

Early Childhood Education and Care
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The following submission to the Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Sector is compiled by Regional Development Australia (RDA) Kimberley. An organisation invested in the economic growth and development of the Kimberley region, RDA Kimberley are highly aware of the importance and need for the ECEC sector and childcare services to ensure this.

Currently there is **no access to any childcare service in the Kimberley region**, despite only one centre operating at their licenced capacity. Kimberley childcare centres have capped numbers, closed rooms and services, with a minimum 18-24 months waiting period for all centres. **This is predominantly due to workforce shortages and centres unable to meet staff/children ratios.** The flow-on impact from this workforce shortage is insurmountable and one of considerable concern to many in the Kimberley.

This Inquiry needs to address workforce issues impacting this industry sector first and foremost. Failure to do so will result in greater workforce loss due to workers fatigue, further room, and regional centre closures, and ultimately influence and impact desired outcomes of this Inquiry. The Commission needs to better understand and consider the unique needs and challenges for each region, a one size fits all approach will not solve workforce issues nor improve accessibility or quality of care for children in the Kimberley, including those most at risk and disadvantaged.

At this time our regional centres need a workforce urgently to provide care, the true essence of this industry sector. Now is the time to consider new approaches specific to regional needs to build back workforces - wages and regulations all need to be reviewed with regions in mind. Shift the focus to support those working on-the ground in this sector which will in-turn, improve accessibility for all community members, and enable centres to provide the services and care needed to achieve outcomes desired for all children and communities.

For the purpose of this submission, RDA Kimberley will be referring to ECEC providers in the Kimberley region. This submission is generated through collaborative partnerships and comprehensive local industry stakeholder engagement and supported by extensive knowledge and understanding of our region. We will cover considerations outlined in the terms of reference and scope of the Inquiry, with reference to the Kimberley, and propose recommendations that best support our regional centres.

RDA Kimberley welcomes the opportunity to further discuss any of the issues and recommendations raised and contained in the following submission.

Yours Sincerely,



**ELSIA ARCHER OAM
CHAIR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA KIMBERLEY**



INQUIRY INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE (ECEC) SECTOR

Regional Development Australia (RDA) Kimberley is part of a national network of 55 RDA committees. Our organisation has an active and facilitative role in the Kimberley to improve regional development outcomes, achieved through collaboration across all levels of government, private sector, and community.

The ECEC sector underpins our community stability and economic welfare. Access to this vital service facilitates economic development, allowing community members to participate in the workforce, local business to capitalise on regional opportunities, and better ensures continued growth and prosperity for all.

Currently, the Kimberley is in the midst of a childcare crisis, with **no access to any childcare centre in the region** despite only one centre operating at their licenced capacity. Access to childcare services is a common theme across Australia, but particularly so in remote and regional areas.

A recent report from Victoria University has revealed regional Western Australia has the lowest rates of accessibility to childcare services in the nation, with at least five children vying for every one spot available in child-care in the Kimberley region, leaving 92.6% of parents without sufficient access to childcare.ⁱ

Kimberley childcare centres have closed rooms and capped numbers, with a minimum 18-24 months waiting period for all centres. **This is predominantly due to staff shortages and centres unable to meet staff/children ratios.**

Skilled and essential workers (i.e. doctors, nurses and teachers) are leaving the region due to childcare accessibility. Businesses, organisations, and other essential services are unable to attract or retain workers in the region, primary caregivers are unable to return to the workforce to their full capacity or at all.

As an organisation directly impacted by the current crisis; a Director unable to return to work, an A/Director juggling full-time work and part-time care for a toddler due to childcare room closures, RDA Kimberley is acutely aware of the flow-on impacts this workforce shortage is having to local business productivity and viability.

RDA Kimberley recognises the need of the ECEC sector for the continued economic growth of the region. We have been working on multiple projects to better capture regional issues, boost local workforce, and serving as an advocate for regional considerations within this industry sector which could help address the current workforce issue impacting the region and improve accessibility for all.

