INQUIRY INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Regional Development Australia Riverina

Date Received: 21 May 2025

Committee Secretariat
Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care
19 May 2025

Dear Committee Members,

Subject: Submission of 'The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the Riverina Report'

On behalf of Regional Development Australia Riverina (RDA Riverina), I am pleased to submit the recently released report, The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the Riverina Report, for consideration in the ongoing inquiry into early childhood education and care (ECEC) in New South Wales. RDA Riverina not-for-profit community-based organisation partially funded by the Australian government, committed to fostering economic development and community sustainability across the Riverina region. Our board of volunteers are Riverina locals, with a passion for regional development and our Chair is appointed by Minister McBain MP. As part of our mission, we work closely with all levels of government, local businesses, and other stakeholders to address key challenges impacting our communities—including access to essential services such as early childhood education and care.

This report, launched on Thursday, 27th March at the Rock Community Hub in Lockhart, NSW, provides a comprehensive analysis of the current state of ECEC services across the Riverina region. It was initiated in response to the Regional Australia Institute's (RAI) November 2023 findings, which highlighted the critical undersupply of childcare services nationwide, with 35% of Australians residing in "childcare deserts." These national concerns are acutely felt in the Riverina, where families struggle to access early childhood services, workforce participation is impacted, and ECEC providers face operational challenges.

Through extensive data analysis, engagement with ECEC professionals, and surveys of providers and parents, The ECEC in the Riverina Report details key findings including:

- Limited Service Availability: Some areas have places for only half of the children needing care, while Lockhart faces extreme shortages with just one place for every eight children.
- Workforce Shortages: Over 80% of ECEC providers report difficulties in recruiting staff, with 22 vacant educator positions currently identified.
- Retention Challenges: Low wages and incomplete training contribute to high staff turnover.
- Excessive Wait Times: Families face median wait times of 12 months for children under three, with some waiting over two years.
- Access Challenges: Despite 72% of respondents living within 10km of an ECEC service, securing placements remains a significant barrier, with financial and social consequences.

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This research aims to inform policy development, drive strategic planning, and foster collaboration to support the economic and social well-being of the Riverina community. The findings will aid ECEC providers in securing funding and advocating for necessary infrastructure investments. Furthermore, RDA Riverina is committed to integrating ECEC sector support into our broader workforce development strategy and continuing advocacy efforts to improve accessibility and service availability across the region.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry's discussions and would be happy to provide further insights or participate in stakeholder engagements as needed. Please feel free to contact us for any additional information regarding this submission.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to the outcomes of this inquiry and the positive changes it may bring to early childhood education and care in NSW.

Yours sincerely,

Kind regards,

Rachel Whiting

Chief Executive Officer and Director of Regional Development

RIVERINA

Early Childhood Education and Care in the Riverina

Final Report

December 2024

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Executive Summary

Regional Development Australia Riverina (RDA Riverina) is part of a national network of committees dedicated to driving regional economic development. Collaborating across all three tiers of government, regional businesses, and local communities, RDA Riverina plays a pivotal role in advancing the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the Riverina region.

In response to findings from the Regional Australia Institute's (RAI) November 2023 report, which highlighted the critical undersupply of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in Australia, RDA Riverina initiated targeted research into the state of ECEC services within the Riverina. The RAI report, based on a 2022 study by the Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy at Victoria University, revealed that 35% of Australians reside in "childcare deserts," areas characterised by a severe lack of ECEC services. This finding resonated strongly with anecdotal evidence from Riverina communities, where parents struggle to access childcare to maximize workforce participation and ECEC providers face significant operational challenges.

RDA Riverina's research builds on its longstanding focus on addressing workforce shortages in the region since 2016. This study emphasises that improved access to ECEC services is critical to alleviating workforce challenges and supporting broader economic growth. The research was conducted through extensive data analysis, consultations with ECEC professionals and providers, and surveys of both providers and parents across the Riverina.

Key Findings

- **Limited Service Availability**: Many parts of the Riverina rely on Local Government Authorities (LGAs) or Councils as the sole ECEC service providers, with minimal alternative options. For example, in 2024, Lockhart lost its only ECEC service.

- **Workforce Shortages**: Over the past five years, ECEC workforce vacancies have increased significantly. More than 80% of providers report challenges in recruiting staff, particularly educators, with 22 vacancies currently identified across the region.

- **Retention Challenges**: The ECEC workforce is predominantly young (aged 20-24), with low retention rates linked to inadequate pay and low completion rates for entry-level training programs.

- **Excessive Wait Times**: Families report median wait times of 12 months for children under 3 years old, with some waiting more than two years. The prevalence of children on multiple waitlists complicates efforts to assess true demand.

- **Access Challenges**: While 72% of respondents live within 10 km of an ECEC service, they still face issues securing sufficient placements. Many families experience financial, mental health, and social impacts due to the lack of accessible services. New residents also reported increased isolation when unable to access childcare and return to work.

Recommendations

1. Data from this report should be utilised by ECEC providers to support funding applications.

2. This report should be shared with key government stakeholders to inform policy development and strategic planning.

3. RDA Riverina will explore opportunities to integrate ECEC sector support into its broader workforce development strategy.

4. Greater focus on improving ECEC workforce recruitment, retention, and training pathways.

5. Continued advocacy for funding and infrastructure investments to address service gaps in the Riverina region.

Funding and Collaboration

Dianna Somerville

Dianna Somerville – Chair
Regional Development Australia Riverina

Background

Across the Riverina, there are more jobs than people. The number of jobs being advertised each month is increasing while the unemployment rate is decreasing (Figure 1). Across almost all industries and occupations employers are struggling to find the right people to fill vacancies. In 2021 Regional Development Australia Riverina's skills audit found that 78% of respondents had difficulties filling vacancies [1]. Since then, the challenge has only increased.

