). The authors further acknowledge that a lack of childcare provision also negatively impacts the ability to develop ‘home-grown’ professionals in regional communities to help to fill workforce shortages (Henning-Smith & Kozhimannil, 2016).

Flynn (2017) articulates a clear link between maternal workforce participation and the availability of comprehensive childcare markets from an international perspective. Flynn (2017) identified Australia as a country that has a ‘child penalty,’ which impacts parents of young children disproportionately over those with older children or no children due to the need to access and pay for childcare services. While Flynn’s work does not specifically differentiate rural areas, the work acknowledges “high barriers to entry in the paid market if care is not readily available, either because demand outpaces supply or because care facilities are not located within reasonable distances of the workplace or the home” (p 261).

The labour force participation link between childcare and mothers has also been identified elsewhere. A German study by Muller and Wrohlick (2020) found that subsidized childcare for families with young children had a “positive and significant impact of the local childcare coverage on mothers’ labor force participation” (Müller & Wrohlich, 2020 p.8). The authors explain that an increase in local childcare places by one percentage point resulted in a 0.2 percentage point increase in the maternal workforce participation rate. This increase appears to have been due to concomitant increases in part time employment of between 20 hours and 35 hours per week and, interestingly, had little impact on full time employment rates.

Brennan and Adamson (2015) outline key lessons other nations can learn from the province of Quebec in Canada, where universal, low cost childcare has been provided to children from birth through to school age since 1997. According to Brennan and Adamson, Quebec’s 1997 reforms significantly increased female workforce participation, so much so that by 2012 “Quebec women’s rate of participation was 3.4 percentage points higher than that of women in the rest of Canada (2015, p.45).



However, the authors caution that in order to guarantee children from low-income neighbourhoods have equal access to high-quality childcare services, strategic planning will be necessary. This is because other studies have found that the *quality* of some of the childcare services had declined, leading to a decline in cognitive, social and emotional development of children attending these services.

A private, subsidy-based system like Australia is also subject to fee increases, and this can further impact the ability of mothers to access childcare services. According to an Australian study by Mumford, Parera-Nicolau and Pena-Boquete (2020), fee increases at formal childcare effects the number of hours both mothers and fathers are willing or able to work, with mothers seeing a greater reduction overall. They argue that “when the price of formal childcare increases, families care for their children by substituting out of formal childcare and disproportionately substituting into maternal care” (Mumford et al, 2020, p 598). Not only are mothers therefore disproportionately disadvantaged by formal childcare fee increases, but the children in these families attend less hours of formal childcare, with consequent impacts on their development more generally. This finding is reinforced by Wood, Griffiths and Emslie (2020) who also identify significant financial disincentives in the financial structuring of childcare support payments creates a “workforce disincentive rate” (p 3) in Australia for parents who work four or five days a week.

## **Safety for farming families**

For rural families, childcare provides safe care for children as it removes them from attending dangerous work practices with parents on farm. It also frees parents to undertake farm labour, which can also be made safer by the presence of a second adult, rather than one person working alone. Reschke’s (2012) US based work considers childcare to be a “crucial strategy for preventing injury to children on farms” (p 208) and provides a discussion of the needs farming families have with provision of accessible, available, affordable and trusted care that allows for localised solutions and sharing of resources. This was also identified by the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety (2005) which identifies childcare provision as a major component of its national strategy to improve child safety on farms. This report acknowledged that “In the absence of childcare or children’s service options, farming families are reliant upon taking the children along as part of farming activities and utilising friends, neighbours and relatives for childcare arrangements” (p 7). This is a significant issue for the safety of rural children, and the wellbeing of parents who, due to their children’s care needs, may also work in isolation.

Qualitative work undertaken by Elliot, Cammer, Pickett, Marlenga, Lawson, Dosman, Hagel, Koehncke & Trask, (2018) in rural Canada, sought to understand why children are present on farm worksites. They found that decision-making around the inclusion of children in farm activity is complex and includes the identification and cultural understanding of farming as a way of life and not just a job. Parents make calculated decisions about safety risks and including their children in the farm lifestyle. Therefore, encouraging families to utilise childcare in rural areas may also require an element of cultural change around the inclusion of young children in farming activities. This is reinforced by Halliday and Little (2001) who identify family farming as having a distinct cultural identity, which encourages opportunities for the family to

work together rather than seeking paid work outside the home, which can impact on the desire of some farming families to want to participate in external care.

### **Staffing and supply challenges for service provision**

Jovanovic (2013) identifies retention of staff as a significant issue for childcare providers in Australia, acknowledging that the work is poorly paid and efforts are often unappreciated. This study does not investigate differences between supply in urban and rural areas. It does however acknowledge that a regulatory structure based on compliance limits the development of trust around educators' skills and professional experience. The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety (2005) identified staffing supply as a key issue for rural communities and the primary factor self-identified by farming families as preventing them from being able to access childcare support. This report also found that childcare provision in rural areas incurred additional costs for those providers who needed to fund skilled staff to travel to delivery locations.

A need for flexibility in rural supply was also acknowledged as an issue that impacted on farming families, many of whom needed intermittent or casual childcare supply rather than regular bookings. Issues of supply were further exacerbated when parents had multiple children requiring care (Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety, 2005). This is reinforced from an economic perspective by Wood, Griffiths and Emslie (2020) who identified additional financial disincentives for parents in engaging in childcare when they had multiple children requiring care due to cost.

### **Funding, models and remote participation**

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training report on Education in Remote and Complex Environments released in November 2020 acknowledges the complexity in delivering early years education in rural and remote communities. The report acknowledges positive correlations between early childhood education and educational attendance in later school years in rural communities (p 50) and that significant economic returns can be achieved through the provision of universal quality early childhood education (p 50). Most importantly, the report heard that funding models for childcare support in rural areas greatly increase participation. Advocacy was made for universal childcare access of 600 hours (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). This report also considers funding models for mobile and distance education options for early years, some of which may have relevance as alternate approaches for delivery in some of the Wimmera Southern Mallee's more isolated locations.

## Interviewing Service Providers and Service Users

The research used an ethnographic method to undertake qualitative research with two target groups. The first of these was service providers (or potential service providers in the case of several councils) in the four rural local government areas identified for this study: Hindmarsh, Yarriambiack, Northern Grampians and West Wimmera. The other target group were service users (or potential service users) within the study area. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Federation University Human Research Ethics Committee (project number A20-108).

Service providers were recruited to the study through their involvement as early years service providers within the region. This included the provision of kindergarten services. Prospective participants were contacted via telephone and invited to participate, and the research team arranged a time to contact each interviewee for an interview. A plain language information statement providing a detailed explanation about the project was provided to each participant via email following initial contact. All interview participants gave written approval for a telephone interview to be conducted. Interviews were conducted via telephone at an agreed time, using a series of questions developed to capture issues impacting on service. Participants were interviewed along the themes of service provision, delivery challenges, structural issues, staffing, policy, geographical and financial considerations.

Service users (parents) were invited to participate in the study via the ByFive network and were contacted by the research team to arrange a time for an interview. The same process applied, with a plain language information statement provided and a signed consent given prior to conducting the interview. Service providers were asked a series of open-ended questions about issues of childcare access and the personal and professional impacts experienced as a result.

Interviews were conducted over a two-week period in early August 2020 via telephone to comply with COVID-19 restrictions on research practice. The research team interviewed at least one representative from all service providers and councils in the study area, as well as an indicative sample of service users from across the four local government areas.

### Overview of the Findings

The study was intentionally broad and designed to capture the breadth of issues affecting the provision of childcare in the study area. The research also sought to provide an acknowledgement of the personal and professional impacts of childcare limitations in the study area on service users (or potential service users). This ensured a holistic understanding of the challenges and impacts of market failure in the Wimmera Southern Mallee, with the intention of identifying areas for more detailed focus and action by the ByFive network.

The research found that childcare availability is limited or missing in the study area due to a combination of factors, which are historical, structural and cultural in nature. These are discussed as follows:

## **Historical**

The Federal and State Governments share responsibility for funding early childhood education and care. The Federal Government provides financial subsidy assistance to parents to assist with childcare costs when children are in approved care and supports the implementation of a National Quality Framework to standardise approved care. Partnership agreements with the State Government provide additional funding to support regulatory oversight and other licensing arrangements provided by the State (Sheppard, 2015).

The State Government supports the delivery of childcare services through monitoring registration, licencing and quality. They can also provide a range of grants and programs for capital upgrades or developments, support for training, curriculum and policy advice (Sheppard, 2015). The State Government works with individual councils, private providers and not-for-profit organisations to support efforts to deliver early years education and care, including kindergarten and, where operational, childcare services.

Provision of kindergarten services and any childcare delivery in the four rural local government areas in the research area were found to be largely following a historical precedent. Councils who were engaged in childcare delivery (or were contracting these services) had a history of providing or contracting those services. Service providers within Councils acknowledged a formal responsibility for the delivery of kindergarten services, but this has never extended to a requirement to oversee childcare delivery.

As a result, research interviews identified that childcare delivery can fall through the cracks as no one entity is directly responsible for assessing and reviewing demand and opportunity in rural areas. Some councils do engage in some efforts in this space, but this is largely the result of either parent and ratepayer advocacy or a desire by Council to broker a local arrangement with a potential service provider to deliver a local childcare service.

## **Structural**

From a structural perspective, it is clear that market failure is occurring in the study area. From the interviews conducted, it appears that this is the result of a range of issues, including thin markets, which challenge economic viability, rural geography, and difficulties with staffing. There are also challenges around communicating and engaging with parents about how childcare needs to be structured and funded in order to be economically viable in smaller communities.

Research also found that there is a significant level of competition between kindergarten and childcare, with kindergarten and its lower cost arrangements impacting on the utilisation and development of childcare opportunities in some areas. The roll-out of three-year-old kindergarten was also found to have impacted on the delivery of childcare in some areas. As councils are responsible for kindergarten, but not childcare, kindergarten tends to be prioritised for early childhood education, but this service does not provide a full substitute for childcare, leaving working parents with supervision and care gaps to fill.