To ensure recommendations from this Inquiry will have an impact to services in the most remote regions, it is vital for the Commission to understand each of these regions, the needs, and the challenges.

It needs to be acknowledged that each region has its own issues, challenges, and barriers. We ask that you listen to those living and working in the ECEC sector in these regions. In doing so, this will provide context to the terms of reference stipulated and address many of the points for consideration under the scope of the Inquiry. We wish to emphasize what may work in metropolitan areas may not work in the regions.



The Kimberley Region

Covering one-sixth of Western Australia's landmass spanning over 420,000kms², the Kimberley possesses rich natural and cultural assets; an internationally recognised tourism sector; improving transport infrastructure to external markets; and diversification opportunities associated with value-add agriculture and pastoral enterprises.

The Kimberley has seen steady population growth since 2018, with an approximate resident population of 38,717 as of 30th June 2021ⁱⁱ, but faces socio-economic disadvantage (including unprecedented juvenile crime rates); disproportionate levels of social disadvantage and disengagement; lack of critical population mass; high cost of living and business; and severe shortages in housing and workforce.

Through building partnerships and economies of scale, many regional based organisations are striving to further the Kimberley's human capital and economic development, and the region has seen some economic growth since 2018 mainly due to the development in the Mining and Resource sector, and Covid policy driving up domestic tourism.

Despite the mining and resource sector being the most productive industry, health care and social assistance remains the largest employer, generating 2,396 local jobs in 2020/21 and accounting for 15.1% of employment in the regionⁱⁱⁱ. This highlights the structure of the region's economy; wealth and investment tied to the mining and resource sector, with greater reliance and need for the provision of government services due to higher populations of people that experience low socio-economic conditions.

The Kimberley's unemployment rates remain high compared to national and state averages, despite critical workforce shortages across a multitude of industry sectors. To provide a snapshot of our local workforce, the Indigenous people represent 41% of the region's population, but when it comes to workforce participation and unemployment rates, there are major imbalances. Overall Indigenous unemployment rate is 20% compared with 1.75% for the non-Indigenous, and in terms of labour participation, 58.8% of the Kimberley Indigenous people stated in the 2021 Census, are not in the labour force. As a point of comparison, 9.82% of the non-Indigenous people stated they were not in the labour force. This imbalance must be addressed as this is an underlying imperative in developing the Kimberley workforce.^{iv}

For a complex range of reasons many Indigenous people in the region experience challenging social and economic circumstances, including significantly higher rates of unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, and suicide compared to other Australians. This current status presents challenges such as increased pressure on health and community services, higher welfare dependency in some segments of the community, and related anti-social behaviours.

Childcare Services in the Kimberley

Centre's across the region provide care to a high number of children that are disadvantaged and at risk. These services are fundamental to their development. Access to childcare services across the Kimberley are vital for those working in the health care and social assistance sector to ensure continued care can be provided to those most at risk.



Currently our regional childcare centres are unable to attract qualified workers to the region due to low wages in the sector, and a lack of affordable or available housing which is further compounded by the high cost of living in the region – the Kimberley was on average 10.8% more expensive than Perth metropolitan area.^v

Regional centres need to focus on engaging with the local workforce to build back the workforce and ensure services can continue to operate and provide care. This comes with challenges as stated above, which need to be acknowledged and considered. So far despite best intentions and efforts the region has not been successful in recruiting, training, and gaining the services of Aboriginal people to work in the childcare industry in sufficient numbers to close the workforce shortage gap.

Further to this, and to provide a point of comparison, the industry sector is unable to compete in the local labour market. A Broome resident could work in an administrative role at a construction company with no formal qualifications required, on-the-job training provided, and for an annual salary of \$100,000. (PPMC Building Maintenance)

The requirement of mandatory formal qualifications to work in this sector is a significant disincentive to attracting mature aged woman and Aboriginal women to work in the industry, and a further barrier for Kimberley childcare centres to recruit and attain. The childcare industry pre-occupation with a focus on early learning as opposed to childcare, is at the core of the problem.