Internet Vacancy Index and Unemployment Rate
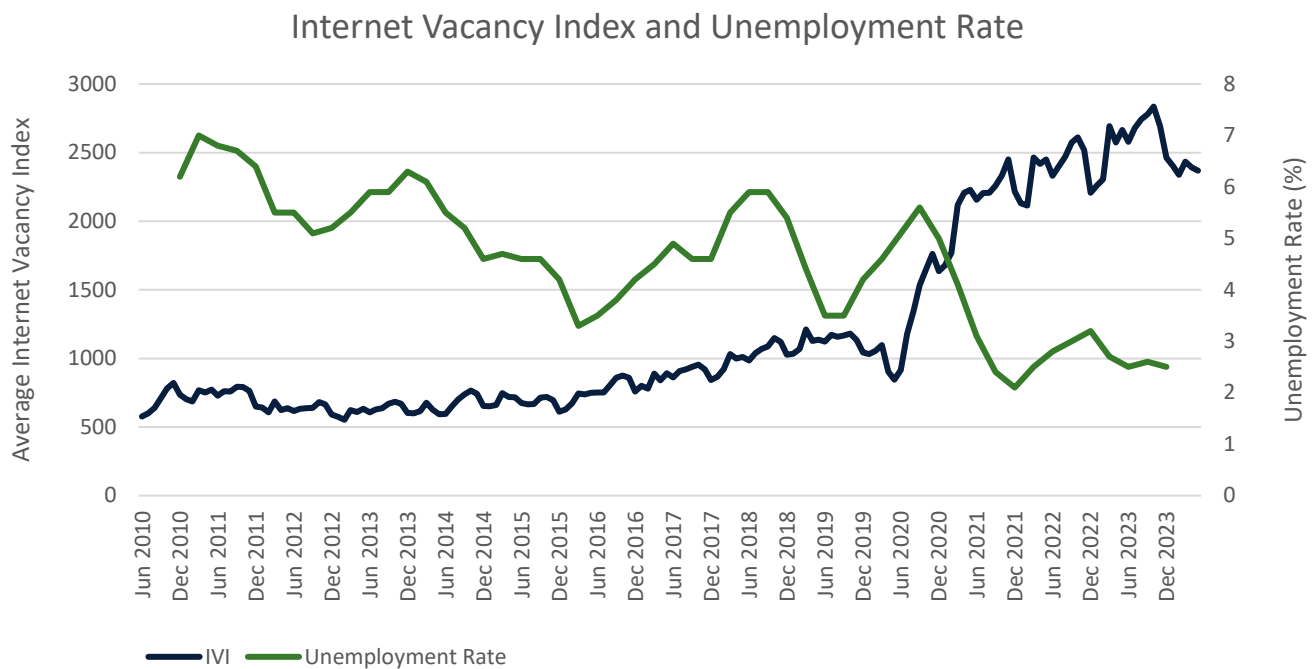
Figure 1: Internet Vacancy Index for the Riverina Murray Region

Data Source: Jobs and Skills Australia [2]. IVI data for the Riverina Murray and unemployment data aggregated by LGAs in the RDA Riverina region [3].

There is no simple solution to workforce shortages, the issue must be tackled with a wholistic approach [4]. One piece of the puzzle is maximising workforce participation. That is, ensuring that those who are already living in our region and those who choose to relocate here and are ready and able to work do not face extra hurdles getting into the workforce. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that one of the main barriers to workforce participation for women was a lack of available childcare [5]. Australia's economy would be stronger with greater workforce participation from women. The Australian Government's 2023, National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality, Discussion Paper states that 'if women's participation matched men's, Australia's GDP would increase by $30.7 billion, or 8.7 per cent to $353 billion by 2050 and create an additional 1 million full-time equivalent workers with post-school qualifications' [6]. It is therefore relevant and timely to look closely at the data available concerning a shortage of early childhood education and care services in the region and the issues causing this shortage. This is of significant importance to the Riverina, a region as forementioned, with major workforce shortage challenges and anticipation of further impacts to this challenge with more than $20 billion allocated to major infrastructure projects in Southern NSW that are funded or underway, with more planned [7]. This report looks at the current availability of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in the Riverina and the state of the ECEC workforce.

In this report the Riverina refers to the area covered by Regional Development Australia Riverina. This includes Bland Shire Council, Carrathool Shire Council, Coolamon Shire Council, Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council, Griffith City Council, Hay Shire Council, Junee Shire Council, Leeton Shire Council, Lockhart Shire Council, Murrumbidgee Council, Narrandera Shire Council, Snowy Valleys Council, Temora Shire Council and Wagga Wagga City Council. Where possible, this report uses language from Early Childhood Australia on How to Talk About Early Childhood Education and Care [8].

Services

Locations

As of April 2024, there were 131 ECEC services across the Riverina [6]. This includes 69 centre-based early childhood services, 34 stand-alone pre-school services, 2 school based pre-school services and 43 services that provide before school, after school or vacation care. In the Riverina region, both Hay and Lockhart only have a single centre-based early childhood service. In addition to this there are 54 family day care educators across the Riverina, these educators are associated with 6 different service providers [7].

Based on this data there are two LGA's with only one centre-based early childhood service (Table 1), this places families in both these LGA's in a precarious position regarding childcare. Both Hay and Lockhart have a single centre-based early childhood service, each with under 30 approved places, additionally, while Hay has 3 family day care educators, Lockhart has none. To highlight the risk a single centre poses to LGA's, after this data was extracted, the NSW Department of Education closed Stay 'N' Play Child Care Centre in Lockhart as a result of accreditation issues [8], leaving parents and guardians in Lockhart Shire Council with no local early childhood services.

Table 1: Early Childhood Services by Local Government Area

LGA	Number of Centre-Based EC Services	Total Approved Places Centre-based EC Service	Number of Family Day Care Educators	Maximum Possible Places* Family Day Care (Pre-school aged or under) Total
Bland	2	135	1	(4) 7
Carrathool	2	49	0	NA
Coolamon	2	106	3	(12) 21
Cootamundra-Gundagai	4	208	5	(20) 35
Griffith	6	455	7	(28) 49
Hay	1	24	3	(12) 21
Junee	2	146	4	(16) 28
Leeton	2	144	4	(16) 28
Lockhart	1**	27	0	NA
Murrumbidgee	2	83	2	(8) 14
Narrandera	3	146	3	(12) 21
Snowy Valleys	6	309	2	(8) 14
Temora	2	118	4	(16) 28
Wagga Wagga	34**	2367	16	(64) 112

* Family Day Care educators can have a maximum of 7 children enrolled at any one time but no more than 4 can be pre-school aged or under. The number in brackets reflects the number of children who are pre-school aged or under while the second reflects the total number of children. Centre-based data obtained from ACECQA and Family Day Care data obtained via Family Day Care Australia.

** At least one centre-based early childhood service has been closed in these LGA's since this data was extracted.

Data Source: ACECQA [6], Family Day Care Australia [7]

Given the size of some LGAs in the Riverina it is important to look at the towns where early childhood services are available within an LGA. Table 2 lists the towns in the region where there is either a centre-based early childhood service or family day care service available.

