

# Unlocked Potential: The Need for Investment in Regional, Rural and Remote Tasmania



*“There’s so much potential for me to do more — to take on bigger responsibilities, to contribute more meaningfully to the community and economy. But without childcare, I simply can’t. And I’m not alone.*

*There are many skilled people stuck in limbo.”*

Taylor, Winnaleah



Separate from the 'mainland', Tasmania is in a unique position: the whole state is considered regional, rural or remote, as Hobart and Launceston are classified as regional centres (MM2). Consequently, there is a dearth of essential infrastructure across much of the state, including early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Regional, rural and remote communities face the agony of slow waitlists, lengthy drives or the complete absence of early learning provision. This forces parents and carers to make tough decisions for their families: relocate from the towns they love, abandon their careers, or rely on the goodwill of family and friends to care for their children.

**“It’s not appealing for families to move here anymore.” Rachel, Coles Bay**

Combined with a lack of other critical services, such as healthcare and community spaces, Tasmanians, particularly those in rural and remote areas, are experiencing deep and compounding disadvantage. And for those families already battling inequities in their lives, like domestic violence or poverty, the absence of a safe place for their children in early education and care further traps them.

**“For parents with significant trauma, facing family violence or escaping family violence, how do they access and navigate support if they’re not in a safe place and their children aren’t either? Parents need responsive and timely childcare, especially when there are risks involved.” Karen, School Social Worker**

### **The lack of accessible, high-quality early childhood education and care entrenches inequality from the earliest years.**

Tasmanian families are under enormous strain: parents and carers are exhausted and their children are slipping through the cracks. Equally important, educators and teachers are breaking under the strain of being overworked and underpaid.

Community leaders, parents and educators are clear: without appropriate investment in services, infrastructure and workforce, many Tasmanian children will continue to start school behind their peers, and will not catch up. Families and communities will struggle while the cost of living continues to rise. High-quality, place-based early learning solutions can change this trajectory.

**“We don’t have any family support to help with consistent care or school pick ups, so childcare is the only way we can participate in the workforce.” Ella, Hobart**

The Parenthood recently visited communities across Tasmania as part of our regional, rural and remote engagement. We met with service providers, centre directors, educators, parents, carers and community leaders to hear about their experiences navigating the early learning system. While the strengths and challenges of each area differ, there were some key takeaways and some key steps forward to realising Tasmania’s potential.

We collected stories from parents and community leaders which can be found in full throughout this report or from page 13.

# Tassie Takeaways

## **Vast Gaps in Essential Services**

As established, there is a severe absence of early learning provision across much of the state. Some families undertake long drives to the nearest service, for example from Coles Bay to Bicheno (a one hour round trip, if the roads aren’t blocked due to fires or roadworks). Many parents and carers, particularly mothers, work evening and weekend shifts just to make ends meet, leaving them exhausted. Others reduce their work hours or employment completely, thus reducing their super and savings as well.

**“In trying to serve my community I can’t help but feel so let down by the lack of access to essential services that it provides. In a town with as many young families as we have I feel we should be able to access care for our children.” Brenda, Scamander**

Even where early learning services do exist, they often run at minimal capacity due to workforce shortages or unsuitable infrastructure. Services reported that they were unsure of the exact demand from families as many didn’t even attempt to enrol their child on the waitlist, as the chances of getting a spot seemed so unlikely.

Due to chronic underfunding, other critical services and supports are also plagued by long waitlists: housing, mental health supports, pediatric care, GPs, schools. Some families are missing out everywhere they turn.

For many rural and remote families, the closest services are located over an hour away. It can become a day trip to attend appointments and, with children prone to carsickness, delays on the road prolong their journeys.

**“We’re in a black hole for so many services, and there’s a gap for activities for kids.” Anon, East Coast**



### Shortstaffing

Early learning professionals across the state report that it's a significant challenge to recruit and retain qualified staff. Educators on the floor are overworked; at one service two educators had called in sick, so the remaining staff were required to work until 5:30pm instead of 4pm, and skip their lunch breaks. There are limited training opportunities and few resources to equip services to support children with additional needs.

Staff are leaving the sector for higher paying industries, such as cleaning Airbnbs.

