

9 November 2023

Strengthening Rural Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

By Five WSM and the North Central LLEN recently brought together rural leaders from across the region for a special Forum to discuss some of the well-documented barriers to early childhood education and care in small rural communities, and importantly the opportunities we can create here and now to provide hope for our rural families and communities.

Critically, the focus was on the policy changes required to support all levels of government in a new rural approach driven by equity and sustainability rather than viability.

The “Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)” roundtable was a solutions-focused event featuring national, state and local sector updates and some great discussion.

The first speaker was Matthew Lundgren from the Department of Education Early Learning Operations and Monitoring Division who shared an update on what is happening about ECEC at a state level followed by Andrew Bubb, Director of the Community Childcare Fund (CCCF) for the Australian Government Department of Education who provided a national perspective.

Katrina Nightingale and Lynsey Leong from Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) continued with an Early Years update from their position of being a Peak Body focusing on the growing policy needs of the workforce, governments and employers in ECEC.

Jo Martin (By Five WSM) and Jane Hosking (North Central LLEN) then gave a joint presentation sharing insights from the draft Strengthening Rural Early Childhood Education and Care Report which sets out to capture clear opportunities to invest and support the equity and sustainability of rural childcare in small rural community settings across Wimmera Southern Mallee, Buloke Loddon and Gannawarra.

Jo and Jane shared the message that childcare doesn’t exist in a vacuum, particularly in rural communities with small populations spread across large geographic areas.

“Solving the access challenge as a part of a broader ECEC system is required. We need to transition from a viability to equity model taking into account broader place-based considerations,” they said.

This set the scene for some vigorous roundtable discussions on ways to strengthen rural ECEC under the current conditions and what we need to develop a fit-for-purpose Rural ECEC model to support our communities thriving into the future, facilitated by John Finighan from Social Ventures Australia.

This information will help create an Action Plan for the future and a unified advocacy approach for our rural communities.

Member of the Organising team Jane Hosking said that investing in the early years is non-negotiable.

“This is foundational to the future of our rural communities and quality ECEC lays the grounds for lifelong development and learning which is supported by research at all levels.”

We know our communities want and demand an improved system that is sustainable, high-quality, and equitable," said Jane.

Co-organiser Jo Martin said our regions have invested in solving differing parts of the ECEC system at a local level.

"Balancing the short-term demands with a new long-term plan is not easy, however, we all know this is the only solution."

"So many valuable conversations were held on the day, with the next steps being to turn these discussions into action to improve the situation for children and families across our region and beyond," said Jo.

The Roundtable was made possible as part of a collaboration between three Regional Partnerships – Wimmera Southern Mallee, Mallee and Loddon Campaspe.

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