Table 2: Early Childhood Services by Town

Town	Number of Centre-Based Services	Total Approved Places Centre-based care	Number of Family Day Care Educators	Maximum Possible Places* Family Day Care (Pre-school aged or under) Total
Batlow	1	29	2	(8) 14
Coleambally	1	40	0	NA
Coolamon	2	106	1	(4) 7
Cootamundra	3	148	4	(16) 28
Ganmain	0	NA	2	(8) 14
Griffith	6	455	7	(28) 49
Gundagai	1	60	1	(4) 7
Hay	1	24	3	(12) 21
Hillston	2	49	0	NA
Jerilderie	1	43	2	(8) 14
Junee	2	146	4	(16) 28
Khancoban	1	17	0	NA
Leeton	2	144	4	(16) 28
Lockhart	1**	27	0	NA
Narrandera	3	146	3	(12) 21
Temora	2	118	4	(16) 28
Tumbarumba	1	89	0	NA
Tumut	3	174	0	NA
Wagga Wagga	34**	2367	16	(64) 112
West Wyalong	2	135	1	(4) 7

* Family Day Care educators can have a maximum of 7 children enrolled at any one time but no more than 4 can be pre-school aged or under. The number in brackets reflects the number of children who are pre-school aged or under while the second reflects the total number of children. Centre-based data obtained from ACECQA and Family Day Care data obtained via Family Day Care Australia.

** At least one centre-based early childhood service has been closed in these LGA's since this data was extracted.

Data Source: ACECQA [6], Family Day Care Australia [7]

Additionally, there are a total of 36 standalone or school-based preschools across the region with a total of 1362 approved places (Table 3). 27.9% of those places are located in Wagga Wagga followed by 17.3% in Griffith.

Table 3: Preschool Services by LGA

LGA	Number of Preschools	Total Approved Places
Bland	1	65
Carrathool	0	NA
Coolamon	3	65
Cootamundra-Gundagai	3	118
Griffith	5	236
Hay	1	29
Junee	1	61
Leeton	1	80
Lockhart	2	54
Murrumbidgee	2	83
Narrandera	0	NA
Snowy Valleys	3	106
Temora	2	85
Wagga Wagga	12	380

Data Source: ACECQA [6]

Supply and Demand

In 2022 the Mitchell Institute reported on childcare accessibility in Australia [9]. The report calculated a ratio of approved early childhood places to children weighted by location, distance, and the availability of services. The ratio presented in table 3 is not equivalent to this but is presented as a marker of service availability in LGA's across the Riverina (Table 4). It is important to note that not all parents will seek centre-based early childhood services or family day care services and that parents may choose to access an ECEC service closer to where they work which may not be the LGA in which they live. It should also be noted that due to ongoing workforce availability, services may not be operating at full capacity.

Table 4: Childcare Places to Population by Local Government Area

LGA	Early Childhood Service Approved Places	Family Day Care Places (Pre-school and under)	Total Places	Children Aged 0-4	Ratio of approved places to children*
Bland	135	4	139	362	0.384
Carrathool	49	NA	49	213	0.230
Coolamon	106	12	118	292	0.404
Cootamundra-Gundagai	208	20	228	622	0.367
Griffith	455	28	483	1822	0.265
Hay	24	12	36	155	0.232
Junee	146	16	162	328	0.494
Leeton	144	16	160	704	0.227
Lockhart	27**	NA	27	200	0.135
Murrumbidgee	83	8	91	179	0.508
Narrandera	146	12	158	358	0.441
Snowy Valleys	309	8	317	816	0.388
Temora	118	16	134	333	0.402
Wagga Wagga	2367**	64	2431	4756	0.511

* Ratio of places to children was calculated as the total number of approved places (including the possible maximum of 4 children pre-school age or under per family day care educator) to children aged 0-4

** At least one centre-based early childhood service has been closed in these LGA's since this data was extracted.

Data Source: ACECQA [6], Family Day Care Australia [7], ABS [10].

Workforce

Current Workforce

At the 2021 census, there were approximately 1300 people employed in an ECEC related occupation across the Riverina. 1000 of these were classified in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) as Child Care Workers, Family Day Care Workers or Child Carers nfd (no further description), the remaining 300 were Nanny's, Out of School Hours Care Workers and Early Childhood (Pre-primary School) Teachers (Table 5). Except for Wagga Wagga all LGA's had either no or fewer than 10 Family Day Care Workers, noting that very small figures will have been adjusted by the Australia Bureau of Statistics to maintain data privacy.

Figure 2 shows the estimated vacancies for educators in the Riverina each month. From September 2020 through to January 2024 this figure tripled from approximately 10 each month to around 35 each month. Nationally, the median weekly earnings for child carers is $1,059 or $55,068 per year [11].

Table 5: Number of Persons in LGA working as educators at the 2021 Census by ANZSCO classification

LGA	Child Carers nfd*	Child Care Worker	Family Day Care Worker	Nanny	Out of School Hours Care Worker	Early Childhood (Pre-primary School) Teacher	Total
Bland	3	26	0	0	0	3	37
Carrathool	0	12	0	0	0	0	14
Coolamon	0	19	5	0	0	8	42
Cootamundra-Gundagai	8	42	0	0	0	14	68
Griffith	12	124	7	4	0	30	177
Hay	0	11	0	0	0	0	22
Junee	0	23	3	0	0	4	37
Leeton	3	49	6	4	0	12	76
Lockhart	0	15	0	0	0	0	17
Murrumbidgee	0	10	3	0	0	7	18
Narrandera	0	26	0	0	0	8	37
Snowy Valleys	3	69	3	0	0	19	95
Temora	0	25	0	0	4	7	42
Wagga Wagga	37	433	20	14	29	88	624
Total	**76**	**886**	**51**	**25**	**42**	**215**	**1292**

* nfd: no further description
Data Source: ABS [12]

The current ECEC workforce has a broad age range but peaks early at 20-24 years of age before dropping as workers get older (Figure 3). While retention of the workforce over the course of their life appears to be an issue, data from NSW suggests that this is not just a local issue [12].

