

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

Organisation: Bega Valley Shire Council

Date Received: 29 May 2025

BVSC Submission to the Portfolio Committee No.3 – Education Inquiry into the early education and care sector in NSW

As an early education and care provider, Bega Valley Shire Council (BVSC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Portfolio Committee No.3 – Education inquiry on the provision of early education and care, particularly in the areas of accessibility, workforce and the regulatory framework.

The Bega Valley Shire

The Bega Valley Shire is located at the southeastern corner of New South Wales, halfway between Australia's two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne and three hours' drive from the nation's capital, Canberra. At over 6,200 km², the shire is the largest local government area in coastal NSW and has a population of 36,000 with two thirds spread amongst 12 villages, 4 major towns and adjacent urban settlements. Our main industries are agribusiness including fishing and aquaculture, health and social services, and tourism.

BVSC Children's Services overview

BVSC provides high quality accredited preschool and long day care programs across the Bega Valley through our Early Education and Care Services section. Centre-based programs are delivered in Bega and Eden, and a Mobile Preschool program is delivered in Candelo and Bemboka.

The service employs 59 staff, including casual staff, and currently has 2 grant funded preschool liaison officers, with an annual operating budget of \$3.4m. The service currently has 171 children enrolled of which 12.8% identify as Aboriginal compared to 3.8% of the overall population in the Bega Valley.

The service provides culturally appropriate programs including delivery of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) Gujaga (small children) Journey Project along with inclusive services that cater for children with a range of social and learning support needs.

Operating hours and places

Bandara Children's Service (Bega):

- 7.45am to 5.45pm Monday to Friday
- 59 places per day

Eden Early Learning Centre (Eden):

- 7.30am to 5.30pm Monday to Friday
- 39 places per day

Sapphire Mobile Preschool:

- 8.30am – 3.30pm Monday to Thursday in Candelo
- 8.30am – 3.30pm Friday in Bemboka
- 18 places per day

BVSC is one of a number of private and not-for-profit providers of early education in the Bega Valley Shire, however we offer the only centre-based care in Eden.

We are aware of a significant lack of childcare places across the shire, with anecdotal information of professionals moving away, or not being able to move here to take up employment, as they are unable to secure childcare for their babies and young children. However, the figures are difficult to quantify as there are private providers in the broader area and some families may be listed across several services to gain placement.

Accessibility of services

Despite recent federal and state government announcements, families in the Bega Valley are still facing difficulties accessing and affording early education and care services. A review of Bega Valley Children's Services in 2023 identified the need for upgrades of ageing buildings and a significant increase in placements (up to 80 children per day) at Bega and Eden in order to meet current and future needs and operate at a financially sustainable level.

A subsequent expansion project has commenced to identify viable options to deliver increased early education and care services. This will require significant financial and resource investment from Council, which will need to be supplemented with government funding.

BVSC offers early education and care services with low fees to provide wider access to services, particularly considering the socio-economic demographics of our population, however, these fees in no way provide the necessary income to support expansion of the services as well as meet increasing operating costs. This ever widening gap threatens the sustainability of our services and our future plans to increase enrolment numbers.

To support this, government should consider the provision of improved access to investment and subsidies for not for profit providers like BVSC which recognises the high quality of education and care services provided and supports improved access for all families.

"Whilst other key workers are relocating to Bega Valley and supported by the government to do so, boosting their industries, they also bring children with them that they can't get into care and there is no incentive to include Early Childhood educators as key workers...leaving centres unable to adequately staff services to take full enrolments." [Nominated Supervisor]

(a) Safety, health and wellbeing of children in ECEC services and (b) Quality of ECEC services and the educational and developmental outcomes for children attending ECEC services

The regulatory framework provides clear guidance on how to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of children in early education and care services. Model policies and procedures provide clear guidance and direction. However, educational wisdom and practices change over time, and ongoing education and training for staff is critical in ensuring up to date knowledge and practices in relation to the child health and wellbeing. In regional areas, this training can be hard to access. Additionally, staffing shortages often prevent staff from participating in training as ratios cannot be met without them. Rather than ask parents to keep children home in order for staff to be able to undertake training, staff may forgo their training in order to ensure children receive care.

