

1 November 2023

## Forum to strengthen Early Childhood Education and Care

Rural leaders from across the region attended a special Forum in Warracknabeal late last month to discuss issues around service delivery, infrastructure and workforce solutions with a commitment to improved early childhood education and care for every child, family and community.

“Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)” was a solutions-focused event featuring national and state sector updates, findings from the Sustainable Childcare for Rural Children Project, proposed practical solutions for strengthened ECEC in rural communities, and a commitment to planning collaboratively for rural children to thrive.

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 Child Care Fund (CCCF) for the Australian Government Department of Education who provided a national perspective.

Jo Martin (By Five WSM) and Jane Hosking (North Central LLEN) then gave a joint presentation about the draft Strengthening Rural Early Childhood Education and Care Report which sets out to capture clear opportunities to support the viability of rural childcare in small rural community settings.

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 considerations,” they said.

Whilst there are several ECEC components, the report specifically focuses on centre-based care (CBC).

“Other forms of ECEC, such as family day care are an extremely valuable adjunct to CBC and should be considered as part of broader ECEC planning along with outside school hours care,” they said.

“CBC as reported by families, provides a sense of service consistency and sustainability that is valued and desired and as such is the primary focus of this report. There is a very close alignment with CBC and kindergarten in these rural areas, which has been confirmed during this work,” said Jo and Jane.

This set the scene for some great discussions on ways to strengthen rural ECEC under the current conditions and what we need to strengthen rural ECEC in 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 communities and quality ECEC lays the grounds for lifelong development and learning. “This is supported by research at all levels. We know our communities want and demand an improved system that is sustainable, high-quality, and equitable.”

“All regions have invested in solving differing parts of the ECEC system at a local level. Balancing the short-term demands with a long-term plan is not easy, however we all know this is the only solution,” she said.

“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 families across our region - stay tuned,” said Jane.

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