Estimated vacancies
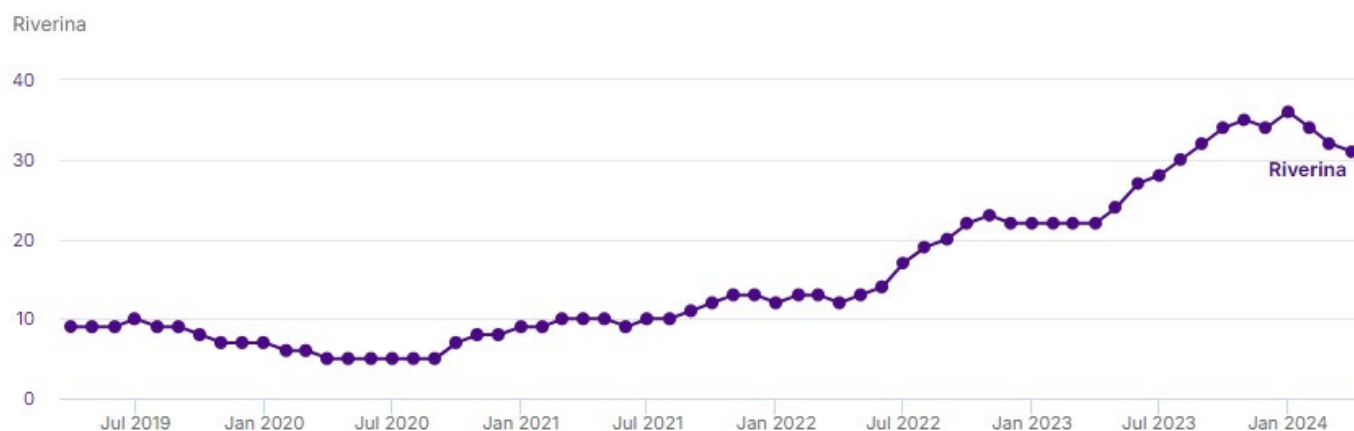
Figure 2: Estimated Vacancies for Educators in the Riverina SA4 Region - Jobs and Skills Australia

Image Source: Jobs and Skills Australia [11]
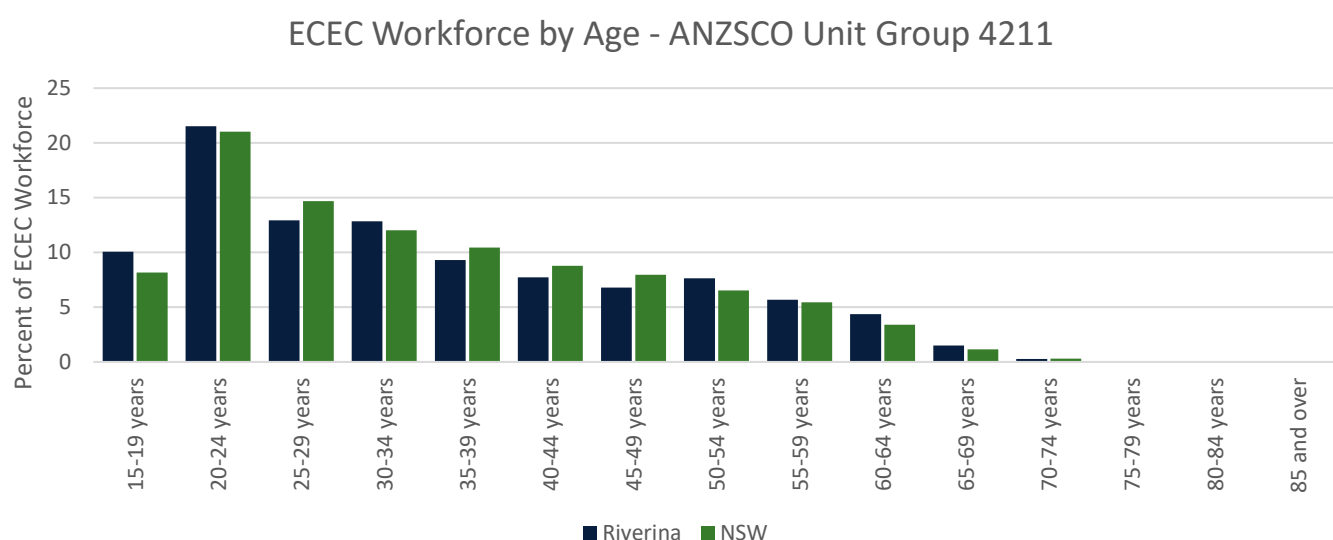
Figure 3: Age of Educators in the Riverina and NSW at the 2021 Census

Data Source: ABS [12]

Training

The most common training requirements for early childhood educators is either a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care or a Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care. These courses are offered by various providers including TAFE NSW. Within the Riverina there are TAFE campuses in Cootamundra, Griffith, Hay, Leeton, Narrandera, Temora, Tumut and Wagga Wagga. These courses are offered at all of these locations either on campus, virtually, or a combination of the two. There also offered at a number of TAFE campuses surrounding the Riverina which may also serve parts of the community. These include Lake Cargelligo to the north of the region, Deniliquin, Finley, Corowa and Albury to the south and Young and Yass to the East.

Data from NCVER (Table 6 & 7) shows that the number of people enrolling in Early Childhood Education and Care training courses is higher than the course completion rates [13]. This data is not available at an LGA level therefore the Riverina SA4 region data has been presented. Overall VET completion rates in NSW for courses commenced in 2018 range from 28.4% to 68.6% depending on provider type in inner regional areas, and 33.3% to 70.2% in outer regional areas (Table 8).

Table 6: VET Program Enrolments in the Riverina SA4

Provider type	Program name	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
TAFE Institutes	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC30113 & CHC30121	325	325	315	275	275
TAFE Institutes	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113 & CHC50121	150	115	100	95	95
TAFE Institutes	**Total**	**470**	**440**	**410**	**370**	**375**
Schools	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC30113 & CHC30121	0	0	10	10	10
Schools	**Total**	**0**	**0**	**10**	**10**	**10**
Community Education Providers	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC30113 & CHC30121	30	30	60	85	90
Community Education Providers	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113 & CHC50121	15	25	30	50	60
Community Education Providers	**Total**	**45**	**55**	**90**	**135**	**150**
Enterprise Providers	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC30113	10	10	10	15	5
Enterprise Providers	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113	20	20	20	15	10
Enterprise Providers	**Total**	**25**	**30**	**30**	**30**	**15**
Private Training Providers	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC30113 & CHC30121	80	80	90	115	210
Private Training Providers	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113 & CHC50121	85	65	70	80	115
Private Training Providers	**Total**	**170**	**150**	**160**	**195**	**330**
All Providers	**Total**	**710**	**675**	**700**	**735**	**880**

Data Source: NCVER [13]