A strict regulatory approach to the delivery of childcare and kindergarten in rural areas exacerbates problems with staffing and service delivery. The research found that collaboration between service providers and the Department of Education and Training in this space were positive and recognised specific issues in local areas. However, interview research revealed that solutions only addressed individual local issues. It is

possible that there may be opportunities to consider local regulatory challenges in the context of broader policy consideration.

### **Cultural**

The research found that there is a culture of acceptance amongst both service providers and service users that the population dispersal in rural communities is a legitimate reason for limiting the provision of childcare services. This is an interesting finding, given that significantly different expectations apply to the provision of kindergarten services which are delivered by Councils across the same geographical population spread. There were also cultural differences identified in the expectations for services, with kindergarten identifying more strongly with education than childcare, despite both professional fields having strong expectations for learning and teaching.

Such norms devalue the role of childcare workers who, while seen as providing an essential service, experience lower than average wages. This devaluing of the role of childcare workers may also be contributing to challenges rural communities have in recruiting and maintaining childcare staff. Anecdotally, the research interviews also revealed challenges in maintaining kindergarten staff as the introduction of three-year-old kindergarten has been viewed by some in the profession as a proxy childminding service, not an early learning program.

Beyond this, responsibility for childcare at family level is gendered, and primarily affects women and their aspirations, independence and financial needs. This results in limited choices and opportunities for women with children and devalues the investment women have made into their education and careers. It also limits opportunities for social engagement and respite, which are recognised as being important for mental health and wellbeing.

### **The critical impacts of childcare gaps**

While the Wimmera Southern Mallee remains unable to address the divide between kindergarten and childcare service provision, rural people and particularly women experience financial, social and professional impacts. This affects the level of equity rural women can achieve as childcare gaps reveal a stark divide between rural and urban support. The entitlement to a childcare subsidy that is offered to women who can access approved childcare in more populous areas does not flow to rural women, representing a double economic burden to the community if this means women are unable to participate economically. Women in smaller Wimmera Southern Mallee communities are often forced to engage private care or make individual arrangements that are not subsidised by Government. A lack of childcare provision and access reveals social, economic and volunteering impacts for local communities in this region.

Childcare gaps impact on early childhood development and socialisation for young children, family finances and female independence and can restrict social connection. This has the potential to impact on mental health and wellbeing for families. At a societal level, a lack of available childcare exacerbates problems for rural workforce shortages and can curb the growth and maintenance of small businesses and towns. Interview research revealed that some women will travel to a larger centre in order to access childcare and may shift their employment to a larger centre for convenience and practicality as a consequence.

## Results and Discussion

### Childcare provision in the Wimmera Southern Mallee

This study examined childcare provision across four Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region, Hindmarsh, Northern Grampians, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack. These local Government areas are characterised by small populations across multiple townships and communities. Agriculture is the predominant economic industry with employment in a range of other professions including healthcare, social assistance, education and aged care, and some tourism, retail and professional services (AITHER, 2019). As previously discussed, councils have a responsibility to plan for their local communities, “including coordination and delivery of services for children and families” (Victorian Government & Municipal Association of Victoria, 2017: p 5). Historically, this has extended to the provision of kindergarten, but rarely childcare. As a result, there are varying degrees of involvement by councils in supporting childcare services.

#### Hindmarsh

The Hindmarsh Shire Council has a population of 5721 (ABS, 2016 Census) and 260 children under five years of age (ABS, 2016). The Council has two regional towns of more than 1000 people, Nhill and Dimboola, (AITHER, 2019) with some smaller townships including Jeparit, and Rainbow. Where childcare is available, delivery is contracted to an external provider to provide kindergarten and childcare services concurrently, which does allow for streamlined delivery. In discussions, the reasons for this delivery approach were identified as follows:

*Interviewer: And you contract out your kindergarten and childcare services?*

*Interviewee: Correct, yes. To Emerge Early Years service providers.*

*Interviewer: And what's the background to that decision, why does council choose that as its model?*

*Interviewee: Ultimately that goes back, I think, around 20 years. I think 20 years ago, council made the decision to run with Uniting I guess it went through a tender process well before my time. It went with Uniting approximately 20 years ago. I think probably council back then and certainly the view is with council now (and I spoke to my director) its expertise in the field. My council's trying to be lots of things to lots of different people, but recognizes that with early years, that's an area where you have to have service providers that live and breathe the provision of early services, kindergarten three or four year old or child care, etc.. So why wouldn't we have them running those services?*

#### Northern Grampians

The Northern Grampians Shire Council is the most populous Council within the study area, with 11,439 residents (ABS, 2016). The Council also has 522 children aged 0-4 years (ABS, 2016). There are two regional towns, Stawell, with a population of more than 5000, and St Arnaud with a population of just over 2000 people. The area also has some smaller towns and communities including Halls Gap and Great Western. Northern Grampians Shire Council has a role in planning the provision of kindergarten services and



childcare and has recently moved to support the delivery of long day-care delivery in Stawell which provided a greater level of financial sustainability for the kindergarten services being delivered:

*We were finding it increasingly more difficult to fund the kindergarten program sustainably. So long day care provided it with some more financial sustainability in that regard, but also looking at the community [and] what the community needs were. So, for example in Stawell the decision to go into the long day care space, we had one shared facility and we had two service providers in there so sustainability-wise, for both our services to operate under the one roof it was just impossible. So the decision was made that really it needs to be the one provider. And the YMCA at that stage approached us and sort of said, you guys do the kindergarten. You've been here, you know, forever and a day. Would you be interested in taking it on? So we looked at the sustainability of the service and whether that would help our organization and whether we could make it sustainable. So that's why we moved into that space.*

## **West Wimmera**

The West Wimmera Shire Council is the local government area with the smallest population, of 3093 people (ABS, 2016) and 209 children under the age of five (ABS, 2016). West Wimmera Shire Council has no townships of more than 1000 people, but has two regional townships, Edenhope as the base location for the Council with a population of 656, and Kaniva with a population of 579 (AITHER, 2019). There are also smaller townships including Goroke and Apsley. The West Wimmera Shire Council provides kindergarten services, but not childcare. Their engagement with childcare is focussed on providing a facility for family daycare to be delivered:

*So in the child care area, we have kindergartens, we are service providers for the local kindergartens and but we don't do child care, but we rent out the buildings... we have the buildings available for other service providers to provide child care in. I don't think, like I have obviously not been there forever, but I don't think they've [the Council] ever provided childcare. There's always been another service provider do it. It's very challenging for small rural councils and the funding that used to be available for those services is no longer [available]. So it's quite a challenge meeting all the regs [short for regulations] for council.*

*we don't attract any funding. We allow the [childcare] service provider rent free all that sort of thing so they can function without having additional costs and they just pay their phone bill or whatever it is. So it's council funding that props that up.*

## **Yarriambiack**

The Yarriambiack Shire Council has a population of 6674 and 287 children under the age of five (ABS, 2016). The Council has two regional towns, Warracknabeal with a population of 2252, and Murtoa with a population of 735 (AITHER, 2019), as well as Hopetoun with a population of 739, Minyip with 529, Rupanyup with 536 and smaller towns including Tempy, Patchewollock, Beulah and Woomelang (all under 500). This

Council has lease agreements with external service providers to provide childcare services in Council facilities:

*So with [childcare service provider], for example, we have an agreement in place that's an MOU. We'll be moving to lease agreements with the new Local Government Act to do some other things. And the lease agreement will be pretty similar to what we've got now in terms of expenses. So Uniting pays a percentage of the costs. So I think it's something like they pay 30 per cent for, say, the rubbish or water or power costs in the building. So it's just a percentage of the utility costs that we bill them annually for.*

This Council has also been quite proactive in supporting efforts to open school bus route access to kindergarten and three-year-old kindergarten students, which supports families to access kindergarten, and maintains school bus routes for children who will later present at school:

*So finally, after about eight years of lobbying, a couple of years ago four-year-old children are now recognized on bus routes. So that's probably the biggest thing that we got excited about was that Kindergarten children are now recognized as part of the planning for school bus routes. So we don't have bus routes terminated just because there's no primary kids on, because kindergarten kids are next year's primary kids.*

## **Economics & Funding Provision**

### **Local Government**

Participating councils in this study all employed different arrangements to support kindergarten, and in some cases, childcare services. Of the four councils that participated in this study:

- Two councils provided kindergarten services and supported the external delivery of childcare to a local not for profit childcare service organisation.
- One council contracted out kindergarten services and childcare in the largest town and provided kindergarten and childcare in a smaller satellite town.
- One council contracted out both kindergarten and childcare services.