**"Short staffing, resulting in ratios being out and staff on leave, are the main things I am told when I ask why there is no care available." Brenda, Scamander**

Housing is another major issue. As is common with tourist areas, there is an undersupply of housing. In some towns, educators have stayed at backpackers' accommodation while seeking permanent housing.

There are also few graduates entering the early learning profession. There are low completion rates at TAFEs, and students struggle to do unpaid placements, especially if they have no care options for their own children.



These compounding pressures make it nearly impossible for services to sustain their workforce, let alone grow it to meet demand.

### The Burden on Parents and Carers

**"I'm meant to start work at 8:30am but school gates don't open until 8:30am. I have to drop the kids off early - which I'm sometimes told off for - my job involves immunising the kids in the community, and on a recent occasion I had a critically unwell child on the doorstep at work when I got there at 8:45am. If I'm not there there is no nurse to provide care."**

**"I feel like I've done a day's work before I even get to work, with the race to drop off kids at school and care in order to get to work on time." Alice, Bicheno**

The struggles to access early learning and care are worsening parents' and carers' mental health. Parents are stretched beyond capacity juggling work, transport, relationships, parenting and additional needs with little to no support - all while the cost of living rises.

Parents and carers are in need of respite.

*We are seeing increasingly more complex families coming through our services. Around 80-90% are single mums and they often want and need a break. They may not have strong family/community support and are doing the parenting 24/7. Add in the fact that some single mums are caring for their children with high needs and it's very challenging.*

*Around 15% of kids in classrooms are presenting with behavioural issues accompanied by a diagnosis or a background of trauma. It is imperative that early educators are provided with the necessary training for the kids who find it hard to fit into traditional educational settings.*

*We hear so often that schools have told families when children are not fitting in that they "do not have the capacity to meet their needs." Often the answer is please come and pick up your child and take them home!*

*Educators have a very tough job. The sector has changed so much in the last 10-20 years as traditional expectations around learning outcomes are still required with the wellbeing needs of the child and family taking a 'back seat'. Wellbeing is foundational. These complexities mean that educators often can't keep up.*

*The government throws out money for extra services but accessing these is difficult particularly in regional centres with long waiting lists. Governments need to customise the needs of the community and resource them accordingly to avoid waste - they don't often see what's happening on the ground.*

*Accessing referrals to any service is hard. Programs and support also change from town to town, region to region, meaning there's a lack of consistency and some families go without any support.*

**Free is key - there are huge out of pocket costs for services. It's about supply and demand - and cost.**

*When behavioural issues and trauma from the early years have not been properly addressed, it can be very difficult to see a change in a child's trajectory and it's often too late by the teen years.*

*A child is not always visible in the community - if they don't have family or strong community connections, there is often no one else in their life than their primary carer/parent. They can struggle not knowing how to deal with issues they are facing emotionally as they might not have other adults who can model to them how to work these through. And if their parent is experiencing any mental health issues, substance abuse, alcohol issues, insecure housing, the child only has a connection with a parent under pressure.*

*As much as the focus should be on kids, if parents don't get the right support then they often don't have the capacity to support their kids when they are in need. If the parents are thriving, the kids generally do well.*

**Arty, Integrated Family Support Worker, Glenhaven Family Care**



### The Impacts on Children

The rise in incidences of children with additional needs must be matched with increased funding and resources. The services we spoke with said that, at times, there can be up to one in three children with additional needs. Early intervention is a necessity to ensure these children are supported and can thrive in their early learning environments, and beyond. Staff need trauma-informed training and support.

**“Bringing supports into the early years changes the trajectory of a young person’s life and will rule out a lot of later problems.”**  
Bec, Community Engagement Worker

### Challenging Behaviours and Technology

A number of services shared their concerns around the growing usage of technology with children. Some children are being raised with technology being a constant presence, for example, a tablet at the dinner table or in car trips. It’s a necessity for many parents while struggling with burnout and the work-family-life juggle, yet this results in some children being exposed to inappropriate content at a young age, and a need for everything to be instantaneous. This trend also speaks to the broader pressures families face in balancing work, care and connection in the early years.

### Transport

**“Many families are moving into the smaller towns because of the rising cost of living, but they don’t have access to public transport, or they can’t afford to drive in.”** Bec, Community Engagement Worker

The placement of early learning services needs to take into consideration the availability of transport for families. Some parents and carers don’t drive, or are unable to afford the cost of petrol, and there are very limited public transport options. This prohibits some families from reaching basic services such as supermarkets, healthcare and early learning.