Table 7: VET Program Completions in the Riverina SA4

Provider type	Program name	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
TAFE Institutes	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113 & CHC50121	65	85	45	65	40
TAFE Institutes	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113	35	30	25	15	40
TAFE Institutes	**Total**	**100**	**115**	**75**	**80**	**75**
Community Education Providers	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113 & CHC50121	15	15	15	40	30
Community Education Providers	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113	0	10	5	10	25
Community Education Providers	**Total**	**15**	**20**	**20**	**45**	**55**
Enterprise Providers	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC30113	5	0	0	5	5
Enterprise Providers	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113	0	0	5	5	0
Enterprise Providers	**Total**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**
Private Training Providers	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care CHC30113	5	10	15	20	20
Private Training Providers	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care CHC50113	25	5	10	15	40
Private Training Providers	**Total**	**30**	**15**	**25**	**35**	**65**
All Providers	**Total**	**150**	**155**	**120**	**165**	**200**

Data Source: NCVER [13]

Table 8: Overall VET Completion Rates in NSW for courses commenced in 2018

Remoteness Region	TAFE Institutes (%)	Schools (%)	Community Education Providers (%)	Enterprise Providers (%)	Private Training Providers (%)
Major cities	49.5	44.8	54.1	69	46.9
Inner regional	46.8	28.4	42.8	68.6	40.6
Outer regional	45.9	33.3	36.3	70.2	31.4
Remote	42	31.8	13.5	71.6	29.9
Very remote	31.3	17.1	12.5	Not Provided	41.6
Not known	51.3	33.4	80.7	70.5	49.4
Total	**48.6**	**39.2**	**50.2**	**69.1**	**45.9**

Data Source: NCVER [13]

Remoteness Region	TAFE Institutes (%)	Schools (%)	Community Education Providers (%)	Enterprise Providers (%)	Private Training Providers (%)

Surveys

Service Directors and Nominated Supervisors

Survey

This survey was targeted at early childhood education and care centre directors or nominated supervisors. It consisted of ten questions designed to collect information about the services and its workforce needs and issues. The survey questions are included in the appendix.

Respondents

A total of 21 responses were received between the 9ᵗʰ of September 2024 and the 21ˢᵗ of October 2024. Most of these responses were from Wagga Wagga City Council and Griffith City Council but responses were received from across the Riverina.

Table 9: Responses from ECEC Centres by LGA

LGA	Count
Bland Shire Council	1
Coolamon Shire Council	1
Griffith City Council	5
Hay Shire Council	1
Leeton Shire Council	1
Murrumbidgee Council	1
Not Answered	1
Snowy Valleys Council	3
Temora Shire Council	3
Wagga Wagga City Council	4

Seven responses were received from Pre-schools, 13 from ECEC centres and 1 from a centre offering multiple services.

Table 10: Responses by Service Type

Service Type	Count
Preschool	7
Centre-based Care	13
Multiple	1

Results

Waitlists

To get a sense of the demand for ECEC services locally, we asked service providers a series of questions about their waitlists including the number of children on the list, if the families waiting for services were likely to be registered with multiple services, how long the wait time for a place was, and if there were families waiting for more days.

Across the Riverina, waitlists for centre-based early childhood services for children under 2 were the longest followed by children aged between 2 and 3, and children over 3. Generally, waitlists for pre-school were shorter however there was one outlier in Griffith City Council with a large number of children on the waitlist for pre-school. Many providers recommend that families put their name on the waitlist for as many services as possible.
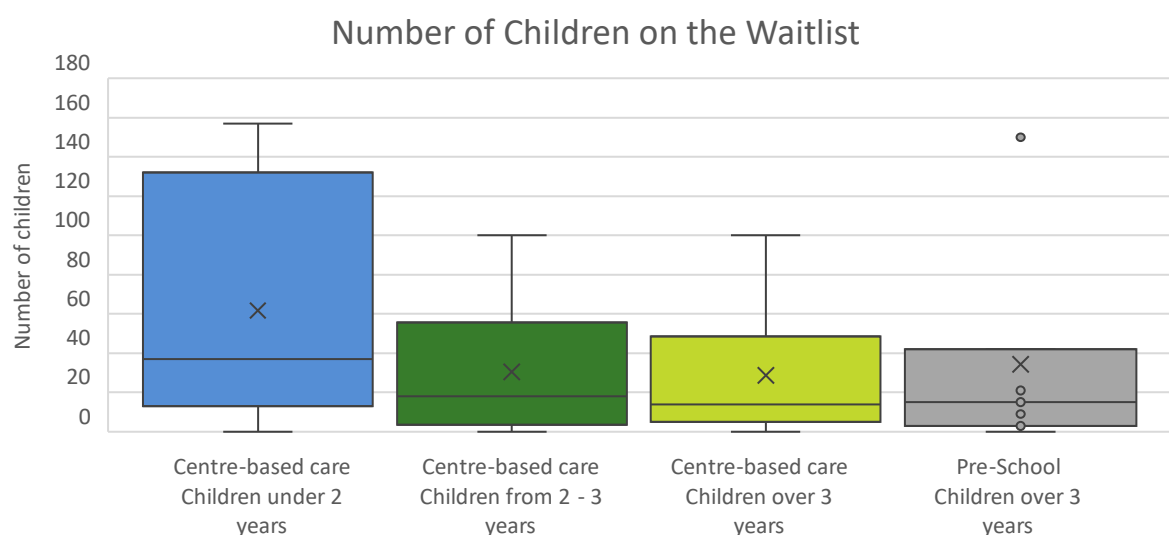

Figure 4: Number of Children on Waitlists by Age

Providers estimated that from 20% to 100% of families were likely to be on multiple wait lists. This makes it difficult to use the length of waitlists as an indicator of demand and availability. To account for this, providers were asked to estimate the time families spent on their waitlists. While some providers felt that they were unable to estimates this, other did provide an estimate. Families with children under the age of 2 were estimated to be waiting anywhere from 6 months to 2 years, a wait period that may see children age out of the category without having been offered a place. A similar wait time was seen for children between 2 and 3 years while a slightly shorter wait time was estimated for children over 3.

Table 11: Estimated Time Spent on Waitlists

Age Group	Min	Max
Under 2 years	6-12 months	18-24 months
From 2 to 3 years	6 months	12-24 months
Over 3 years	3 months	24 months

Almost all providers indicated that families currently using the service would like more days, with estimates of anywhere from 2 to 50 families wanting more days then were currently available to them.

Workforce

When asked if they were having any difficulty finding staff, 80.95% of providers said yes. Across the region, 12 Early Childhood Teacher vacancies were reported and 22 Educators. Given that 21 responses were received out of a possible 131, vacancies across the region are likely to be high. In the case of ECEC services, the flow on effect of employing 1 educator or teacher can be significant, with one educator caring for a number of children, this potentially allows many more people to be able to enter or re-enter the workforce. Often the people unable to participate in the workforce due to child rearing responsibilities are women.