Each council provided different reasoning and justification for their decision-making in regard to how each service was managed. However, the main challenge to providing both childcare and kindergarten appeared to be funding and associated costs, inflexible regulations (both State and Federal) and lower population sizes:

*Council does subsidize each child so that we can reduce parent fees. And I'm not aware of any other councils that do that. So, council has some skin in the game. Even though we're not actually running the programs directly ourselves, we are contributing both with facilities and also with subsidies each year to make sure that kindergarten's affordable. But I guess that model of funding needs to match what's needed in small rural areas to ensure that the programs are sustainable. The pressures that we*



*have are completely opposite to the western or northern suburbs of Melbourne where they've got too much need and not enough capacity. We're sort of at the other end of the scale.*

*Having worked in a childcare service profession before, it's very challenging for small rural councils when the funding that used to be available for those services is no longer available. So it's quite a challenge meeting all the regs [short for regulations] for councils.*

*the numbers [of children] here don't probably reflect that we could build a childcare service or justify building a childcare service. It would have to be a really different type of model.*

### **State Government (Kindergarten)**

All service providers interviewed advised that they have a good working relationship with the Department of Education and Training at the local level and feel well supported and serviced:

*On a local level, we don't really talk to people from the city particularly or higher up in the department. But from a local level, we're well serviced. Yeah, it's good to be able to just jump on the phone at any time. If you had a query on something they don't answer straight away, they'll come back to you fairly shortly.*

*But we've had a pretty good relationship, fortunately, with the Department of Education, both when it was headquartered in Ballarat and now it's in Warrnambool with the new regions. When 15 hours kinder was implemented, we were heavily involved in some implementation stuff. We were one of the councils that did a pilot on the 15 hours, and we did that between [two small towns] as an example of how rural kindergartens could share services and have the 15 hours. And we developed a model that we got funded for. So, we're one of the early kindergartens to try all that stuff.*

One council representative advised that he believed the current level of funding and service did not need to change:

*Our main thing would be no change is needed. Just keep doing the same as what you're currently doing government, because council wouldn't have been looking at doing the projects that we're doing without any funding from government.*

When asked about the challenges of bringing bureaucrats and politicians to an understanding of the nuances of rural childcare and provision, one council representative explained that much depends on the individual Minister:

*It's been dependent on the minister of the day, I think. Some of them have been a lot more interested [than others].*

This representative also advised that State Government funding for kindergarten services paid for the employment of staff, while the Council contributes to infrastructure maintenance and administration costs:

*Now with the new funding model that the Department of Education has put in, it really meets the funding specifically for the staffing. Council puts in a hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand a year*

*in terms of maintenance upgrades and administration and for the early-years coordinator position. And just with maintenance and keeping the buildings up to date, some of those are quite aging buildings. And so, we've had to put a bit of work in to replace all the playground equipment. We did a five-year program on that to bring that up to speed. It's never-ending, really.*

### **Federal Government (Childcare)**

The Wimmera Southern Mallee councils that participated in this study reported having less engagement with the Commonwealth than they have with the State government in the early years space. This may in part be due to most councils that participated in this study having either never provided childcare services directly, or not for some time. Thus, the relationship these councils have with the Federal government is largely indirectly through private and not-for-profit childcare providers. Again, council representatives justified their decision for not providing childcare as it being too costly, complex and labour intensive:

*Most councils are reluctant to be involved in childcare because of the complexity of the rules and regulations and certainly something we've always said no, we wouldn't do, but we would provide buildings or other things to support people who wanted organisations who were already in that business.*

One Council representative explained that while his Council did not provide childcare services directly, they are aware that access to both three-year-old kindergarten and childcare has been identified as a key method for addressing disadvantage. As a result, the Council has been proactive in their advocacy to government:

*And I think it was 2010 The COAG report identified three-year-old children as being the next vulnerable group in rural Australia because of their access to education and other issues. Childcare was one of those as well. So, we've been heavily involved in our own services, but lobbying to get things done with the Department of Transport and the Department of Education around some of those issues.*

Disparities between State and Federal Government funding of early years programs is clearly impacting on one council's ability to provide childcare in towns with small populations. A service user participant outlined conversations she had had with her local council representatives in which she was advised that funding is the key issue for why the council cannot provide programs and infrastructure:

*[The Council] said we've got evidence to say we need childcare for you guys, but there's no funding, it's all for three-year-old kinder. We need a new kinder, ours is falling down, but they say there is no funding available. We have enough land and everything to have a new kinder and a new childcare centre built. We've got the land. And the council would be happy, they'd love it if we could, but they're just saying that there's no funding so we can't do it.*

While the councils in this study identified funding and costs as being the primary reason why they are unable to provide childcare to towns with smaller populations, one not-for-profit, contracted childcare and kindergarten provider explained that the utilization of a 'global budgeting' accounting method provided her business with the ability to deliver services in centres with very low numbers of children:

*So, what we do is we look at the service as a whole. We do a global budget for all of our kindergartens and long day care services. That allows us to keep every kinder open or every centre open. So, from an early years management point of view, if we look at every kindergarten on its own, we'd probably close half our kindergartens down because they wouldn't be running financially sustainably. But because we make profit in other services, we're able to keep all our services open. What we look at is one lot for all of our services, we don't necessarily look at each individual service by themselves. We budget for each service by themselves. But the overall is a global budget.*

This same not-for-profit provider also explained that profitability depended in part on the level of education staff have attained:

*At the moment for our rural and remote centres, we get eighty thousand dollars a year to run that service regardless of whether we've got two kids or whether we've got 18 kids. That's great, but when you're running a three-day program with a qualified – depending on what level teacher you are employing depends on whether you can run that program at a surplus or whether you can't run a surplus. If you've got a graduate teacher in there, potentially you can run it and break even. But if you've got a high-level teacher on a 2.5, then you more than likely will run that program at a deficit budget.*

Together these observations indicate that the necessity to run early years services with a 'for profit' outcome may be driving decision-making which considers service delivery to be unviable in many rural locations.

## **Quality & Regulation**

All service providers interviewed suggested that onerous 'red tape' at both State and Federal level presented significant barriers to effective early years service provision. Quality and regulation were viewed as costly, complex and 'city centric'. Particular factors identified included staff training and qualifications:

*I think the introduction of the third or the additional ratio requirement has provided us and I think every EYM across the state a huge financial impact. So, the money that we see for having that third educator in the room doesn't cover the actual cost of having an educator in the room. We might get some twenty thousand for the third educator that might cost us thirty-six thousand to employ that educator for the full year. So, we're sixteen thousand dollars worse off as to what we were originally with just the two educator requirements. So, we have to find that money. Three years in a row we ran a deficit budget. Since we had long day care we've managed to be able to put them back into surplus.*

When asked about the challenges of retaining kindergarten staff, one council representative explained that the casualisation of the workforce and staff training are key factors:

*The biggest issue will be to get a provider. I mean, the Department's got the building block grants out at the moment and we can look at those, but it's getting a provider and getting trained staff. It's the qualified staff in those small rural areas that's the issue and I think sometimes the childcare model itself that's funded because it doesn't lend itself particularly to part-time childcare.*

A not-for-profit provider explained that upskilling the workforce was vital, but that while staff are training, they are not able to work at the level needed, unless an exemption is obtained from the Department:

*There are scholarship programs available. We've got a few Diploma staff members looking at doing their Bachelor, which is fantastic. So upskilling. But the problem is we can't use them until they're qualified. So, it's two years away. We would love to put them in these positions and train them up and do that on-the-job training. But unfortunately, what the Department asked us to do is to have Bachelor qualified so we can potentially get an exemption or funding by exception, but only if we've been able to provide [evidence that] we've advertised extensively and we've proved that we just can't get anybody. Then potentially we could say, right, well, we've got somebody that has enrolled and are currently studying a Bachelor who's completed their Diploma and then potentially we go for an exemption.*

This same not-for-profit provider explained that the early years teacher shortage could be offset if primary teachers could teach in kindergartens without having to gain further qualifications. It is noted that some teaching qualifications cover the educational years of 0-8 or 0-12, but in other situations primary aged educators require additional qualifications to work in (lower paid) kindergarten roles. While it is possible for primary teachers to retrain and gain kindergarten teacher qualifications, the training requirements and costs are often prohibitive. The fact that early years teachers can teach in primary schools and in kindergartens also provides a challenge to early years providers, as early years teachers abandon the sector to work in primary schools:

*Probably one of the fundamental things for me that shits me to tears to be perfectly honest is that we can't use primary teachers in the kindergarten sector. So, people that have gone through and done the Bachelor in primary cannot work as a kindergarten teacher in the early years sector. Guys that go through and do The Bachelor of Early Education can go and work in the primary sector or in the kindergarten sector. So, for me, it's just a real shame because we sometimes have fantastic primary teachers that are brilliant. I think there should be some type of bridging course between Bachelor primary trained to become a kindergarten teacher. And I don't think they need to complete a full diploma course. There needs to be looked at some sort of bridging course that doesn't take a long period of time, that doesn't cost thousands of dollars to complete for them to be able to become a qualified kindergarten teacher.*

One council representative explained that while the policy space could be challenging to navigate, the council had a good relationship with the local DEET quality and regulation team:

*You've got a level of policy at the kindergarten level, policy from local government, you've got a level of policy from state and federal government too. It's just a minefield. But it obviously can be done and that can be negotiated. For me the regulations are sometimes prohibitive but at the same time, we do seem to have lots of support from the quality and regulation team.*

One council representative suggested that families did not understand the issues councils and other providers have in setting up childcare centres; particularly when many of the regulations were built on urban

models. This representative advised that if families were better informed, they might be more supportive of their local childcare centres:

*I don't think people understand the regulations around it. You've got to have two staff in a room for one child and things like that. They don't understand how much it costs to implement all those regs. You know, the same regs are for the middle of Melbourne as they are for [rural areas]. It makes it quite challenging and you can't afford to run a service like that.*

This same representative advised that onerous quality and regulation requirements actively dissuaded locals from investing in family day care:

*There is family day care in [a local town] run out of the service, so they do in-venue care. Different people have run that over the last few years but they don't last long in that either. And that is also all the regs. They have to set up as their own business. And they're sort of under the guidance of a provider. Seven years ago, there were 25 family day cares in our rural area around here. And now there's like three or something, and the big thing with that is the huge expectations of family day carers – all the paperwork and things like that. You have to have the individual programs and all this just puts people right off. So, we've had in the last three years, we've had three different people. And they've left to get a job opportunity, obviously.*

Staff to child ratios were raised as particularly concerning to all service providers, with low numbers creating challenges for service provision:

*Just the sheer numbers make it challenging. If we were to run a service and we only had two kids for the day, we still have to pay two staff members if we were a service provider. And then you've got lunch breaks you have to cover. I think they [governments] need to look at small rural services and re-do how they do that and look at having a different exemption for certain things like that.*

## **Rurality/distance**

All service provider and service user respondents in this study highlighted that rurality and distance is driving disparity and inequality in early years services across the Wimmera Southern Mallee. The consensus among service providers is that the current funding models are based on 'city centric' policies that prioritise teacher to child ratios and numbers of children attending. Small centres with small numbers of children attending are seen as economically unviable. This economic rationalism is set against the fact that all council representatives acknowledge the importance of early years education. Councils in the Wimmera Southern Mallee are making decisions on where and how to provide services based on having to reconcile two outcomes that are potentially at odds with one another – the desire to provide care and education to all children and the need to balance budgets. Coupled with disparities between State and Federal funding models and staff training requirements, councils are needing to find creative solutions. For some councils, this has meant outsourcing childcare and/or kindergarten in smaller communities. For others, services are being bolstered in larger centres, which necessitates some families having to travel great distances in order to access childcare and kindergarten.

