RAPAD
REMOTE AREA PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT BOARD

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Senate Education and Employment Committees
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Submission: Senate Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care in Rural, Regional and Remote Australia

The Central Western Queensland Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate's inquiry into Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system in rural, regional and remote communities.

RAPAD is the regional organisation of councils for central western Queensland representing the local government areas of Barcaldine, Barcoo, Blackall-Tambo, Boulia, Diamantina, Longreach and Winton. The RAPAD region covers 23 per cent of Queensland and is home to a dispersed population of 10,880 people, including 583 children aged 0-4 years. With a birth rate of 14.3 per cent, significantly higher than the Queensland average of 10.5 per cent, there is a clear and ongoing need for accessible childcare services to support young families, early childhood development, workforce participation, and community sustainability.[1]

Over the past two years, RAPAD has prioritised understanding and addressing ECEC service gaps across Central West Queensland. RAPAD advocates for policy and funding settings that support accessible, high-quality and flexible ECEC models in rural, regional and remote communities where traditional service models are often not viable.

RAPAD ECEC Focus and Activity

RAPAD activities have focussed on building evidence, supporting service development and advocating for policy change including:

- Undertaking an initial regional ECEC review to identify childcare service gaps, workforce challenges and barriers to access across Central West Queensland, providing a foundation for ongoing regional action RAPAD-early-childhood-education-and-care-review/ .
- A submission to the Senate inquiry for quality and safety of early childhood education and care.
- Establishing the RAPAD ECEC Alliance, bringing together representatives from all seven member councils to improve, support and sustain early learning and care services through collaboration, evidence-based planning and coordinated advocacy.

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Regional population by age and sex, 2025, custom Queensland Regional Profiles accessed https://statistics.qgso.qld.gov.au/

- Facilitating regional ECEC forums in Longreach and Blackall, bringing stakeholders together to identify challenges, share knowledge and explore practical service delivery solutions for rural and remote communities.
- Partnering with The Future Care Project to develop a regional evidence base on childcare access, workforce availability, service demand and barriers to participation, including community, employer and industry surveys, council baseline data collection, and analysis of existing childcare datasets to quantify unmet demand and economic impacts. Summarised community survey findings presented to the RAPAD board can be found here.
- Exploring, along with member councils, practical, place-based service solutions, including in-venue care models in council-owned infrastructure and/or housing to provide care and pilot opportunities in communities where no approved childcare service currently exists.
- Partnering with Central Queensland University (CQU) to develop a place-based workforce initiative addressing critical ECEC workforce shortages. The proposed project will deliver Certificate III and potentially Diploma qualifications through a blended model using RAPAD CWQ Country University Centres across the region, combining online learning with quarterly face-to-face assessment visits. The initiative also includes Certificate IV Training and Assessment to build local in-region training capacity and provides mentoring, assessment and small business support for both centre-based and Family Day Care (FDC) educators.
- While this submission draws on evidence and examples from the RAPAD region, the challenges and service delivery constraints described are consistent across many communities throughout Western Queensland. These issues are not unique to Central West Queensland and reflect broader structural barriers affecting ECEC access, workforce sustainability and service viability across the region. This submission is supported by the Western Queensland Alliance of Councils, representing a collective regional position on the need for ECEC reform.

Inquiry Terms of Reference

The extent and nature of ECEC service gaps

- **Types of ECEC services in the RAPAD region:** Availability of ECEC services in the RAPAD region is largely determined by community size and include long day care provided by local councils and not-for-profit organisation, family day care, in-home care, outside school hours care, kindergarten programs and informal care arrangements. Services generally operate at or near capacity.
- **Data gaps:** In communities such as Aramac, Alpha and Boulia, the lack of approved childcare services creates a data blind spot. As there are no licensed places, enrolments, attendance records, waitlists or subsidy claims, traditional measures indicate little or no demand. However, this reflects the absence of services rather than the absence of need. As a result, genuine community demand remains largely invisible in government datasets, potentially leading to these communities being overlooked in funding, planning and policy decisions.
- **Key survey findings:** RAPAD ECEC survey respondents reported requiring an average of 3.7 days of childcare per week but can access only 1.7 days. Sixty-two per cent of responding families reported they could access little or none of the care they required. The findings are most pronounced in our smallest and most remote communities. Ninety-three per cent of RAPAD ECEC survey respondents reported they would increase their workforce participation if childcare were available, representing more than $2.7 million per year in forgone income among

respondents alone. Almost half of respondents reported considering leaving the region due to limited childcare access, while 63 per cent identified reliable childcare as a major factor in remaining. Where services are absent, families rely on informal care arrangements that are largely invisible within existing datasets, further contributing to the underestimation of childcare demand in the region.