Table 12: Reported Vacancies

Position	Vacancies at Individual Services	Total Vacancies Reported
Directors	0 - 1	1
Early Childhood Teachers	0 - 3	12
Educators	0 - 4	22
Leaders	0 - 2	6
Nominated Supervisors	0 - 1	1
Trainees and Apprentices	0 - 1	5
Ancillary Staff	0 - 2	3

The impacts of these vacancies include, centres staffing above ratio to ensure coverage when educators are unwell, managers spending a lot of time on the floor, difficulty covering staff due to illness and time off, having to restrict enrolment numbers, needing to use waivers for trainees to meet ratios, and high levels of stress for staff and management leading to a high risk of staff burn-out.

> *"We have trouble with casual educators, there isn't any. We run above ratio every day to make sure we always have immediate coverage if educators are away."*

> *"Service Manager spends a lot of time on the floor which then affects office/admin time which affects all things including QIP, planning, all admin duties."*

> *"Utilising staff to ensure ratio and qualification regulations are maintained is an ongoing challenge. This leads to burnt out staff and inconsistent classroom educators … Some days there are not enough staff to work, let alone train newcomers"*

Final comments provided by centres included noting that training to comply with the national quality framework (NQF) can be difficult to source and expensive, it can be hard to find casual staff to cover illness and many staff members are still working towards a qualification, there is a mismatch between government funding for families to access services and for centres to provide those services, staff and management at many centres are experiencing high level of stress and at risk of burn-out, and that there is no specific training available for centre directors.

> *"With the Government providing low/no cost childcare/preschool to families, services are unable to meet the increase in enrolments. Preschool hours have increased for families, however budgets for employees to meet these new hours … has not been increased enough to continue to provide high quality services."*

> *"Training that is necessary to support and comply with the NQF is a very costly budget item for services, and often training is not available through the Dept."*

Parents and Guardians

Survey

This survey was targeted at parents and guardians currently using or on a waiting list for an early childhood education and care service. It consisted of 13 questions designed to collect information on wait times and the impacts of the availability or lack of availability on workforce participation and wellbeing.

Respondents

A total of 155 responses were received between the 9th of September 2024 and the 21st of October 2024. Most of these responses were received from within Wagga Wagga City Council, followed by Griffith City Council, Temora Shire Council and Narrandera Shire Council. No responses were received from Coolamon Shire Council or Snowy Valleys Council. Nine responses were received from LGAs surrounding the Riverina.

Table 13: Responses from Parents and Guardians by LGA

LGA	Count	Region*
Albury City Council	2	Murray
Bland Shire Council	1	Riverina
Carrathool Shire Council	1	Riverina
Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council	1	Riverina
Edward River Council	1	Murray
Federation Council	2	Murray
Greater Hume Shire Council	1	Murray
Griffith City Council	40	Riverina
Hay Shire Council	4	Riverina
Junee Shire Council	2	Riverina
Leeton Shire Council	4	Riverina
Lockhart Shire Council	5	Riverina
Murrumbidgee Council	7	Riverina
Narrandera Shire Council	14	Riverina
Shire of Towong	1	Hume
Temora Shire Council	14	Riverina
Wagga Wagga City Council	53	Riverina
Wodonga Council	2	Hume

* Based on Regional Development Australia Boundaries [16].

Results

Distance

Overall, 72% of respondents were within 10 kms of the nearest ECEC service with a further 17% within 30kms and 11% over 30 kms away from the nearest service. Table 14 shows a breakdown of the distance from the nearest service by LGA. Due to local supply and demand conditions parents and guardians may not be able to access their nearest service.

Table 14: Distance from Nearest ECEC Service by LGA

LGA	Under 10kms (%)	10 - 30kms (%)	Over 30 kms (%)
Bland Shire Council	0	0	100
Carrathool Shire Council	0	0	100
Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council	100	0	0
Griffith City Council	72.5	25	2.5
Hay Shire Council	75	0	25
Junee Shire Council	50	50	0
Leeton Shire Council	75	25	0
Lockhart Shire Council	0	20	80
Murrumbidgee Council	14.3	42.9	42.9
Narrandera Shire Council	64.3	21.4	14.9
Temora Shire Council	92.9	7.1	0
Wagga Wagga City Council	86.8	9.4	3.8
Surrounding LGAs	66.7	11.1	22.2

Waitlists

Across the Riverina the median time spent waiting for a place at an ECEC service was 12 months. For children under the age of 2 and between 2 and 3 years old, where educator to child ratios are 1:4 and 1:5 respectively the wait time ranged from 1 month to 34 months with a median wait time of 12 months. This means that a child may move into the next age category before receiving a place. Wait times for child over 3 years were shorter with a median of 7 months.
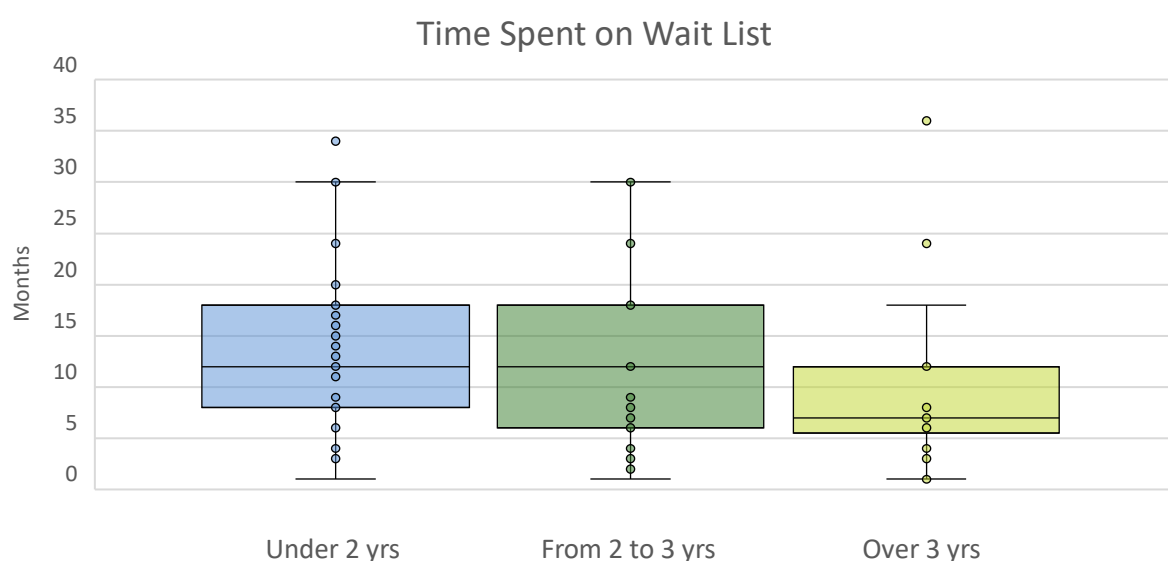

Figure 5: Time Spent on Waitlist by Age of Child

Parents and Guardians are often told by ECEC services as well as family and friends to put their child's name onto the waitlists of multiple services. This means, that not everyone on a waitlist will end up using the service. Table 16 shows the maximum and minimum number of service waitlists that families put their name on in each LGA. The table also include data from Tables 1 and 3 on how many services are available in each location as a reference point. This data shows that some families feel they need to put their child onto the list for every service in town in order to secure a place at a service.