With current kindergarten and childcare policies being developed in urban centres, councils, not-for-profit and private providers in regional areas are at significant disadvantage.

*I think it's more about and it always is the difference between rural and metro, I suppose, in access and the viability for childcare, but also flexibility of services. It's really hard to have flexible services for families and probably more so in rural areas, but that's probably the biggest thing I hear back from families about childcare, is the lack of flexibility of childcare.*

*probably the one challenge that we face is sustainability. And that's an ongoing issue, certainly for our smaller towns. That's something we'll have to watch over the next three, five, ten [years], is just having enough numbers to make a service viable. Which is not really something we can control. Most small rural communities are aging so that there is a reduction in children being brought through. So, yeah, that might be a problem that we face in however many years' time. And then what we do with the service to provide with a small number of children, if you weren't able to run a service any longer, what's the alternative for the children that are still in that area? Because, you know, everyone should have a right to kindergarten.*

*You've got to have this many staff and one child, basically two staff in a room for one child and things like that. They [DET] don't understand how much it costs to implement all those regs. You know, the same regs are for the middle of Melbourne as they are for Goroke. It makes it quite challenging and you can't afford to run a service like that.*

With many 'unviable' locations for childcare in the smaller townships, rural families are as a consequence having to travel great distances to access these services. This is particularly onerous for those parents who work in the towns that they live in:

*We've got Stawell, which has got three options and then you've got St Arnaud, which is another option. But there's all these little towns in between. Halls Gap people are having to drive to Stawell for childcare.*

The impacts that having to travel to access formal childcare was an issue raised by all service user participants:

*It's just the fact that we have to travel so far... it's so draining, like the drive is tiring, the kids are over it. They fall asleep in the car, which throws off their nap time. And that's the other thing. I come back to Goroke for work and I just think every time I get a phone call from day care because [my son]'s tripped over, he's got a blood lip, I think oh, if this is something urgent, I'm still like an hour away. It takes me 45 to 50 minutes to drive in. I think it's sixty-five, seventy-five k's something like that.*

Another participant made a daily two hour, cross border round trip in order for her children to attend childcare in Naracoorte where she worked three days a week:

*When I was going back to work, there was nothing available here in the West Wimmera, well in Goroke, where we were. So I had to take my kids to Naracoorte with me, an hour's drive [100km round*



*trip]. Because there's no point in me going via Edenhope where there was limited childcare, so may as well go straight to Naracoorte [where there is] a bigger facility.*

These service users reported that traveling such distances is tiring for both themselves and their children, particularly when the family is on the road by 7.30am and not returning home until late evening. As most of the mothers interviewed were married to farmers, their partners were not necessarily able to care for the children or provide meals of an evening, putting further strain on these working women.

A not-for-profit service provider also highlighted concerns for staff who are required to travel long distances from Horsham to work in remote communities. A possible solution for this provider would be to offer a travel allowance:

*To offer staff travel and whether that would be enough incentive for staff to do that. But then some staff burn out with the additional travel that comes into play. We've got to monitor and be mindful of that, and especially now in the winter months, leaving at 7:00 or 6:00 in the morning to get to work and then leaving at night and travelling home in the dark. All those type of things we've got to really think about and consider. It becomes really hard.*

One council representative suggested that for mothers who work in larger centres, such as Horsham, taking their children with them is better than providing childcare in the towns that they live in:

*It's probably easier for the mum to take the child with them and put them into childcare in a service that operates five days a week and meet the needs of her work requirements.*

### **Issues with kindergarten impacting on long day care access**

Within this mix the State Government has recently introduced three-year-old kindergarten which is being progressively rolled out in rural local government areas. While hosting three-year-old kindergarten attracts new funding and assists councils in their aim to educate their youngest citizens, other challenges have arisen as a consequence. One that all remote and rural councils are facing is that three-year-old children were not allowed to travel on school buses unaccompanied by an adult:

*Because particularly in the remote parts of our council area, we have families that will travel 15, 20, 30 minutes. They'll put their four-year-old on the bus and then have to drive their three-year-old in. And obviously with rural families, particularly at harvest time, those are the times access then becomes an issue for three-year-olds.*

The arrival of three-year-old kindergarten has also put further strain on limited resources and infrastructure:

*Basically [with] three-year-old kinder... accommodating all those children has caused both services to have waiting lists in regards to what we can provide for long daycare. We can't accommodate all the children that are wanting the service. But definitely three-year-old kinder has produced some challenges well and truly that we're still working through at the moment.*

A not-for-profit provider expressed concerns for smaller communities once three-year-old kindergarten is rolled out in 2022:

*I'm very concerned with the roll out come 2022 of three-year-old kindergarten in Horsham, because I am quite concerned that the staff that we do have traveling to [smaller towns] to fill positions there potentially may look to somewhere closer to the home at a three-year-old kinder. We find it very difficult to get staff to move to the area. Especially teachers, is probably the hardest position to fill in those remote communities.*

This same provider highlighted how three-year-old kindergarten will have an impact on long day care:

*I suppose three-year-old kindergarten has probably impacted our long day care numbers. So, for me, as an organization has really made us rethink our model and what we do and what we provide in each service. We really do provide sessional kindergarten but it's just looking at, well, how does that work then when we've only got low numbers in long day care because now all those three- to five-year-old kids that were normally in the three- to five-year-old room are now attending kinder. It's really something that we will look at, where we're monitoring quite closely this year around that financial impact and what that means for our organization this year and then moving forward around the modelling.*

At one council, the not-for-profit provider of childcare services and the council-run kindergarten service are working collaboratively as much as possible, though staffing remains an issue:

*In [two larger townships] they work alongside each other physically in the same building, and that service seems to work in a very complementary manner to each other. Children often attend kindergarten in the morning and then staff take the children across to the childcare centres in the afternoons and they do work very cohesively. And I see that as a really successful model for our kindergartens. But the difficulty, again, is that sometimes their childcare centres can't staff on the same days as the kindergarten. So we worked really hard to try and make that as efficient as possible in that if we can get the days to work for our staff and their staff we'll try and work together.*

This council representative also acknowledged that many of the council's smaller townships have no childcare at all:

*The other kindergartens ... have no access to childcare. And especially in the southern end of the shire, there is just none and their families are crying out for childcare down there, but there's no access. So, the implications for three-year-olds in those kindergartens has just purely meant that more families are able to attend a three-year-old kinder and because it has now been funded and the fees are not so expensive. That's the implication for the small ones.*

Another council representative is facing a similar issue:

*I think, because we're rolling out a three-year-old kinder 7.5 hour days in Kaniva, that will take away from the local childcare as well. We try to do different days and things like that but that doesn't always work. We try and work together, but of course we're a lot cheaper than childcare too. They get the whole term for \$320 dollars. And that's two 7.5 hour days, it's very popular.*



This council representative also observed a challenge that three-year-old kindergarten is presenting to educators:

*And then the other issue we find is because now kinder is the long days and for three-year-olds it's really looked upon as childcare and kinder is now stuck in that childcare bucket rather than an education. The teachers, you know, this is why they're leaving to primary schools. They're like, we need to change nappies because some of the three [-year-olds] are still in nappies. And so, it's kind of devalued and they feel very devalued.*

In a sector that is already struggling with recruiting and maintaining staff, the issue of three-year-old kindergarten teachers feeling devalued is something that councils and government will need to examine.

Many of the services users interviewed stated that they are adversely impacted by the disparities between the provision of childcare and kindergarten in small communities:

*Well, I don't have any [children] in childcare because there isn't any childcare! Our kindergarten ended up doing two days a week, two full days from 8.30 to 4pm, which we chose as parents because there was no childcare in town.*

This participant, who is a health professional trying to run her own business, also remarked that she needs to work her business around kindergarten hours and employ a private babysitter as there is no childcare in her small town:

*I run my own business and I've got three employees. We're quite busy, but we've been shut down, obviously, on and off [due to COVID-19 restrictions]. We have to work everything around it [kindergarten]. I have to work it around babysitters – it's ridiculous.*

Service users spoke of the challenges in advocating for services in their communities:

*I know that a friend of ours tried hard to get some sort of program going quite a few years ago and had a bit of support, but it just seemed like an uphill battle to get council approval, funding, someone to run the program. So, I think everyone just sort of gave up on the idea of ever having a facility like that. It just seems to be we're too rural and it was all too hard.*

*We've got such young families that are just in desperate, desperate need. School teachers can't go back and teach. We've got women in agriculture that can't [work]. It's between an eight and 12 month wait right now in Horsham and even then, you're lucky if you get the day that you want. But there's just nowhere to go to push your voice. It's not okay for the next generation to go through what we've gone through.*

One participant explained that despite having her son on the waitlist for childcare in Kaniva in January, by the time she returned to work in April, there were still no places available. The family was able to find childcare in Horsham two days a week, but this presented a new set of challenges:

*So we ended up there two days, which was hard work because we had to leave at seven o'clock in the morning to get there by 8.30am to get me to work and then by the time we got home at night it was*

*about 6.30pm so he was buggered. He was just over one [years old] at the time. So that was really hard.*

## **Centrality of childcare for early childhood development**

All service-user participants reported that their children benefited emotionally, intellectually, behaviourally, and socially from attendance at formal childcare. One mother noticed a marked difference in the social skills of her own children (who attended regular formal childcare) and her niece and nephew (who were cared for by older grandparents when their mother worked). While all four children were of a similar age and lived in the same town, this mother found that:

*Our kids are happy to play by themselves and approach other children and, you know, play and be independent kind of thing. Whereas my niece and nephew are more so searching for that one on one interaction all the time. And we get a lot of comments about how good our kids are with other kids.*

Another participant commented that her son's social skills had improved significantly since commencing childcare and that he had developed a strong bond with his carers:

*He's a very stereotypical, energetic farm boy stuck in town. So, playing with other kids that he wouldn't necessarily socialize with at different ages as well, taking direction and learning discipline and authority from other people that aren't his parents and family has been really good. And just the things like the craft – that isn't in my repertoire! After having him at home for seven weeks in the first lockdown, I don't think childcare workers get paid enough. So, this week he invited the room leader to come for a sleepover and come for a play at our house!*

This positive viewpoint is also reinforced by other interviewees who emphasised the obvious benefits of socialisation for their children through attending childcare.