- **Operationl v's licenced places:** Workforce shortages within the ECEC sector have reduced the operational capacity of services across the region, meaning many centres cannot utilise their full licensed capacity. Consequently, service availability data can overstate access to childcare and understate the level of unmet demand. Families who are unable to secure care may not be reflected in enrolment or attendance data, creating a false impression that existing services are meeting community needs. This data gap risks masking the true scale of childcare shortages and limiting the evidence available to support targeted investment and service expansion in regional and remote communities.
- **Regional population growth:** Demand for childcare is increasing in communities including Blackall, Aramac and Alpha, where growth in the population of children aged 0-5 years is occurring alongside increasing demand from parents wishing to participate in the workforce. The absence of childcare has broader economic and social consequences, limiting workforce participation and affecting the availability of key services across the community including education and hospitals.

> *'Due to no childcare available, and how difficult it is to find someone that you trust and is reliable to look after our children, I have given up my work and study.'*
> RAPAD ECEC survey respondent.

- **Timeframes:** These issues require immediate attention. Communities across the region report that the pace of policy and service responses does not align with the urgency of local need, contributing to population loss as families and workers relocate to access essential services elsewhere. In Alpha, the purpose-built early childhood service ceased operations in 2024 with the withdrawal of C&K, and the Barcaldine Regional Council has been engaged in ongoing efforts to secure a provider and restore the service. Local community survey data indicates that at least 51 children were born in the Alpha area between 2022 and 2026, demonstrating an ongoing cohort of young children and evidence of demand. The continued absence of a childcare service is having tangible impacts on families, workforce participation, and community sustainability.

> *'I can only do 1-4 shifts a month as a nurse due to a lack of childcare.'*
> A farm owner and registered nurse

- **Cyclical demand for services:** Childcare demand in regional and remote communities is not static and inherently cyclical. Population movements, fluctuating workforce numbers, seasonal industries and cohorts of children moving into and out of the early childhood age group can result in variations in enrolment levels from year to year. Funding and service planning frameworks must recognise these fluctuations and support the ongoing viability of services, as temporary reductions in enrolments do not indicate a lack of community need. Once a service

closes, it can be extremely difficult and costly to re-establish when demand returns. Case in point is the closure of the service in Alpha where infrastructure exists highlighting the need for ongoing sustainability funding rather than additional capital investment.

- **Service closures due to available workforce:** The small scale of services in smaller RAPAD communities such as Tambo, means many operate with minimal workforce capacity. Consequently, the absence of one educator can result in services being unable to meet staffing and ratio requirements, creating frequent disruptions and closures, and reducing the reliability of childcare for families and employers.

Impacts of limited or no access to ECEC in the region include:

- Reduced workforce participation and productivity.
- Difficulty attracting and retaining residents, particularly families with young children.
- Increased reliance on informal care arrangements.
- Reduced access to early learning opportunities.
- Additional recruitment, retention and workforce replacement costs for employers.

Good News Story
Family Day Care (FDC) offers a practical solution for smaller RAPAD communities. Diamantina Shire Council has successfully supported FDC services in Birdsville and Bedourie by providing council housing for educators and partnering with approved provider Uniting Care Remote Family Care Service. The model has enabled families to relocate to these communities and demonstrates a scalable approach that could be replicated elsewhere using council-owned housing and underutilised public infrastructure.

Challenges in attracting, training and retaining a qualified ECEC workforce

Sustaining a qualified ECEC workforce is consistently identified as one of the greatest barriers to ECEC service provision in the RAPAD region. Service providers and councils report difficulties recruiting qualified educators and maintaining sufficient staffing levels to meet demand.