Table 15: Number of Service Waitlists Families Joined to Access ECEC Services by LGA

LGA	Number of Waitlists Families Joined (Minimum – Maximum)	Number of Available Services in Each LGA	
		Centre-Based EC Service	Pre-School
Bland Shire Council	2 – 2	2	1
Carrathool Shire Council	4 – 4*	2	0
Coolamon Shire Council	No Survey Responses	2	3
Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council	No Survey Responses	4	3
Griffith City Council	1 – 6	6	5
Hay Shire Council	1 – 3*	1	1
Junee Shire Council	2 – 2	2	1
Leeton Shire Council	2 – 5*	2	1
Lockhart Shire Council	1 – 3	1**	2
Murrumbidgee Council	1 – 5*	2	2
Narrandera Shire Council	1 – 12*	3	0
Snowy Valleys Council	No Survey Responses	6	3
Temora Shire Council	1 – 3	2	2
Wagga Wagga City Council	1 – 34	34**	12

* In some LGAs the maximum number of waitlists parents and guardians have placed children's names on is higher than the number of services available. This may reflect families trying to access services in adjacent LGAs and towns based on preference, location of work or need.

** At least one centre-based early childhood service has been closed in these LGA's since this data was extracted.

Coverage

In some cases, just getting a place at a service may not provide adequate coverage for families. They may require more days in order to move from part-time to full-time work or to have the flexibility to engage in shift work. Across the region 47.1% of respondents needed more days than they currently had access to.
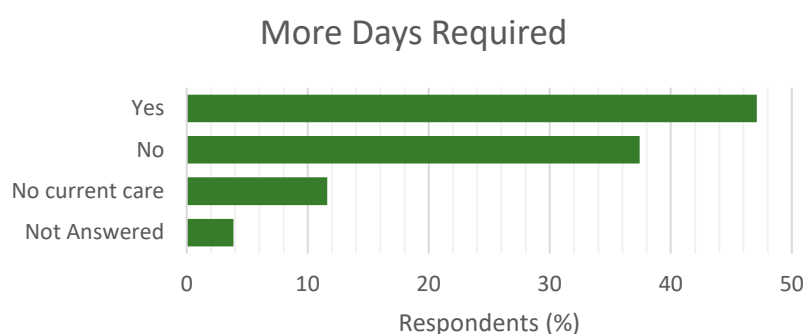

Figure 6: Families Requiring More Days at an ECEC Service

In some cases, families may need to put their children in different ECEC services depending on age and availability. They may even put a single child in two or more services to ensure the coverage they require. 22.6% of respondents had children in multiple services.

Table 16: Families with Children Attending Services Run by Different Providers

Children with Different Providers	Respondents (%)
Yes	22.6
No	49.0
No Current Care / Not Applicable	10.3
Not Answered	18.1

Workforce shortages across the ECEC industry in the region means that when staff are ill or otherwise require or request time off work. There is not always enough staff to cover them and meet ratios. While some centres operate above ratios to prevent this, not all are able to. If there are not enough educators, then some children are unable to attend. 34.8% of respondents reported having been impacted by staff absences. These impacts included having to use up personal leave, sick leave or carers leave in order to look after children, loss of income and other financial impacts, having to rely on family and friends to assist them, requiring flexible working arrangement in order to look after or pick up children, not being able to work, missing appointments and routine disruptions for children.

Table 17: Families Impacted by Staff Absences

Impacted by Staff Absences	Respondents (%)
Yes	34.8
No	34.2
Still waiting for a place / Not Applicable	14.8
Not Answered	16.1

Service Preference

With limited availability within ECEC services across the region parents and guardians are often unable to make a choice about which type or service they would prefer to use. When asked what their preference would be if availability was not an issue 52.9% reported that they would prefer to use a centre-based early childhood service, followed by 22.6% preferring a pre-school and 14.2% preferring a family day care service.

Families were also asked if they had ever used or considered using in-home care or nannies. 5.2% of respondents had used in-home care, 22.6% had considered or were currently considering it and 52.3% had not considered it. Those who had used it reported that while expensive it worked well, that they liked the convenience of having the educator come to or live-in their house and that it was one to one care.

Reasons for not using it included the lack of available nannies in the region and concerns about retention, not knowing how to find information on using in-home care such as how to find workers, regulations and qualifications, that they did not have to space to accommodate a live-in nanny, concerns about the lack of socialisation for children and the expenses of using such a service without subsidies.

Table 18: Preferred Service Type When Available

Preferred Service Type	Respondents (%)
Centre-Based Care	52.9
Preschool	22.6
Family day Care	14.2
In-Home Care	1.3
Mobile Children's Service	1.9
Not Answered	1.9
OSHC	3.2
Vacation Care	1.3
Other	0.6

Table 19: Families Who Have Used or Considered Using Nannies or In-Home Care

Used or Considered In-Home Care	Respondents (%)
Used	5.2
Considered	22.6
No	52.3
Not Answered	20

Access and Impacts

Parents and guardians were asked how access to ECEC services affected their ability to participate in the workforce. Respondents reflected on how their ability to work, their hours and which days they work were based on what services they could access rather than being able to access services around the times they needed or wanted to work.

> *"Currently I work 2 days per week but as of 2025 the childcare provider can only offer me 1 day a week which means I am going to have to cut back on work. This will severely impact my family financially."*

> *"When I returned to work after maternity leave, the days I could work were determined by the days I could access care - not the days my employer would have preferred. I also received pressure from work to increase my hours to full-time but was unable to do so because of a lack of childcare availability."*

Respondents also reported not being able to work due to not having a place at a service as well as the financial impact of keeping one child at a service so as not to lose access.