At this time **our regional centres need a workforce which can provide care, first and foremost.** Failure to address this will only lead to greater workforce fatigue, more room closures and centre closures across the Kimberley.

Case Example:

In May 2022 Kununurra's only OSCH service had to close their doors due to workforce shortages. This provided after school care from 2PM-5PM and holiday care 8AM-5PM 4 weeks of the year for Kununurra residents. This closure directly impacted 40 families from accessing after school care and holiday care in 2022.

In one year, this equates to 24,000hrs of care no longer provided during school terms and a further 15,120hrs of holiday care. This has considerably reduced workforce participation for Kimberley residents and resulted in several families leaving the region.

Kimberley Childcare Report

RDA Kimberley worked closely with the Kimberley Development Commission (KDC) to conduct thorough industry surveys with childcare services to better capture the impact of the current childcare crisis across the region.

This report was officially launched by the Department of Primary Industry and Regional Development Tuesday 20 December 2022. RDA Kimberley would like to highlight a few points from this report for consideration:

1. Workforce shortages are the heart of the current crisis.



2. The workforce shortages are driven by:
 - Lack of affordable housing for staff,
 - **High attrition and low completion rates in training and workforce development programs** and,
 - Perceived poor wages and conditions, especially in the context of conditions in the mining and government sectors.
3. For the total underutilised ECEC or OSHC places the sector is unable to meet, the region forgoes Commonwealth Childcare Subsidy to the estimated magnitude of \$3.7 million p.a.
4. In the medium-term, additional licenced capacity is needed to unlock economic opportunity in the Kimberley.

ECEC Skills Set Pilot Program – Broome

Through Workforce Australia Local Jobs (Local Jobs), RDA Kimberley and Broome Employment Facilitators worked closely with many stakeholders to launch the ECEC Skills Set pilot program in Broome. The program aimed to engage and upskill the local workforce and in-turn, help reduce the strain on this crucial industry sector.

Broome Employment Facilitators facilitated collaborative work between all key stakeholders to address the many barriers to participation, engaging with local organisations and businesses to incorporate childcare as part of the program, and assisting Community Skills WA with the successful grant application through the 'Lotterywest Capacity Building Grants' Program to cover these costs.

A further unique addition to this pilot program was the involvement of Traditional Owner Group, Nyamba Buru Yawuru (NBY) and the inclusion of the Warrmijala Murrgurlyai (Rise up to Work), Sustainable Employment Program. Warrmijala Murrgurlyai delivers culturally integrated training and employment services aligned with the Mabu Liyan (good well-being) Framework, providing greater support and on-going mentorship for participants throughout training and when placed in employment.

The inclusion of this program aligned with the long-term objective to better ensure employment retention and continued training and career pathways for all participants, addressing two of the objectives in Closing the Gap.

RDA Kimberley ensured regional challenges were considered and barriers addressed, assisting with the development of a more bespoke delivery of the program to better ensure participation and retention of the identified cohort as they enter the workforce.

This pilot program was launched in Broome, Monday the 10th of October 2022. **Seven** participants engaged in the 10-week program. **Two** successfully completed the course and continued employment at their centre of placement, and through mentorship provided by NBY and the Warrmijala Murrgurlyai program, a further two participants have committed to completing the course and continuing employment at their centre of placement.

Whilst the program has been relatively successful thus far – we are acutely aware five of the seven ladies who participated on this course have significant Language, Literary and Numeracy (LLN) barriers, nevertheless all are competent carers able to acquire basic skills to work in this sector. Considerable extra resources were required to assist participants complete this program, with further still required to ensure continued engagement and ongoing training pathways are completed as required to work in this sector.



Industry Regulations Impacting Regional Childcare Services

In 2014 a mandatory accreditation for all ECEC workers was introduced by the Commonwealth Government to improve the quality of care. The mandatory accreditation of ECEC workers involves the compulsory completion of a course in early childhood education, requiring **all** ECEC workers to must have, or be actively working toward, an approved **Certificate III level ECEC qualification**.