Key considerations for the RAPAD region in relation to workforce, raised by stakeholders include:

- **ECEC Qualification requirements:** Mandatory Certificate III qualification requirements continue to constrain workforce supply, particularly in the Family Day Care sector, and concession for 'working towards' qualifications. Existing pathways, such as Central Queensland University's Certificate II in Community Services (ECEC-focused), provide credit towards six of the seventeen Certificate III units and require fewer placement hours. Recognising Certificate II as an approved entry pathway, with priority completion of essential safety and compliance units, would enable individuals to commence work while progressing to a full Certificate III qualification. This would create a more flexible workforce pipeline, increase participation and help address workforce shortages while maintaining qualification standards.
- **Staff ratios:** Workforce shortages are compounded by qualification and staffing ratio requirements. RAPAD ECEC forum participants identified challenges in meeting Diploma-

qualified educator ratio requirements where staffing shortages limit service capacity or availability. Consideration should be given to targeted rural and remote exemptions or alternative pathways that maintain service quality while recognising workforce realities.

- **Recognition of prior learning and bridging pathways:** Greater recognition of prior learning and bridging pathways for non-early childhood teaching qualifications could support retired teachers transitioning into the ECEC sector helping to expand the available workforce while building on existing professional experience.
- **Student placements:** Placement requirements are a barrier for ECEC students, particularly the costs associated with travel, accommodation and care for their own children. Consideration should be given to extending the Commonwealth Practicum Payment to Certificate III and Diploma ECEC students.
- **Impact on staff:** The small scale of most services in the region limits access to relief staff, professional development, and career progression opportunities. Additional study requirements often occur outside paid work hours, contributing to work fatigue. Funded, paid professional development aligned to priority skills and capability gaps could support workforce retention, recognise professional expertise, and create pathways into specialist areas such as behaviour support, additional needs, and gifted education, helping to strengthen workforce capability and retention.
- **Remuneration equity:** A review is needed to ensure greater parity in remuneration and employment conditions between early childhood teachers (ECT) working in long day care services and those employed in state school kindergarten programs. State school ECT's receive higher salaries and have access to additional benefits, including remote service incentives, country service points, and subsidised or provided housing and utilities. These disparities make it difficult for ECEC services to compete and attract and retain qualified teachers.

> *'Last year our older son missed out on a kindergarten program because the centre was unable to retain a qualified teacher. He lost a year of early childhood education that cannot be replaced.'*
> Working family responding to the RAPAD ECEC survey

- **Housing:** Housing availability and affordability are key structural barriers across the RAPAD region. These pressures affect the recruitment and retention of ECEC professionals, limiting service capacity, workforce stability and opportunities for service growth.

Workforce impacts include:

- Inability to establish services in communities with demonstrated demand.
- Reduced service capacity despite available facilities or community support.
- Service closures or restricted operating hours when staffing requirements cannot be met.
- Increased operating costs associated with recruitment and workforce turnover.
- Reduced workforce stability and continuity for children and families.

The effectiveness of the Child Care Subsidy (CCS)

In the RAPAD region, childcare availability is a greater barrier than affordability. While CCS assists eligible families who can access approved care, it does not address the underlying challenges of

operating services in thin markets where enrolments are low, workforce shortages are acute and operating costs are high. CCS and fee's do not cover the costs of running these services.

- **Eligibility does not mean access:** RAPAD ECEC survey found one-quarter of surveyed families were eligible for CCS but have no approved service through which to access it.
- **Excessive gap fees:** RAPAD region families, who can access an ECEC service, have reported paying gap fees up to four times higher than metropolitan families. The in-home care rate cap has not kept pace with educator wages and remote operating costs. Of surveyed households with out-of-pocket expenses, almost half reduced their work hours or switched to cheaper care (where available) because of childcare costs.