*So our oldest son, I initially enrolled him because when I was working doing placements with early childhood services, I could tell which kids had been in child care because they just seemed to be a lot more settled and comfortable. And I thought well I really want that for my kids.*

*He loves it. He's a very social kid. He comes home talking about all the other kids and that kind of thing. So, it's definitely benefited him a lot being there now. He's meeting other kids. He's doing creative things all day, comes home covered in paint and sand and things like that. So, I think it really benefited in many ways, even his speech and things have come a long way since being in childcare. Just being around other kids and talking more. And he comes home and sing songs that I've never sung before and things like that, just those kind of other learning activities that he wouldn't do it home or with family.*

Another service user also emphasised the significance of access to adult education in local settings.

*And I think for regional areas, we've got such low literacy and numeracy levels in adults that education is really one of the most important things and early education is something that should be put on a pedestal around here.*

## Impacts on Service Users (parents)

### Equity

Rural parents are unable to access the same level of childcare services and associated financial support for the care of their children as their urban counterparts. While this report acknowledges a range of challenging geographical, market driven and even cultural reasons that contribute to this situation, the outcome is that families who cannot access early childhood care also do not access Government supported childcare funding that would enable employment and respite care. The national childcare subsidy system, which was designed to address economic inequities by providing tiered childcare funding support to ensure parents from all financial backgrounds can participate, is not truly accessible to all. The system was not built to provide support for families in parts of Australia where geographical challenges result in market failure, such as the Wimmera Southern Mallee. Ultimately it means that families who would be eligible for this financial support elsewhere do not receive any support, because there are no approved childcare services to engage with.

This situation exacerbates problems in rural areas in terms of underemployment, skill shortages and financial dependence of women on their partners. As Bock (2004) acknowledges, rural women may:

...work with no contract or only with a temporary work contract, or they work as home workers or unpaid family workers. Rural women are also less successful in finding a job that requires the level of education they possess, even though young women are better educated than men in many regions (p 23).

This situation is replicated in the Wimmera Southern Mallee where women are twice as likely as men to hold degree level qualifications (Tischler, 2020). Maintaining workforce participation while living in areas with no childcare options available is a significant issue for career maintenance and progression. Further, breaking connections to workforce participation has been identified as a factor in financial vulnerability of women and reduces their earning capacity and human capital in the workforce over a lifetime (Wood, Griffiths & Emslie, 2020).

For rural women, Bock (2004) identifies a complex interplay of geographical, cultural, structural and individual circumstances that influence women's employment, which she demonstrates through the following diagram:

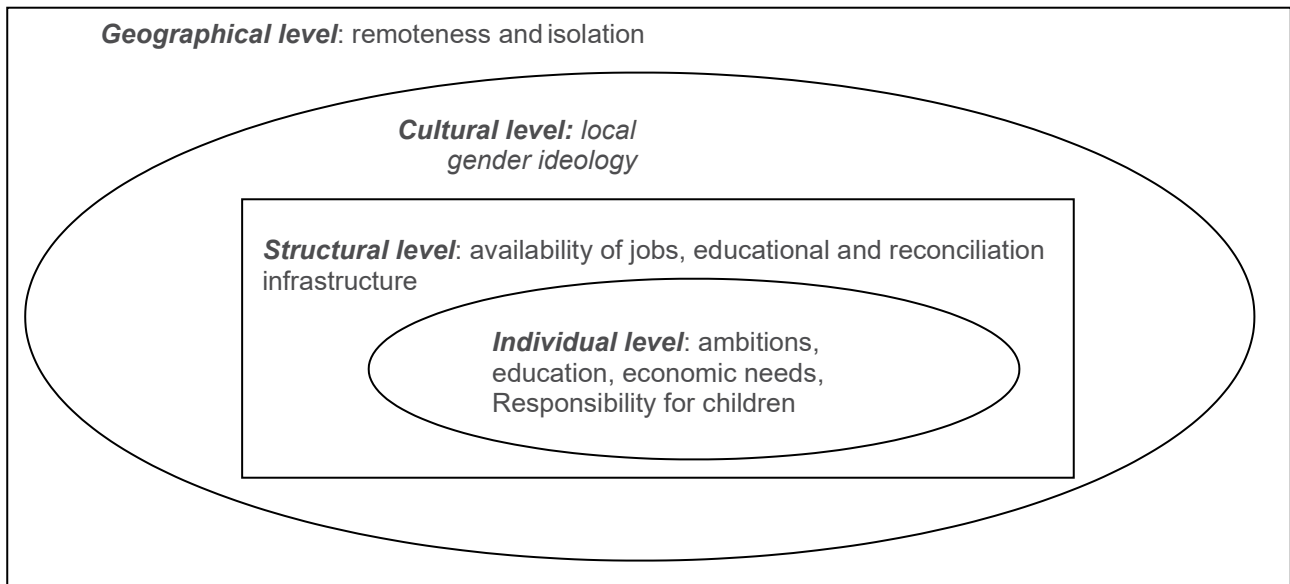


Figure 2. Rural women's employment is influenced by geographical, cultural, structural and individual factors. Taken from: Bock (2004, p 27).

Our research study identified that potential service users in rural areas considered an inability to access childcare to be an individual or personal issue linked to their own relationship choices rather than a structural or cultural challenge for the region. As one woman explained:

*I guess the thing is, I choose to live where I am. I have a choice. Like I mean, I married a farmer and this is where we chose to live. But if I did have childcare around the area I obviously would have supported that.*

Similarly, service providers also acknowledged that women in the community would be able to increase their employment if childcare was available, but responses focussed on the difficulty of being able to provide such services:

*There'd be a handful of families that would have the opportunity to put children in childcare, whether they're farming families and mum can be more effective on the farm if it's mum looking after the children or whether they'd be working a lot more hours than they do now. But yeah, realistically, I think most people just accept in the smaller communities, that there's some services that just aren't going to be provided. It doesn't make it right, but I guess it makes it understandable.*

Another acknowledged that a lack of services forced parents to rely on family for childcare support:

*It makes it hard, like it just makes it difficult for them to work. So they have to rely on family.*

These comments also show that providers link rural childcare needs to farming families in rural communities. While this is certainly a demographic requiring support, there is a risk of overlooking the real diversity of need in this space and the opportunities that are forgone when such services are not available to support families.

## Work, careers and childcare access

In the Wimmera Southern Mallee, provision of childcare is a significant issue for women in maintaining connections to work and careers, which is an issue for regional development. Women's career trajectories

and professional goals, workforce participation, financial security and wellbeing as mothers are linked to the provision of affordable and accessible childcare, and women are twice as likely to have degree level (or higher) qualifications in the region (Tischler, 2020). Having women leave the workforce while children are young impacts upon the availability of skilled workers in our regions. In interviews with service users, the challenge of accessibility and maintaining engagement with professional careers was noted as a key issue, and many participants stated that they had been unable to return to their usual employment as there were no childcare places available and/or lengthy waiting lists:

*So, he was probably on the waiting list for a good year before he got a spot. So it was a good year of having to rely on family and all the other methods before we could get him in all the days we needed.*

Another parent highlighted the fact that informal and unregulated childcare options emerge when parents are unable to access formal care:

*Going back to work full time is quite challenging because there's no formal childcare in [location] on a Friday. There is a couple of sort of private ones, but that's pretty much come out of necessity because there is no daycare on Friday yet.*

Others highlighted the challenges of retaining work in their professional fields and the difficulties associated with travelling to bigger centres to maintain this work while having childcare responsibilities. Comments here also highlight further issues around individual challenges with finding local employment options that support parenting responsibilities for children in rural communities:

*Like, I know a lot of mums my age have found work in Horsham or Naracoorte like myself. I guess a lot of us have got tertiary... you know we've gone on and done Uni. We want to work in the field that we've studied. And a lot of those jobs around here in Goroke are not available. I know some of the girls here have changed their professions to work at the local school because of the fact that it's so hard to get work in their area.*

*A lot of our mothers here are still trying to work and they do try to get babysitters in. But usually babysitters are quite young so that by the time it comes to school and everything they're off to Uni and all that kind of thing.*

The personal impacts of childcare on women's work was also highlighted, with one woman expressing her frustration around inconsistent childcare as "heartbreaking:"

*It's unbelievable. Look, I don't mind paying the money, it's fine because it means... like I want to work, I'm someone that does want to work too. I didn't go to Uni for six years to not work. I run a business now and I really enjoy it. But it's been really challenging. It's been quite heartbreaking sometimes because you actually have to cancel courses or you cancel your days at work because you don't have childcare. So, yeah, it's been really - it's heartbreaking, actually.*

Another woman made the point that work decisions in rural communities can be impacted by lack of childcare availability, which makes work in a larger centre more attractive:

*I think the career was the main point. When I got offered the job in [location], we did toss up whether I could even take it because we didn't know if we'd get childcare and we had childcare in Horsham. Financially it's been fine, it hasn't been an issue and everything else has been fine. I think the main part was just trying to get back to work.*

A lack of childcare or limited childcare availability in the smaller towns in the Wimmera Southern Mallee is having an impact on the choices women are able to make to maintain connections to employment and professional careers. For some women, it is also impacting on choices they make with regard to working in smaller communities.

It should also be noted that in interview discussions with service users, the research team noted that women consistently referred to themselves in the first person when arranging and paying for childcare support for their children, implying that the responsibility for managing and funding childcare arrangements was the responsibility of mothers in the families we engaged with. This suggests an additional financial and logistical load for women in maintaining their employment.