RDA Kimberley would appreciate the Australian Government providing the evidence which clearly demonstrates that this regulation has translated into a significant quality improvement in childcare services in the most remote regions.

RDA Kimberley's engagement with ECEC providers on-the-ground in our region demonstrate this regulation is significantly impacting regional childcare services ability to retain staff and serves as a deterrent to engage and employ the older and local workforce. **This regulation is a contributing factor to the current workforce shortage in the ECEC sector in the Kimberley region.** Workforce shortages are the primary reason for childcare services reducing their service capacity and being unable to meet current community demand.

Ongoing lack of access to childcare services will impact the development and educational outcomes of children in the Kimberley, especially those most at risk and/or disadvantaged.

Case Example:

Since 2018 Broome Senior High School has had 28 girls enrolled in Cert III ECEC studies and all working in childcare services in the town. Not a single student has completed this formal certificate, and all are no longer working in childcare services due to the mandatory accreditation required.

Reasons given for this include social/family issues, LLN barriers, or just of no interest to complete formal studies in this industry. This is not to say the girls did not enjoy this work or were not capable of acquiring the necessary basic skills, but for many this formal qualification was too difficult and/or too daunting when juggling other life challenges and social issues.

RDA Kimberley recommends the immediate review of industry regulations across all levels of Government and puts forward the proposal to **amend the Commonwealth Government Regulation stipulating a mandatory accreditation for all Early Childhood Educators and regional considerations be given to this point to allow services to remain operational.**

Given the current climate and crisis we find ourselves in we propose that local training programs, such as the ECEC Skills Set detailed above, be recognised and these participants be permitted to work and count towards ratios without the undue pressure of completing a formal Cert III. Removing a barrier for regional centres to attract and retain staff and supporting local training initiatives to engage and build a local workforce for the sector.

RDA Kimberley acknowledges this recommendation does not align with the National Quality Framework; however, a 'National' framework implies all regions and regional centres have the same capacity to deliver the same service, and this is simply not the case.

The Kimberley faces a socio-economic disadvantage to metropolitan areas, with disproportionate levels of social disadvantage and disengagement, and low levels of adult LLN skills being a significant barrier to initial engagement and ongoing employment in the region. This framework does not consider or make allowances for regional challenges. Regional centres do not have the luxury to engage with a large selection of candidates which fit the criteria needed to operate their service at permitted capacity.



There is a need to look at new approaches specific to regional needs to build back this workforce.

Our engagement with regional centres and industry stakeholders suggests regional considerations have previously been proposed and note the following comments, insights and recommendations shared by those in the sector:

- 'In order to support early learning in remote areas, the Australian Government must be prepared to look beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to business support. Early learning services in remote Australia may require different types of support, in order to provide both stability and quality for children and families. **The National Quality Standard and the EYLF should stand as the benchmark for all early learning services, but the Government can consider innovative ways of applying them in remote settings.**' **Early Childhood Australia**, Education in Remote and Complex Environments. Submission 27.
- **Rural and Remote allowances.** Rural and remote services are most severely impacted by a skills shortage in Western Australia. The Government needs to review the current regulations to assist services in these areas to remain operational. While there is a huge skill shortage across Western Australia, services in rural and remote areas are more impacted due to low population and large distances. The large wages offered by mining companies and industries in these regions make it even more difficult to attract people to the workforce. To these support services we recommend that flexibility be given to these services to be able to operate when suitably screen candidates are available but who have not yet completed their qualifications.' **Australian Childcare Alliance WA**, Submission to the Workforce Summit WA. Recommendation #4.
- Children's Education and Care IRC's 2019 Skills Forecast summarises the challenges which need to be addressed in the sector as:
 1. Government policy/legislative framework reviews and modification
 2. The attraction and retention of staff
 3. **The challenges faced by regional and remote communities**
 4. **The need for diversity and variance in perspectives**
 5. The need for ongoing professional development.