> *'Full cost of care is roughly $1485 a week plus fees to the in-home care provider.'*
> RAPAD ECEC survey respondent running cattle grazing enterprise

- **Additional Child Care Subsidy:** A proposal raised at the Blackall ECEC Forum was to broaden eligibility for the Additional Child Care Subsidy by recognising geographic isolation as a vulnerability criterion. The proposal suggests using the existing Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) assessment framework as an objective measure of remoteness and service access challenges. This would acknowledge that children and families in geographically isolated communities often face systemic barriers to accessing early childhood education and care, irrespective of other disadvantage factors. Expanding ACCS eligibility in this way could provide higher subsidy rates for services operating in remote locations, helping to offset the increased costs associated with service delivery, workforce attraction, staff accommodation, travel, and regulatory compliance.
- **Supply-side funding:** Supply-side funding is essential for rural, regional and remote ECEC services, where low population density, small enrolments and higher operating costs can make service delivery challenging. Current funding arrangements do not adequately account for the additional costs associated with delivering services in isolated locations, including workforce attraction and retention, staff accommodation, travel, freight, professional development, infrastructure maintenance and access to specialist support services. Additional equity funding based on location and remoteness would better recognise the increased costs associated with workforce recruitment, travel, freight and service operations. New Zealand's **Component D: Isolation** provides a useful model by recognising that geographically isolated services face higher costs for goods and services, regardless of enrolment numbers.
- **Council-run ECEC Services:** While ECEC is not local government core business, several RAPAD councils contribute funding, buildings, housing and coordination to support service delivery considered as critical community infrastructure. The not-for-profit centre-based childcare service in Blackall remains operational only through an ongoing council subsidy exceeding $50,000 per year. Longreach and Winton councils run approved childcare services at financial losses and allocate budgeted funding to maintain these services as essential community infrastructure but at a cost to other council priorities. Additional supply-side investment would improve service sustainability.
- **Operational funding for FDC and IHC:** FDC is a valuable childcare option in rural and remote communities; however, the removal of FDC (and IHC) operational funding and limited support for provider coordination are barriers to establishing and sustaining services and there has been

substantial decline in registered FDC services in the region. Current CCS arrangements applying a lower hourly rate cap to FDC than centre-based services is a disincentive and puts additional financial pressure on families, limiting the viability of providing FDC services, constraining choice and flexibility.

CCS funding impacts:

- CCS eligibility does not translate into childcare access, workforce participation or improved affordability for many RAPAD families.
- Families face higher out-of-pocket costs
- Councils are increasingly required to subsidise childcare services for them to remain viable.
- Funding and regulatory changes challenge the viability of FDC models, despite being an important option for communities.
- Reduced childcare choice and flexibility for providers and families.

Effectiveness of existing Commonwealth programs

- **Three-Day Guarantee:** The RAPAD ECEC survey highlighted minimal regional awareness of the Three-Day Guarantee with less than 30 percent of respondents ever having heard of it. For those who were familiar with it and were eligible, only a small proportion were using it and few had a service to access. Expanding eligibility without increasing available places limits the program's benefit.
- **Building Early Education Fund (BEEF)**: Round one BEEF did not reach the RAPAD region despite demonstrated demand, reflecting the data limitations outlined above. BEEF would be enhanced by treating geographical isolation as a standalone priority criterion, assessing viability in ways that council subsidised and smaller services can meet and extending eligible delivery models beyond centre-based care would better fit thin markets in our region.
- **Worker Retention Payments:** Current Worker Retention Payment arrangements, that exclude contractor models, impact almost all FDC and around 70 percent of IHC educators national, contributing to the decline in both service options for RAPAD communities.
- **Community Child Care Fund:** Our region has benefited from CCCF funding in the past. The need for this funding is universal and as a competitive grant process, these programs tend to be overprescribed, adding additional financial pressure to ECEC services for services already under pressure as outlined previously.
- **In-Home Care:** Attendees at both Longreach and Blackall ECEC Forums highlighted the structural failures and underutilisation of the current IHC program, including funding following a family, rather than a child, regardless of the size of the family. IHC has significant potential to support families requiring flexible or tailored care, particularly those in geographically isolated locations. We would like to see the program redesigned to recognise multiple-child households, workable school-age and vacation care settings, recruitment incentives and provider coordinated funding.
- **Inclusion Support:** The Blackall ECEC forum highlighted that children with additional needs in the region face reduced access to early intervention, diagnostic, allied health and inclusion support due to lack of service availability, workforce shortages and distance. Thirteen percent

of respondents to the RAPAD ECEC survey reported a child with additional needs, yet most rely on intermittent, visiting services. School-supports have been described as 'evaporating' unless staff actively advocate for children. IHC care is excluded from inclusion support entirely which is at odds to the design principle that IHC is made available to children with complex needs who cannot attend a long day care service.