### High Costs

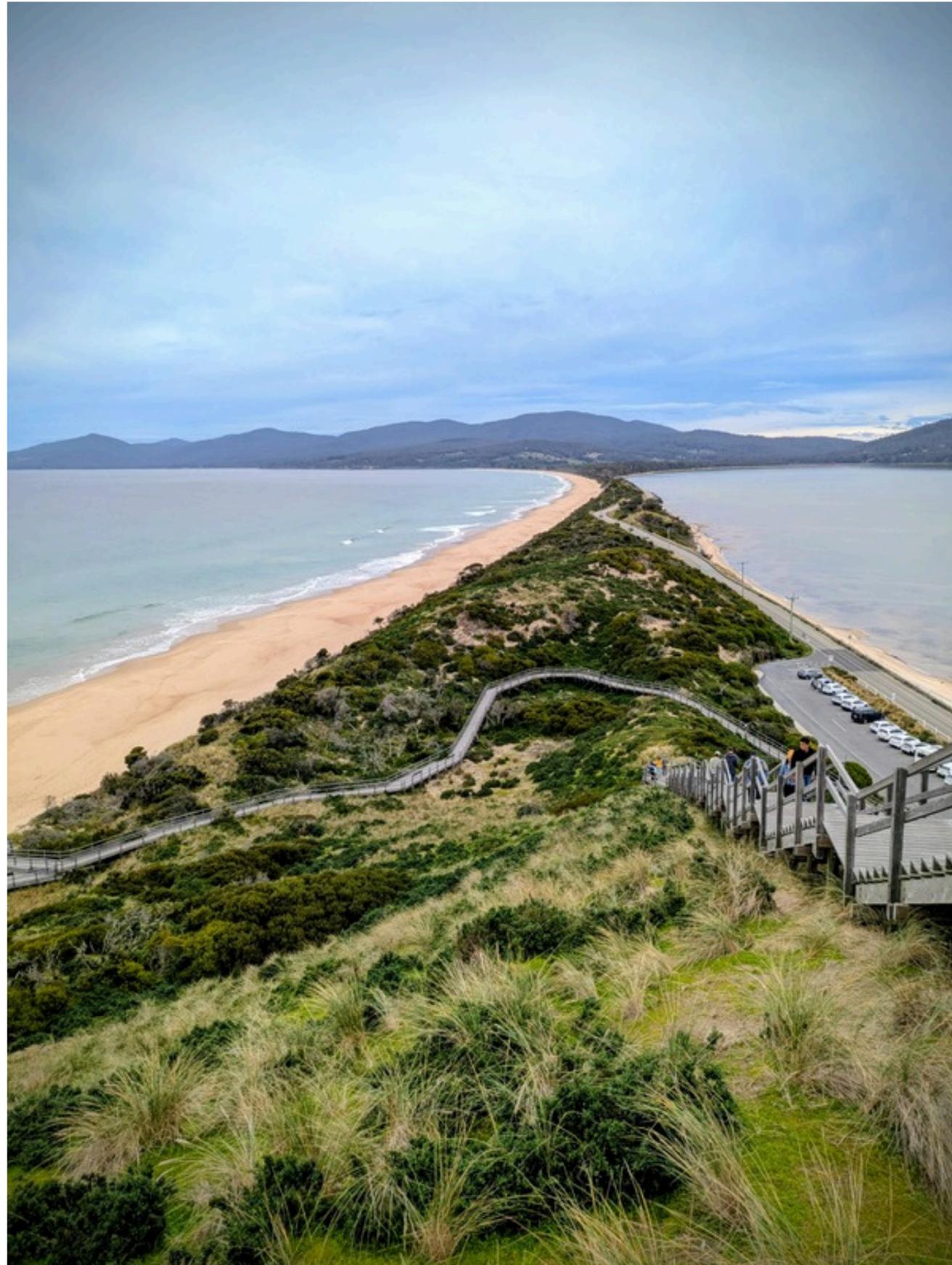
Early learning fees are still a barrier for many families. The Working Together program - which provides free care to certain families - has been very successful in the services we visited, however, expanding the program and reducing the set of criteria would enable more families to access early learning and care. For many families, the complexity and cost of care mean the choice to work is not really a choice at all.