RDA Kimberley by no means wish to de-regulate this industry sector or lessen the importance of early educators. We absolutely agree there needs to be fully qualified educators in all major centres. Employees need to gain skill sets, and training is required, but propose regional considerations and an amendment be made to the mandatory accreditation for **all** educators working in centres and counting towards ratios.

Furthermore, the key to encouraging more mature aged women to work in this sector (a key cohort identified in recent skill summits) is the need to properly recognise their existing child education and care skills (lived experience, recognition of prior learning) and not insist they acquire a formal certification.

Continued training pathways would of course be supported and encouraged, but at this time **our regional centres need a workforce**. Failing to acknowledge and address the impediments to regional centres building their workforce, will result in greater regional centre closures. This will further impact accessibility to ECEC services in the most remote regions, increasing the gap for those children experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and ultimately impacting our region's ongoing development.



Visa Agreements & Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA)

RDA Kimberley welcomed the news in late 2022 regarding the Ministerial Direction number 100, Skilled Visa Processing Priorities, to help speed up processing and the introduction of childcare workers to this list. However, more still needs to be done in this space to address affordability, especially for those lower paid yet essential workers identified, and allow for greater flexibility dependant on a region's needs.

RDA Kimberley commends the East Kimberley Chamber of Commerce (EKCCI) for the leadership and effort to-date in the investigation, successful acquisition, and execution of the DAMA for the East Kimberley region. The current East Kimberley DAMA has complemented local employment and training initiatives and served as a further tool to address the East Kimberley's workforce shortages; the first on-the-ground worker sourced through this scheme is working in the ECEC Sector.

EKCCI recently proposed to extend the East Kimberley DAMA Designated Area to include all Local Government Authority's in the region and is awaiting confirmation from the Department of Home Affairs for this. RDA Kimberley has strongly supported this proposal and for the EKCCI to be the Designated Area Representative (DAR) for this.

RDA Kimberley believe this extension is critical to optimise the significant investment occurring across the Kimberley and recommends greater support and avenues such as the DAMA be available to assist all regional and remote ECEC providers.

Conclusion

Different settings are required based on the location of services. Each region has different challenges and barriers – listen to those working on-the ground in the ECEC sector in each of these regions.

The Kimberley is a region with a higher cost of living and higher cost to do business. Wages and subsidies need to reflect this.

Support those working on-the ground in this sector. Building back this workforce is essential to enable regional centres to remain operational and provide services to full capacity. Recognise local training initiatives which engage and build a local workforce in this sector and remove barriers for regional childcare services to attract and retain staff.

This may not be a life-long career for all who enter the sector, and that is okay, but allowing people to enter this industry with greater ease may be the steppingstone they need to engage and continue in the workforce, breaking the systemic cycle of welfare dependency.

By focusing on supporting those working in the sector, this will in-turn improve accessibility to services for all community members. This will improve developmental and educational outcomes for children in the Kimberley and enable primary caregivers to join/re-join the workforce and contribute to the economic growth of the region.

At this time Kimberley residents need access to care and need to return to work. The Kimberley ECEC sector just need a workforce to provide this to community members, ensure retention of those already working in the sector, and to be able to provide the support and care needed to encourage further training pathways for those entering the workforce.



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

ⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Regional Population Growth, Australia (3218.0). Compiled and presented in economy.id by [.id \(informed decisions\)](https://economy.id.com.au/rda-kimberley/population). <https://economy.id.com.au/rda-kimberley/population>.

ⁱⁱⁱ National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) ©2021. Compiled and presented in economy.id by [.id \(informed decisions\)](https://economy.id.com.au/rda-kimberley/employment-by-industry). <https://economy.id.com.au/rda-kimberley/employment-by-industry>.

^{iv} 2021 Census All persons QuickStats, Kimberley. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/51001> &

2021 Census Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people QuickStats, Kimberley. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/IQS51001>.

^v WA Regional Price Index 2021, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD). <https://www.kdc.wa.gov.au/wa-regional-price-index-2021-price-index-2021/>.