> *"I cannot work because I don't have a daycare spot for my youngest daughter. I haven't worked this year but have kept my 3yo in daycare, so I don't lose my spot when I eventually get a spot for my 1yo."*

> *"My partner is yet to be able to join the workforce as we have no care options for our child. We've moved interstate for my job so have no family or friend support either. Living off one wage supporting a family without the option to get back into the workforce is concerning."*

Respondents were also asked how access to care affected their financial wellbeing, they reflect on the financial impacts of not having access to ECEC services. This included living on one wage and relying of family for financial assistance.

"Struggling to make ends meet on one wage"

"After maternity payment stopped, I had no income but could not return to work yet. This meant relying on parents to pay my bills and provide"

Respondents also reflected on the financial impacts of paying for ECEC services, including feeling as though they had no ability to choose a lower cost service and the overall impact of fees.

"My son (and previously my daughter) have been enrolled at one of the most expensive centres in our region. As fees have increased, I haven't really had the option of switching centres as it's so hard to get in anywhere else anyway. Early childhood education, even with the CCS, takes a big chunk of my pay and when I had two children in care, it was almost not worth picking up additional work hours because of the additional childcare costs. If there was more availability pricing may be more competitive as families could move centres to access lower fees"

"Childcare is expensive and when we are having to access services in different locations its puts pressure on the family financially"

They also discussed the longer-term financial benefits of being able to access ECEC services.

"We are able to work to build our business and secure our family's financial future thanks to access to reliable and appropriate early childhood services … Knowing we have dedicated, focused time to work and earn an income was a primary driver for choosing to put our child in early education."

"Improves financial wellbeing greatly - provides security and reduced stress greatly. Without having early childhood my role and overall career, workforce progression would struggle, and thus ultimately financial wellbeing would stagnate."

"I am unable to earn a secondary income for our family. It also puts our family business of farming at risk in times of adverse environmental conditions eg: climate change and increased risk of droughts."

Other impacts of access to ECEC services included the impact on parenting, mental health, education and child wellbeing.

"Having my child go to daycare makes me a better mother. I get to go out, talk to adults, have a fulfilling career and then get to come home and be a Mum … Plus, my child learns so much whilst they are at daycare. I am not a qualified teacher/early childhood educator. I am constantly amazed at what they are teaching a 2-year-old to do."

"My son has additional needs and due to the centre not having the sufficient staffing to support him, he could not stay a full day during preschool. This caused a lot of stress on me; every day was a struggle to balance work and caring for my son while trying to work from home with him."

"The service is so valuable to her education, learning, socialisation, and more. They show such kindness and understanding. The other positive impact is on my mental health."

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Appendix

ANZSCO Definitions

Data Source: [14]

421111 – Child Care Worker
Provides care and supervision for children in programs, such as long day care and occasional care, in childcare centres, hospitals and educational centres.

421112 – Family Day Care Worker
Provides care and supervision for babies and children, usually in the carer's own home and under local government or community-based schemes.

421113 – Nanny
Assists parents in the provision of ongoing care and supervision for babies and children, usually in the child's home.

421114 – Out of School Hours Care Worker
Provides care for school age children in an out of school hours care program.

241111 – Early Childhood (Pre-primary School) Teacher
Plans, organises and conducts activities to help pre-primary school students to develop a wide variety of skills including speech, reading, writing, motor skills and social interaction.

Early Childhood Education and Care - Service Directors and Nominated Supervisors Survey

About this Survey

The purpose of this survey is to collect information about the availability of early childhood education and care services in the Riverina and the impact of availability on our workforce.

Privacy

Any responses entered in this online survey are protected under Regional Development Australia (RDA) Riverina's privacy policy and will be used in our workforce development programs. Deidentified data from this report will be published in an upcoming report. If you have further questions regarding this survey, please contact RDA Riverina on

research@rdariverina.org.au.

1. What type of Early Childhood Education and Care service do you represent?

- ☐ Centre-based Care
- ☐ Family Day Care
- ☐ Outside School Hours Care
- ☐ Vacation Care
- ☐ Preschool
- ☐ Mobile Children's Services
- ☐ In-home Care
- ☐ Other (please specify)

2. What town is the service located in?

3. How many children do you currently have on your waiting list?

Birth to 24 months	
24 months to 36 months	
Over 36 months	

4. What proportion of children on your waiting list are likely to be on the waiting list for multiple service providers?

5. What is the average wait time for children on your waiting list?

Birth to 24 months

[   ]

24 months to 36 months

[   ]

Over 36 months

[   ]

6. How many families currently using your service would like more days?

[   ]

7. Are you currently having any difficulty finding staff?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Other

8. How many vacancies do you currently have

Director/manager

[   ]

Early Childhood Teachers

[   ]

Educators

[   ]

Leaders

[   ]

Nominated Supervisors

[   ]

Trainees and Apprentices

[   ]

Ancillary Staff

[   ]

Other (please specify)

[   ]

9. How do these vacancies affect the day to day operations of the service?

10. Is there anything else you would like us to know?

Early Childhood Education and Care - Parents and Guardians Survey

About this Survey
The purpose of this survey is to collect information about the availability of early childhood education and care services in the Riverina and the impact of availability on our workforce.

Privacy
Any responses entered in this online survey are protected under Regional Development Australia (RDA) Riverina's privacy policy and will be used in our workforce development programs. Deidentified data from this report will be published in an upcoming report. If you have further questions regarding this survey, please contact RDA Riverina on research@rdariverina.org.au.

1. What town are you currently living in?

2. Approximately how far is the nearest early childhood education and care service from your home?

- ○ Under 10kms
- ○ 10 - 30kms
- ○ Over 30 kms

3. If you have been on the wait lists for an early childhood service at any time within the last 12 months, how long were you on the list?

Children under 24 months

Children from 24-36 months

Children over 36 months

4. How many early childhood education and care services were you registered with before you found place for your child?

5. Do you currently need or want more days for your child/children at the service?

6. Have you ever had to keep you child/children at home due to staff absences at the early childhood service provider? If so how has this impacted your family?

7. Do you have children with different service providers? If so why?

8. How does access to early childhood services impact your family's engagement in the workforce?

9. How does access to early childhood services impact your family's financial wellbeing?

10. Are there any other impacts that access to early childhood services has on your family?

11. If availability was not an issue what type of early childhood service would you most like to use?

- ○ Centre-Based Care
- ○ Family day Care
- ○ Preschool
- ○ In-Home Care
- ○ Mobile Children's Service
- ○ OSHC
- ○ Vacation Care
- ○ Other (please specify)

12. Have you considered or used a nanny or au pair? If so what were the positive and negative aspects of the experience?

13. Is there anything else you would like us to know?