## **Negotiating system gaps and market failure**

Both service users and service providers acknowledged significant challenges with the financial viability of childcare services in smaller townships across the Wimmera Southern Mallee. Parents take a highly pragmatic approach to childcare support, and clearly consider kindergarten hours to be an integral part of filling this need. Childcare services are impacted by parental choices around kindergarten as a 'cheaper' option to provide care needs. The advent of three-year-old kindergarten in some areas has also increased the challenges for childcare provision, but at the same time, has also provided a service requirement linked to kindergarten that was not previously available in some communities.

Some parents in areas where both kindergarten and childcare were available spoke about how they were trying to work their employment hours within kindergarten hours in order to avoid full day childcare costs:

*So Kinder is three days a week, funded for 15 hours a week. And so instead of doing three full days work, I'm going to three half days and a full day of day care because daycare costings are still a full day for before and after kinder. I'm flexible so I'm working around that cost.*

However, it was also acknowledged that the relationship between kindergarten and childcare is challenging for parents who work and cannot be flexible with their hours. For these parents, costs are incurred for daycare and kindergarten fees, which add significant additional costs to have care available before and after kindergarten hours, in locations where kindergarten and childcare services are not run by the same provider. One woman spoke about a friend who needed to use both services for her children:

*One of my friends... she's a sole trader and doesn't have any staff, so if she's not there, she's not making money, so she really has to make the most of her time. She's got the kids all in on the same days, but on a Kinder day the three year old will be going to daycare at the start of the day, Kinder*

*from nine to two and then the rest of the day is daycare care. So she'll be paying Kinder and full fees for the daycare as well.*

This is an acknowledgement of the challenges that exist in some local government areas where the council recognizes responsibility for the provision of kindergarten services but not childcare. That the two services have a level of synergy and the ability to provide these services more seamlessly in rural communities would seem like an opportunity to provide a more cost effective and streamlined service for parents.

In areas where childcare support was not available, kindergarten hours are the only option, requiring parents to find other solutions to meet care needs around kindergarten hours so that they can work. As one parent acknowledged, filling this gap required an investment in private, informal care:

*I've been lucky enough because I've got a three and a four year old, so they're both at Kinder. And then basically what I use is I have a girl that I've had privately that comes to the house now. That's my only option, which costs me between \$130 to \$150 a day.*

Another parent who was unable to access childcare locally also engaged a private sitter to look after the children while the mother worked from home:

*And then I just got someone privately to cover with the kids when I was working from home, because I just couldn't do it otherwise and I just had to fork that out for myself, like with my own money as it wasn't covered by anything. There's no subsidy available for that because they weren't a registered provider and it's very expensive. Sometimes you feel like you're just working to pay childcare.*

Also notable in both these situations is that this is a significant additional cost borne by women in rural communities that is not subsidised or supported by the Government. This is because these childcare arrangements are privately arranged and do not constitute an “approved childcare service” (Australian Government, 2020). They are nevertheless necessary in order for women to be able to work because of market failure in these rural communities. They represent a significant additional level of cost borne by rural women in maintaining their careers and work, which differentiates them from their regional centre and urban counterparts where approved care services are more readily available. There is also the question of quality of care and whether these informal arrangements confer the early learning benefits of a high quality centre based program.

## **Childcare as a social connector and welfare support**

Childcare operates as a way to connect parents in communities with other parents and children. Beyond the employment opportunities for women childcare supports, childcare also helps enable parents to participate in volunteer activities and connect with others engaged in similar experiences. As three Local Government areas within the study, Hindmarsh, Yarriambiack and West Wimmera all report some of the highest rates of volunteering in Victoria of between 35-46 per cent of the population, (Ministerial Council for Volunteers, 2017: p 18) this is an important part of the contribution that people of all ages (including parents with young children) make to the Wimmera Southern Mallee. A number of service users who were interviewed



acknowledged the importance of being able to engage with the community through volunteering activity, and the limitations a lack of childcare support placed on this activity:

*And I just think it's really important for the mums to make that connection as well. That social connection that we're missing here as well... So and then being in the community, my husband and I are both in the CFA. We also find that we're both at the same meetings, but we can't go to the same meetings, though we try, because who is going to look after the kids? So it does impact on your commitment to the community and your children.*

Service users also acknowledged childcare as an important part of being able to have some respite from children to engage in self-care or attend personal appointments or catch up on life administration. As one woman expressed, any opportunity for childcare support, regardless of the model, would be appreciated:

*I do know there would be a lot of mothers interested in afterschool programs, long daycare, anything really just to get some time. To get some work done. Get some shopping done. And work in the area.*

For those who were able to access some childcare support, the social and community connectivity benefits were acknowledged as highly important. People reported making new social connections through childcare:

*And then there's joining in the childcare community to meet new people that you found along the way. You know, even in a town as small as [location] you never knew existed. We have been going for a walk after drop off in the morning before I start work or before Kinder pick up. So yeah, [childcare] has introduced me to new people within the community.*

Another felt that this helped counter the isolation experienced when other services to connect people were not available, such as play groups or mother's groups:

*I do absolutely think it's [formal childcare] a great thing. I think because we are so isolated out here that to have that social interaction with other people is very important because we don't have a mothers group out here.*

Remoteness has been found to be a contributing factor to psychological distress for rural parents (Novello, et. al., 2011) and childcare can act to provide a sense of community and connection for this demographic. The Wimmera Southern Mallee reports significantly higher rates of family violence reporting than the Victorian average (WSM Regional Partnership, 2017) and higher levels of vulnerability in one or more early childhood development domains (Australian Early Development Census, 2020). Childcare can provide important respite for parents and support for children navigating difficult health and wellbeing challenges (Kita et. al., 2020; Wise, 2018). These are significant indirect benefits that can be provided by childcare for families in rural communities, and there is some evidence to suggest that childcare can act as a preventative factor for child maltreatment (Sandner & Thomsen, 2020).



## History, infrastructure and change management

The way in which childcare in the Wimmera Southern Mallee is delivered is heavily influenced by the historic development of kindergarten education as a responsibility of councils. In interview discussions with service providers it was clear that councils took responsibility for the provision of kindergarten services in their communities but were much less inclined to assume responsibility for childcare services. There was a level of disparity between how the four rural councils engaged in childcare and kindergarten provision, ranging from fully contracting out kindergarten services and aligning the contractor to enable childcare provision at the same time (which is a significant structural advantage) to providing only kindergarten services, or providing a location for an external provider to deliver family day-care or some level of long day childcare service.

Councils have a long history of providing kindergarten services to towns in their municipalities and communities have in the past adopted various models for ensuring financial viability of these services, including significant levels of community fundraising.

The distinction between childcare and kindergarten is a significant one for rural Councils, as it defines the boundaries of their responsibilities in this space. Based on interview discussions, the engagement of Councils in childcare tends to focus on infrastructure supports (such as a physical location for childcare to be delivered) and some advocacy or facilitation with potential providers. Some councils were engaged in ways to explore potential leveraging of their role as kindergarten providers to better support sustainable childcare models, but this was not universal. Overwhelmingly, the way in which Councils delivered kindergarten services was based on historic precedent, which was acknowledged by councils service providers in conversation:

*Interviewer: Why does Council choose that as its model?*

*Interviewee: Ultimately that goes back, I think around 20 years. I think 20 years ago, council made the decision to run with [external provider] – I guess it went through a tender process well before my time. It went with [service provider] approximately 20 years ago. I think probably council back then and certainly the view is with council now (and I spoke to my director) its about expertise in the field. My council's trying to be lots of things to lots of different people but recognises that with early years, that's an area where you have to have service providers that live and breathe the provision of early years services... so why wouldn't you have them running those services?*

Interestingly, in this case, the historic model allowed for the alignment of childcare and kindergarten with an external provider, which appears to provide a more economically viable model for delivery because economies of scale and staffing arrangements across the two systems are more workable. Other councils within the study also identified an historic focus on delivery, which ensured and ongoing separation of service provision:

*I don't think they've ever provided childcare, there's always been another service provider to do it.*

Another identified their role in providing physical infrastructure that supported both childcare and kindergarten, but took responsibility only for kindergarten service delivery:

*So when we renovated [site], we renovated it so that childcare could operate at the same time as kindergarten separately because basically they're all sharing a room... we redeveloped the building so they could operate concurrently so they could have their own area.*

Infrastructure investment was also identified as a significant issue for service users, who argued that in some rural locations their communities lacked the necessary infrastructure to support both childcare and kindergarten:

*Our Kinder is so old, it's just appalling. It was old when my husband went there, he's like 'I can't believe it's the same Kinder, it's old as.' But we could have a brilliant facility. We have brilliant job opportunities for people here we could have all that sort of stuff, but we've just got nowhere to go to voice our opinion.*

Service providers also acknowledged limitations in councils support for infrastructure upgrades, and the role of their work in finding grants to support necessary infrastructure changes to allow childcare to operate effectively alongside kindergarten:

*And I know [the contracted service provider] when I first started, wanted some extra space. And it's just about, is it something that we can accommodate or not? And that was something we could accommodate. And now the next step is, can we accommodate looking at a building block grant to see if we can get more infrastructure for her? And that's where I fit in. So I think it's just having those ongoing conversations about what's working and what isn't, because it is a council building and we need to look after the services in there.*

It is important to acknowledge the challenges created by this historical precedent of placing councils in charge of kindergarten provision for economies of scale and more flexible solutions. Infrastructure support for childcare is an issue that is at the discretion of Council, but without this support, the delivery of childcare is exponentially more difficult.

Related to this, community engagement and assessments of childcare needs in local townships are also technically beyond the official scope of council responsibilities. Parents move through childcare and preschool years and the dynamics of need are constantly changing. Understanding childcare needs requires regular review of local needs in all rural townships. Needs will peak and trough as parent cohorts change over time. Ensuring responsiveness to these needs was highlighted as a major challenge for service providers and the communities they support. At least one Council reported undertaking a parent survey to ascertain levels of need, but in general Councils appeared to take a responsive approach to this, engaging when issues are brought to their attention by community members.