**“It’s confusing to work out how much childcare costs and how to enrol my child when I’m trying to get work and I haven’t slept. My husband works full time, and I’m not working and have minimal Centrelink, so how can we pay for childcare?”** Anon, St Helens

**“I have no intention to send her to childcare now, but if I wanted to work, my wages would pay for her childcare.”** Anon, St Helens

**“How can I figure out how much care will be when it’s based on EOFY income, which is obviously vastly different from the previous year, as a first-time mum anyway? So you just get a surprise at the end of the year to figure out how much it costs? Which is then very confusing to figure out if you should work and enrol in care or if you’re financially better off staying at home.”** Sally, St Helens





### The Potential in Bruny Island

Bruny Island, off the coast of southern Tasmania, covers 362 square kilometres with a permanent population of around 1000 people. It's a key tourist destination; over 150,000 cars visit annually.

For years there was no early learning service available on the island. Following sustained advocacy from the community for childcare, the State Government announced that Bruny Island would be a test pilot for their three-year-old kinder program, however, progress has stalled.

An alternative solution was offered through adjunct care, where children are cared for at the school while parents remain onsite. It operates out of the arts space, which is not a long-term option as the school is expanding and will need to eventually reclaim the room.

The service has proven useful for many of the local families, who are now able to get more work done in a school workroom. Three parents have found employment through doing their training at adjunct care, and are now all completing their Certificate III.

However, there are clear limitations. The "workroom" provided for the parents is far from ideal, and is not feasible for those working in industries such as farming or cleaning. It also does not allow for the parents' (often confidential) meetings to take place onsite, online or in person.

The community wants federal funding for a new early learning facility to be built on the school site. Ongoing operational subsidies are vital - one year there might be a single baby born on the island, and the next there could be 14. Under the current early learning system, that level of fluctuation makes viability almost impossible. A hub would be ideal, with room for visiting allied health and early intervention services, and even consolidation of the small local library on the same premises.

Families on Bruny Island love their community, but many are facing burnout. Many don't have family anywhere in Tasmania that they can call on for support. Without more early learning options, they have to make sacrifices to support each other and each other's children.

Children spend most of their time with their parents, but they also need time with other adults and with their peers. The only available kids' activity on the island is a weekly all-ages sports activity. The children need their independence, as do the parents.

*I work for myself as a Digital Project Manager. I am in high demand.*

*It's only now that I can work five days a week. My children and I were in a DV situation where we couldn't leave as I couldn't support myself independently without any childcare.*

*I don't have any family support here.*

*I had to get overseas au pairs to get back to work. I couldn't make any decisions for myself until we got adjunct care here. That is how crucial this care has been.*

*It is challenging to work onsite at the school. You're trying to do work with giant companies to get them to trust you, but you're in one small space, at one table, doing work together with other people.*

**Jessi, Bruny Island**

*I completed my Master of Teaching and the following year, I was employed at the Bruny Island District School. Later that year, I found out I was pregnant, however as I was not on a permanent contract, I was not entitled to maternity leave and I lost my position.*

*My partner manages an agricultural property on North Bruny and I was working two days a week on the farm, however I am now unable to do the practical component of this role with a child and no access to childcare. We have trialled adjunct care while I study a Diploma of Agriculture. Despite the easygoing nature of my child, he does not seem to enjoy adjunct care, whether the reason is because he knows I am on site, or the confined space they are limited to (as they're not allowed to go outside unless toileting), I am unsure. Unfortunately this now means that I am not able to fulfil my two days on the farm in a practical, on-ground capacity.*

*Once a week, my son and I travel across on the ferry and he does a half day at the West Winds Child Care Centre at Woodbridge while I study in their online access centre and/or attend appointments. My son thoroughly enjoys his time there which has a format that must suit him.*



*Ideally, we'd have something similar on Bruny. I'd love to see childcare here or at the very least, some greater flexibility with the adjunct care.*

*Given the above and with our second child due in the coming months, I am unable to teach at the moment, however I would like to work at the school again and work in an on-ground capacity on the farm if we are able to access childcare.*

#### **Ashley, Bruny Island**

*We have had some progress in relation to 'childcare' on Bruny Island. The government promised a 3 year old kinder program prior to the last State election which we have not had any movement on.*