Other related matters

- **Informal Care:** In communities without approved childcare services, families rely on informal care arrangements, including family members, friends, nannies, au pairs and governesses sourced through personal networks and social media. These arrangements operate outside approved regulatory frameworks and offer limited safeguards for children, families, carers and employers. RAPAD ECEC forum participants raised concerns about children being cared for in environments where they may be exposed to machinery, vehicles and livestock due to the absence of formal care options.
- **Regional Education Commissioner Report – universal care and flexible models:** RAPAD supports the Commissioners Issues for Consideration 1 and 2, of universal care obligation and flexible delivery models as outlined in the Annual Report 2025. Both would demonstrate significant commitment by the Australian Government to increase the supply of ECEC services and ensure tailored approached that best fit community need.

Key recommendations

- Introduce targeted **supply-side funding** for rural, regional and remote ECEC services that recognises the additional costs of operating in geographically isolated communities.
- Expand the **Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS)** to include geographic isolation as a vulnerability criterion, using the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) framework as an assessment mechanism.
- Develop funding models that recognise **thin market conditions**, cyclical demand and the importance of maintaining service viability even when enrolments fluctuate.
- Review **Child Care Subsidy (CCS)** settings, including Family Day Care and In-Home Care rate caps, to better reflect the costs of delivering care in regional and remote areas.
- Restore or introduce operational funding and coordination support for **Family Day Care (FDC)** and **In-Home Care (IHC)** services as flexible care models for small communities.
- Create more flexible **ECEC workforce pathways**, including recognition of Certificate II as an entry pathway, expanded recognition of prior learning, and improved transition opportunities for experienced professionals entering the sector.
- Extend financial assistance for **student placements and practical training**, particularly for Certificate III and Diploma ECEC students in regional and remote locations.
- Review qualification, staffing and ratio requirements to provide appropriate rural and remote flexibility while maintaining safety and quality standards.
- Address workforce barriers through targeted measures to improve **housing availability, remuneration parity and professional development opportunities** for ECEC educators.

- Recognise **geographic isolation as a standalone priority criterion** within Commonwealth infrastructure and grant programs, including the Building Early Education Fund (BEEF).
- Redesign the **In-Home Care program** to better support remote families, including recognition of multiple-child households, school-age care requirements and provider coordination costs.
- Expand access to **inclusion and early intervention supports** for children with additional needs in rural and remote communities, including eligibility for children accessing In-Home Care.
- Support and fund a **universal care obligation and flexible delivery models** that allow communities to implement locally appropriate ECEC solutions where traditional centre-based models are not viable. Several communities in the RAPAD region are highly suitable as pilot sites to trial place-based solutions.
- Recognise childcare as essential community infrastructure and ensure funding arrangements reduce reliance on ongoing council subsidies to sustain services.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this Senate Committee inquiry into the state of Australia's ECEC system in rural, regional and remote areas. RAPAD acknowledges the challenges associated with delivering ECEC services across geographically dispersed communities, thin markets and complex operating environments. However, these challenges highlight the need for more flexible, fit-for-purpose policy, funding and regulatory settings that better reflect the realities of rural and remote service delivery. RAPAD has invited the inquiry committee to hold a Senate hearing in Longreach and would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence from the region. Meaningful reform is needed to ensure all children, regardless of where they live, have equitable access to quality early learning and care and that communities are supported to deliver sustainable local solutions and we look forward to outcomes that strengthen access to high-quality ECEC services for children and families in rural, regional and remote Australia.

Yours sincerely,



Morgan Gronold
Chief Executive Officer RAPAD