However, with no formal agency that is required to take responsibility for the provision of childcare in rural areas, Councils are the default agency to broker childcare delivery. Without this, responsibility would be left solely to the private market or social and community services sector. In doing so, Council undertakes involvement in childcare provision that is beyond the scope of its role and engaging can lead to expectations

and costs that are a challenge to fiscal responsibility. Ultimately market failure occurs in many rural towns in the Wimmera Southern Mallee because childcare service provision is left to market forces to determine.

## Staffing Challenges

Of all the issues considered within this report, recruiting and maintaining qualified staff to provide childcare services and kindergarten education was identified as the most difficult management issue for service providers in the four local Government areas studied. Staffing issues were compounded by geographic challenges of rurality and population dispersal. Access to training, mentoring and support as well as regulatory constraints are all significant challenges to effectively providing support in this area.

All Council representatives observed that the recruitment and retention of early years staff is a key challenge for councils and contracted service providers:

*Always difficult to get staff in and retain them and get them qualified and have those educators. It's just difficult to retain staff, difficult to get qualified, educators, and retain them.*

When asked about the challenges of retaining kindergarten staff, one Council representative explained that the casual nature of kindergarten employment in small towns and the training needs of staff are key factors:

*It's probably around the casualty of that work as much as anything, but also around the training because now with all the national quality framework, we've got to have qualified staff. And it's difficult to get qualified people in rural areas.*

Another service provider acknowledged that employing qualified staff is difficult and the idea of being in a position to choose between candidates and skill sets is incredibly rare:

*Well, first idea that comes to mind is staff - staff, staff, staff really because it is just so difficult to get appropriately qualified staff and never mind a choice of staff you know, sort of really high quality staff. And I'm not say thing that they aren't. But it doesn't give you much variety when you do get application for positions, but staffing positions is incredibly difficult. And I'd say that would pretty much extend into the you know, what I seen with [another service provider] services that work right alongside ours that they have the same difficulty too. And I know [kindergarten location] had to close and has just come back again after being closed for what might have almost been a month because they just couldn't get staff for that time. That's probably the major difficulty. In terms of anything else, we seem to manage everything else pretty well, I think, in terms of service provision and availability and all of those things. But the staffing is probably a major issue.*

Service providers acknowledged staffing was so challenging it was necessary to ensure flexible solutions were arranged with the Department of Education and Training to ensure services are delivered. For some providers, there were significant supports in place to upskill untrained staff to become kindergarten teachers:

*We've spoken at length about that with the department in their rules, their quality and regulation branch, and one of the things that we have in place is that, you know, you're supposed to employ staff that are qualified at the outset, but you just can't get them, and particularly in smaller towns as we move up into the Mallee areas. So we take on staff that are often untrained and with a commitment that they'll be working towards a qualification so that once they've done their period of probation. Then we put them into a training course so that they're getting a nationally recognized qualification. So the departments agreed to that for services in rural areas. You know, that's what you have to go with, that you're working towards qualifications that you can't always get qualified people at the outset.*

Efforts to support the upskilling of kindergarten staff involved with Yarriambiack Shire council engaging a skilled educator to provide a mentoring role across multiple sites to provide a support network to isolated staff, support educational upskilling and assist with compliance and quality improvement:

*[Person's] role is to mentor people. She's really good at that. And she's been getting people through their courses. The staff have a pretty good network of staff too and they do work together and support each other; particularly the teachers have supported the educators, the assistants to get through their training.*

Yarriambiack Shire Council also provides scholarships to enable kindergarten staff to attain further qualifications:

*We have had some that have done the diploma qualifications and we have three staff currently on scholarships to get further qualifications for early years to get degree qualification. One of the things we're really keen on is promoting local people to get the teacher qualifications. We've been fortunate that we've got three staff on scholarships this year.*

Those who engaged in childcare delivery also acknowledged significant challenges in attracting and retaining qualified staff in rural childcare locations. One provider explained that they were required to fill staffing gaps at rural locations by having staff travel from Horsham, which was acknowledged as a significant additional cost to provide the service, and an additional occupational health and safety risk:

*The workforce capacity and the workforce issue is huge for us, especially in rural and remote centres. So at the moment, we pay staff to travel from Horsham to work in those locations, to actually get staff to have that service open. We don't get funding for that. But in order for us to have a service and to keep it open, it's something that we need to do at the moment. So obviously that reduces our potential surplus. But again, we look at the bottom line and we look at the overall budget in regards to that. So that for me is our biggest major concern is the staffing and how do we continue to employ staff?*

Interestingly, some service user participants observed the opposite phenomenon, and explained that local childcare workers in rural locations were travelling to larger centres where more consistent work was available:

*There's a few local girls who started their Cert 3's in early child development, but they all eventually move to Horsham because there's no work here.*

Another service user also identified a number of women who had been trained but were travelling out of town to work:

*We've probably got two or three qualified childcare people that are already travelling to Horsham because they can't get a job [in town].*

Other service users also acknowledged that a lack of available staff was having an impact on the accessibility of rural childcare and kindergarten:

*And I think the reason I have such a long waiting list is staffing issues, I've heard, like they just don't have enough staff.*

*The Kinder room seems to have a lot of issues with keeping staff for more than a year or even seeing the year out. So, yeah, the staff is the biggest issue.*

Management of staff requires significant effort to attract, and potentially upskill staff in rural areas, and provide them with enough support. In the areas studied, this is provided to varying degrees by service providers.

### **What's Working:**

Service providers consistently identified two things that were working well within the region with regard to the provision of early years services. This was the high uptake of kindergarten services in the region, and positive engagement and support for service providers from the Department of Education and Training in the region who oversee regulation and compliance.

As one service provider noted, rural councils have a high kindergarten participation rate:

*I think kindergarten is pretty good because I think if you look at our uptake rate, I think we're sitting up around between 96 to 98 per cent most of the time. I mean, now I don't think there's many kids that are missing out on kindergarten in our council, looking at our figures for the last few years. We get the data back and it's always been around the high 90s, our participation rate.*

Service providers, and particularly Councils also acknowledged strong support from the Department of Education in flexible support and funding initiatives that assisted with the provision of kindergarten services, training, grants and project support.

*Probably what I've noticed is the Department of Ed support out there, I think is absolutely brilliant. The By5 project... I just hope the funding continues for that. But I think our Council can really do a lot in that space. There's so much out there and there is some assistance out there and some great projects and some great initiatives. I think for the early years space for me, it's a good space to be in. It seems to me there's a lot of people wanting to do some really positive things in rural areas. And you can't ask for more than that really at the moment.*

## What Service Users (parents) want:

Service users were strongly focussed on options that provided childcare supports linking services to kindergarten and after school care:

*What we would love is to have childcare centre next to a Kinder. And then your kids could go from the childcare centre to the Kinder when they're finished because now three year old's here to stay. A lot of kids are going to be going to Kinder earlier and we would just love a child centre next to a Kinder. Yeah, a five day week from 7:00 to six or whatever it is would be perfect. I mean, we've actually got a woman in town who is one of the heads of the childcare centres in Horsham and I mean, the employment opportunities and stuff that having a childcare centre [in town] would offer would just to be amazing.*

After school care and school holiday care were also acknowledged as a major issue for families:

*After school care would be another thing. If we could add that in somehow like after school care until they're eight years old or something would be another option that I think parents would love to have.*

Another parent said they were struggling with the lack of available childcare:

*I do need care for after school care. And I do need care for school holidays. It's a juggle.*

And parents also discussed the challenges of limited childcare availability impacting on work arrangements:

*I think if it would be good if there was full days just to give flexibility, because I can only work the days that child care is on. So if they had five days a week I could choose my days around that.*

## What Service Providers want:

Service providers – including one council which was actively working to identify childcare needs, an external provider and a facility to support childcare – identified several challenges experienced with regard to the provision of childcare. These ranged from facilities, financial and staffing challenges:

*I guess the next thing would be how we improve childcare services in particular down south, because I know from the survey we did, there's probably about 18 families over the next five years that will be moving in and out of childcare who want childcare at least three days a week. So there's a demand, certainly a demand down there. And Uniting is interested, but it's just getting a model that works for them, I guess financially and getting a facility is the thing, because even if we put in for a building block grant today, it's probably next year. You're looking at 18 months before you get a facility.*

Another identified the financial burden that can be associated with engaging in childcare provision, and described the reticence of some Councils to engage in that space:

*And if there was childcare, I think there needs to be... if we do have to have extra staff for two children or whatever then there needs to be funding available to pay the staff that can't possibly be propped up by Council funds for everything. We already have our kinders that we lose money on that, obviously very propped up by council.*



One not-for-profit provider suggested that a travel allowance for staff might assist in addressing staff shortages in smaller communities:

*I really don't know. I don't know what the answer is. You know, it's so hard because, you know, local people would prefer to work in their local community. Of course, they're probably going to look for jobs closer to home in the first instance to suit their lifestyle and their family. For me, I think it's about potentially the travel and potentially offering a travel allowance to staff members to be able to travel to a centre and back. You know, that got to be over 100 k's or something.*

The same provider also suggested that investing locally to upskill local staff to work in remote communities:

*The issue is retaining those educators. So, you know, we've had teachers that have moved and that's where she's from. So how do we retain them once here? And for me, I think we're better off to invest locally in our local communities and our local staff that are wanting to up skill and looking at how we can do that and how we can support them and how we're going to retain those people who are currently living in the communities versus the ones that are coming into the community for a short period of time for something different.*

Also, from a training perspective, there was some commentary about the value of encouraging people to study for a certificate level qualification. A diploma was considered a stronger option that provided more options for service providers to adequately staff a facility with suitably qualified personnel:

*For me, I think it's an absolute waste of time, the Cert 3 course. Why aren't we just rolling out Diploma level course? Because after 12 months, they're Cert 3 equivalent anyway. So why are we making people do two different courses and enrol in two different courses when potentially they can enrol in one and become Cert 3 equivalent in 12 months? I just don't see the benefit of doing a Cert 3 and then going on to do your Diploma. Because even when you're studying your Cert 3, you're not a qualified teacher anyway, when you've finished it. For me, the way our organization can then use a working towards diploma level qualification more broadly than what we can a Cert 3.*

*Well, for me, a diploma level can work in a diploma position because they're working towards a diploma, whereas a Cert 3 can only be a Cert 3. And when it comes down to ratio requirements in childcare, often you have to have two diplomas in the room and one cert 3. So, you know, depending on what your ratio numbers you have to have at least 50 percent diploma in the room. So for me, we employ cert 3, don't get me wrong, but I prefer to employ diplomas and pay them an extra two cents an hour than what the Cert 3's get, rather than because they've got more skill level and they've got more training and we don't have to train them as much. We've still got to train them anyway. But yeah, for me get rid of the Cert 3. Enrol in the two years of the diploma your Cert 3 equivalent anyway at the end of the 12 month diploma level course. Why are we bothering and we've got more flexibility in the region and our service to be able to use both working towards diploma.*



## Recommendations

This research has highlighted several opportunities to streamline kindergarten activity and improve the potential to provide childcare services in rural communities. Overall, there is a need for government, public agencies, regional development leaders and service providers to reflect more meaningfully on the opportunity costs of failing to adequately provide childcare services to rural communities.