*With some media and some support from a couple of State representatives, the Department of Education then offered 'adjunct care' as a temporary offering at our school.*

*The adjunct care program is for 2-4 year olds. Parents can drop the children into a classroom with a teacher and two carers between 11 - 2:30pm Wednesday and Friday and from 9am - 2:30pm Thursdays.*

*The parents must remain on the school grounds for that time, but do not need to be in the room - so can volunteer or undertake study etc in an office area.*

*While it is far less than a perfect solution for childcare, 6 - 12 children regularly participate in the program.*

*This has meant that I have regained some sanity with my twins having a place to safely play, with caring adults outside of our family. They LOVE going to school, and we can see how a proper 3 yr old kinder program would benefit them so much. Although without significant investment, that is unlikely to happen as we need a purpose-built centre, and while we have land, the Department seem slow and unresponsive in making it happen even with the federal funding available.*

#### **Teisha, Bruny Island**

# Realising Tasmania's Potential

The evidence is clear: access to high-quality ECEC is among the most effective ways to break cycles of disadvantage. It enables parents and carers to participate in paid work - often in essential community roles - and provides much-needed respite that supports family wellbeing. For children, high-quality ECEC offers a safe, nurturing environment that fosters development, prepares them for school and strengthens ongoing school engagement.

**Community hubs with wraparound services** are an excellent model for regional, rural and remote communities as they include multiple services families can access. The Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs) which already exist in Tasmania are exemplary in this regard. These centres are a lifeline for families and are highly valued by communities, but many parents expressed their desire for more across the region. Particularly for remote families, this can facilitate access by ensuring they have a centre closer to home.

The adjunct care offered by the CFLCs supports parents' attendance at playgroups, parenting classes and medical appointments as there is care onsite for their children. By expanding to long daycare and preschool, CFLCs could meet the needs of many communities.

**"I've been doing monthly women's health clinics with the Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs). There are lots of women needing to be seen but it's hard for them to come to the regular clinic with their kids, so at the CFLC there's adjunct care available." Kaylee, East Coast**

In a small community, people are reluctant to accept help or "charity". Normalising supports available within a hub can reduce this stigma, for example, breakfast clubs, pantries and community gardens that are onsite and regularly used by staff and families alike. Building relationships amongst the families and staff is crucial - to create a sense of community and belonging, and to normalise these supports.

**Early learning provision through a CFLC could be adapted for regional, rural and remote contexts on the mainland on the pathway to universal early education.**

In some areas, other models of care are needed. Family daycare would be a welcome addition to many communities. A number of East Coast parents commented that they would prefer family daycare as they perceive it as easier for their children and as a built-in community. They would like to see some of the old schools or halls in the region repurposed for early learning.

The dual-educator model, as proposed by the Productivity Commission and supported by not-for-profit providers such as Thrive Group, as well as in-venue care can overcome existing barriers to family daycare such as high set up costs and administrative burdens. These models are particularly well suited to Tasmania's smaller or fluctuating populations. They allow educators to share resources, provide mutual support and maintain viability where a single operator might struggle, while compliance is upheld by an approved provider. Families benefit from continuity of care, out of hours care and smaller, community-based environments. Governments should back these models with dedicated funding streams and a consistent, nationally recognised framework.

Communities stressed the importance of genuine co-design and buy-in from local groups. There have been varying experiences following consultation processes with governments, many have been successful while others have fallen through. **Building a service alongside communities is the key to unlocking their potential.**

The backbone of a universal early education system is a thriving workforce. The recruitment and retention struggles currently afflicting the Tasmanian sector make expanding service provision almost impossible. These struggles reflect low pay, excessive workloads and the undervaluing of the early education profession. In addition to improving the pay and conditions of early childhood staff, it is imperative to support school graduates to enter the sector. Tailoring courses to meet the needs of students proves more successful: providing localised places, mentorship and relationship building, and supporting students through their coursework and placements.

#### Build it and they will come

**"I feel we need something that begins small and is funded in a way that allows for the natural growth of the community."** Rachel, Coles Bay

Early learning provision will likely see more families flock to these areas and thus future proofing services will allow for the increased demand as communities grow. Services such as CFLCs may not all be ready for daycare now, but building in capacity will support future demand. When high-quality services are available, demand follows.