While quality early education is critical to a child's long term development and outcomes, childcare also contributes to parents' ability to participate in the workforce which is often critical to improving outcomes for families and communities as a whole.

(c) Safety, pay and conditions of workers

The importance of the work early education and care workers do is consistently underestimated and undervalued. Early education and care is critical to the long term outcomes of a child. It involves many moving parts, and the general sector pay rates do not reflect the effort required or the importance of the role.

The Bega Valley Shire is significantly impacted by the sector-wide shortage of qualified staff that is being seen nationally. Even though Council pays above award rates for many of its staff, the lower remuneration of the sector as a whole makes it difficult to attract and retain staff. The recent Federal Government's Worker Retention Grant applies to just a handful of BVSC's early education staff for eligible pay increases, and many

staff or potential staff are diverting to alternative carers due to the low wages across the sector as a whole. Existing staff across the sector are overworked, striving to meet high expectations with minimal pay.

In addition, staff are choosing to remain on casual pay rates rather than take up opportunities for full time or permanent part time positions due to the higher hourly wage which provides challenges in continuity of service provision and our ability to ensure services meet ratios as well being able to forward plan for increasing enrolments.

The obligations for meeting ratio of qualified staff together with a limited pool of available qualified personnel in regional areas places undue pressure on existing staff who need time off the floor to be able to undertake the quality programming, reporting outcomes and professional development required.

Further measures to ensure wages continue to increase toward parity with similar sectors to ensure the long-term sustainability of the workforce are also required.

(d) Effectiveness of the regulatory framework

A robust regulatory framework is critical for the early education and care industry, as the outcome of poor behaviour or decisions can have lifelong consequences for some of the most vulnerable members of our community.

However, reporting methods, obligations, platforms and timeframes are a complex and confusing framework which is difficult for early education and care staff to navigate. For example, early education and care staff are required to report child safety concerns to a number of different agencies including NSW Police, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), the Office of the Children's Guardian and the NSW Department of Education Regulatory Authority. For an organisation like BVSC, we also have our own internal procedures that also need to be followed.

Establishing a clearer, national framework which clearly defines separate reporting obligations and timeframes, and enable one report to be submitted to all relevant agencies at the same time, would assist staff to comply and further adhere to quality outcomes for children and families.

(e) Effectiveness of the NSW ECEC Regulatory Authority

No comments

(f) Collection, evaluation and publication of reliable data in relation to ECEC services and the level of public knowledge and access to information made available about each ECEC service

No comments

(g) Availability and affordability of quality training institutions for early childhood education qualifications

Gaining qualifications for people in regional areas can be costly. Further subsidising qualifications and training will support pathways for staff to become qualified early educators. This also needs to be supported by more accessible tertiary courses in regional areas with local placement opportunities to help increase numbers of people entering the sector.

Access to meaningful, face to face training in regional areas can also be limited. While online learning is an important mechanism, for some topics, face to face training is required but isn't always available.

“If face-to-face professional development is not accessible how are services to work towards an exceeding standard if we are not upskilling our educators to provide a quality learning environment or children?”
[Nominated Supervisor]

Measures to support staff to upskill qualifications while at work, salary sacrificing options for their own childcare to retain parents and incentivise early education and care as a career pathway are needed to be considered as workforce strategies into the future.

(h) Composition of the ECEC sector and the impact of government funding on the type and quality of services

Government funding is critical to the success of the ECEC sector. For a local council, wage increases and expansion of services are not possible without increases in fees, which would make childcare unaffordable for many of our families, or capital investment from government to enable expansion of services. BVSC’s current centres are ageing and not able to support further expansion due to property sizes and bushfire risk. New buildings, on new sites, are required before our services can be expanded—this will not be possible with significant government investment.

(i) the experiences of children with disability, and their parents and carers, in ECEC services

No comments

(j) any other related matters

No comments

Summary

Access to quality and affordable early education and care is critical for the long term success of future generations. This is dependent on the skill and size workforce, the number of places available (particularly in regional area), and the affordability of those places.