While there is no overarching organisation coordinating and facilitating childcare services, efforts to build opportunities are individualised and struggle to achieve economies of scale. Change is being held back by historical ties, structural limitations under existing systems and approaches, and cultural aspects which normalise elements of difference and disadvantage in rural areas. The recommendations that follow, provide a starting point for further action to improve childcare outcomes in the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

| RESEARCH FINDINGS   | RECOMMENDED ACTION  |
|---|---|
| <p>1. The delivery arrangements for kindergarten and childcare in the four rural councils has been established by historical precedent. With limited exceptions, delivery continues to follow an approach that prioritises the provision of kindergarten. This is due in large part to the historical conventions established around council provision of kindergarten education.</p> | <p>a) Kindergarten and childcare are different with different funding streams, but they engage the same cohort of parents and children and are subject to the same regulatory and quality frameworks. In areas where market failure is occurring, kindergartens and childcare could have greater synergy, allowing staff and children to move more freely between the two systems. It is recommended that, where possible, childcare and kindergarten be managed by a single agency, to ensure there is local responsibility for both.</p>  |
| <p>2. Market failure is occurring in the Wimmera Southern Mallee regarding the provision of childcare.</p>  | <p>a) Consider working with councils to explore opportunities to streamline childcare services to support kindergarten participation. Research indicated that there are significant advantages achieved when kindergarten and childcare services are co-located and delivered by a single service provider. This should be further explored. The model used for some areas in Hindmarsh, which contracts Emerge (HDKA) to provide childcare and kindergarten services, is a promising model.</p> <p>b) There is significant potential with a larger entity providing childcare and kindergarten services to support movement and opportunities for staff across the region, and support educational, mentoring and resourcing initiatives. It is recommended that ByFive or WSM consider hosting a forum to discuss challenges and opportunities across Councils to share resources and streamline effort.</p> <p>c) Within a larger entity, potential for cost averaging should be explored to assess whether it is possible</p> |

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|   | <p>for delivery in rural centres to provide economic returns and what support would be needed to enable this. Emerge (HDKA) has done some work in this area which has potential for further exploration.</p>  |
| <p>3. Historical differentiation of levels of funding and quality and regulations between kindergarten and childcare is impacting how these services are managed in rural and regional areas. 'City centric' policies in both sectors privileges locations with growing populations and greater infrastructure, which limits smaller localities' ability to provide both childcare and kindergarten services.</p> <p>4. In contrast to kindergarten, there is no organisation taking responsibility for assessing local needs and provision of childcare when the private sector fails, with neither councils nor the community services sector having direct responsibilities in this area. Because of this, efforts to deliver childcare rely significantly on volunteer advocacy and the goodwill of Councils.</p> | <p>a) Without legislative change, it is difficult to resolve this issue, but acknowledgement of the gap in responsibility that exists in this region regarding childcare provision is an important step. It is recommended that ByFive and WSM acknowledge and communicate this as a regional delivery gap requiring policy engagement at State and Federal levels.</p>   |
| <p>5. Rural people, and most particularly women, are impacted by limited childcare availability. This is affecting their workforce participation, financial stability, career goals and independence.</p>   | <p>a) Childcare is seen as an issue for parents (and particularly women) to manage individually in the region rather than as a broader systemic issue that impacts on women's careers and opportunity. The language around childcare provision needs to change to recognise the social, economic and gendered costs of the current approach.</p> <p>b) It is recommended that this work is supported by a survey of parents in the rural councils that collects data on the cost of being unable to work and of managing market failure individually.</p> |
| <p>6. There is a culture of acceptance in the region that geographic dispersal prevents adequate childcare service delivery. There is some evidence to suggest this is preventing advocacy and engagement in local solutions.</p>   | <p>a) Parents and families need to be communicated to regarding how childcare operates and how it can be supported.</p> <p>b) A process of regular engagement with parents (possibly through the maternal child health network) to assess childcare support needs across the region</p>   |

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|  | <p>would help better understand demand. Working with councils to build a process to capture and communicate this data would further assist in this aim.</p>  |
| <p>7. Staffing is a major concern for childcare and kindergarten provision, and there are too few trained, skilled staff in these professions to meet existing needs.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Local career opportunities in early years education needs to be communicated to school students.</li> <li>b) A much stronger focus on local training arrangements is required. Efforts to develop Certificate 3 training as an option within VET in schools should be considered to engage with young people early regarding potential local careers in early years education.</li> <li>c) Consider working with the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) to better understand the needs of schools in supporting vocational training in childcare</li> <li>d) Consider advocating for funding to reimburse service providers that are funding travel for childcare and kindergarten staff to deliver at rural locations.</li> <li>e) Investigate opportunities for more streamlined and low-cost bridging qualifications to support primary teachers who want to provide kindergarten education or childcare to better enable this transition.</li> </ul> |
| <p>8. Training and staffing for childcare and kindergarten incurs significant churn and professional isolation is a contributor to this. The siloed nature of the two sectors is also preventing staff migrating between the childcare sector and the kindergarten sector.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Investigate options for a broader, regional effort to develop training and support opportunities for childcare and kindergarten staff that links to employment. The Yarriambiack Shire Council's scholarship program and not-for-profit providers have some insights into this area that could be more broadly extended in the region.</li> <li>b) Provide mentoring and support for staff undergoing training to support their educational development goals. The Yarriambiack support model (p 40) has potential to be broadened. This should include consideration of a regional scholarship program to support training.</li> <li>c) Consider increasing opportunities to encourage local Diploma and degree level training for childcare and kindergarten to support a higher standard of qualifications in the region.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>9. Responsibility for childcare is gendered, and the impacts are issues for equity.</p>   | <p>See recommendations at #4.</p>  |
| <p>10. A one-size fits all regulatory structure can prevent innovation and change. This is being</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Participants acknowledged that a good relationship with the State Government existed to support Councils and service providers to deliver services</li> </ul>  |

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| <p>addressed through a reported positive working relationship between DET and service providers.</p>                                  | <p>within the regulatory environment. There was a reticence to challenge the regulatory environment and actions are being addressed at an individual level. There is scope to further explore the potential that some of these individual issues may be common across rural early years' service delivery more generally and could be addressed systemically at policy or regulatory level. To engage in this space, it is recommended that ByFive seek to engage with the Department of Education and Training (DET) regarding policy and regulatory issues impacting rural areas.</p>  |
| <p>11. There is a lack of understanding by the community about the practical challenges of childcare costs, staffing and delivery</p> | <p>a) Early communication is required for parents regarding childcare costs, subsidies and why regular commitments are required. Parents need to be better informed of their responsibilities when participating, to ensure services are sustainable. It is suggested that rural areas consider establishing a childcare coordinator so that this effort is streamlined, rather than delivered at each site.</p> <p>b) Parents also need to be made aware of the educational role of childcare so that it is understood as not simply a transactional baby-sitting service. This is important for valuing the staff and the engagement provided by services. The development of an engagement strategy in partnership with DET should be considered.</p> |

## Recommendations for future work

This study had found that childcare provision and access presents significant social, economic and equity issues for the Wimmera Southern Mallee Region. Currently, the early years model remains embedded in an historical structural framework that has not kept up with parental expectations and needs. The urban centric policy and regulatory environment also privileges larger and growing populations and further disadvantages rural and regional working families. The recommendations in this report have been designed to assist early years' service providers and government to address the issues identified, which included the attraction and retention of staff, market failure, equity and equality in service provision and systems gaps.

It will be challenging to bridge the gap that exists between what is needed in terms of regional childcare support and what is delivered in rural locations, but it is critical for women's workforce participation, financial stability, independence and also forms a key component of community change. Related to this, the provision of childcare would also have an impact on local workforce shortages and reduce some skill gaps present in

the region. As a result, there is a significant advantage in understanding the economic and workforce impacts of this service delivery gap in more detail.

To support this, it is recommended that further survey work be undertaken of parents in the study area (potentially through the ByFive network) to provide a greater level of detail around the real and opportunity costs of limited or no local childcare access on women and families in the study area. This work has also noted that there are substantial childcare subsidy benefits that flow to communities with approved childcare arrangements in place. Many areas of the Wimmera Southern Mallee are missing out on this flow of funding, and as a result parents are being doubly burdened if they work, by having to pay full private childcare rates, with no Government support. If this was properly understood, the case for change could be even more compelling.

At the same time, there is a case to be made that Local Government assuming responsibility for childcare in addition to other responsibilities is an unreasonable impost, and the research team is aware that this is a prevailing view within some Local Government organisations. However, in the study area, radical change would be required to shift this responsibility to either schools (via DET) or the private/not-for-profit sector. It would be valuable to initiate a conversation with the range of organisations and agencies involved in childcare planning and provision (or potentially involved in childcare provision) to see if some of the best attributes of the range of existing models that exist across local government areas can be shared, and an agreed path forward for advocacy at regional level can be agreed. It is recommended that Regional Development Victoria engage with the Department of Education and Training to explore the possibility of furthering this work with ByFive.

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