#### People don't know what they don't know

Without adequate service provision, regional, rural and remote communities adapt and 'make do', but to the detriment of so many community members who suffer and burn out picking up the slack. It is the role of governments to redress inequity and create environments in which families and communities are supported and can flourish.

**"What we need is really simple: a reliable, nearby childcare centre that understands the needs of rural families. One that opens consistently, respects children's wellbeing, and supports parents trying to keep their careers. It would be well supported."** Taylor, Winnaleah



# Recommendations

**The Parenthood advocates for a National Early Childhood Commission.** This would be an independent body that can coordinate oversight, enforce standards and make sure every child, no matter where they live or who they are, has access to high-quality, safe care. It would address accessibility by identifying all unserved and underserved areas, and work with all levels of government to deliver appropriate, tailored early learning services. The Commission would set the path for future government coordination and stewardship of a universal system.

The Building Early Education Fund is a significant investment for regional communities and is an excellent step towards universal early education. **The Parenthood strongly supports the creation of an advisory body** of stakeholders and experts to work alongside the Federal Government and the Department of Education to deliver early learning provision to the communities who need it most - and who are most ready. The group could connect the executors of the fund with communities and guide the consultation and co-design process. In the pursuit of universal early education, it would be well positioned to provide further guidance on early learning delivery across regional, rural and remote areas - so that no child misses out.

**Right now, many of Tasmania's regional, rural and remote communities face compounded disadvantage. With the right investment in high-quality, community-led early learning models, this can be transformed and the potential of Tasmania's families can be unlocked.**



# Case Studies

## Taylor, Winnaleah

I'm a mum of two girls, aged two and four, and I'm currently pregnant with our third child.

We live on my husband's fourth-generation dairy and cropping farm — a place with deep roots and hard work at its core.

My husband is a farmer, working seven days a week. Working on the land is very demanding. I'm proud to call this our home, but the reality of raising a young family here, with so few early childhood care options, is incredibly challenging for working parents.

Before I even had my first child, I put our name down on the waitlist for the nearest childcare centre — in Scottsdale.

That was over four years ago. Only three weeks ago did we finally secure a spot. It's a 90-minute round trip just to drop them off and not including the same time to pick them up. And that's considered a win.

Before Scottsdale, we had one day of care available in Bridport. This facility was excellent but for us that meant four hours of driving just to drop off and pick up.

My 75-year-old father-in-law kindly made it his "town day" — picking up the girls and doing the groceries so I only had to travel one way and could work for longer.

We were desperate, so we tried a local family daycare when one opened recently. But sadly it didn't suit our family.

The kids were rarely allowed inside, were made to sleep outside during a Tasmanian winter and we'd often get messages on the morning of care saying they were closed for the day among other issues. It put a deep strain on my work capability and ultimately we needed to leave for something more reliable.

Before having children I was the Editor of the local paper for ten years but most recently took on two days a week with Blue Derby Mountain Trails which was closer to home and less of a daily demand while we raise little people.

There's so much potential for me to do more — to take on bigger responsibilities, to contribute more meaningfully to the community and economy. But without childcare, I simply can't. And I'm not alone. There are many skilled people stuck in limbo.

I know many women who have not been able to return to work at all due to childcare limitations or who are driving hours a day just to have some income for their family.

People don't always understand what life on a farm looks like. We produce the food and milk that ends up on tables across the state and country. People eat what we grow — but there's a disconnect. We're raising children and feeding communities, but we don't have the basic support systems we need.

This region has changed so much since I moved here. I came just before the Blue Derby Mountain Bike Trails were built.

Now there are 76 Airbnbs, bustling bars, clubs, and a new wellness retreat set to open. More than 81,000 people visit Derby alone and it contributes over 50 million directly into our economy.

The District School is the largest it's been in years. People are coming — tourism is thriving — but the infrastructure to support families hasn't caught up.

We tried hiring a nanny for one day a week, but it was such a huge expense and I couldn't work from home, because the kids were still in the house. I'd end up working from cafes, juggling interruptions with work deliverables.

We looked into getting an au pair, like some families do, but the idea of having someone live with us 24/7 just wasn't right for us when the need for care sits only within the hours of work undertaken.

And now, with a third baby on the way, we have no plan. It will most likely be a case of 'take your baby to work' like I did with my other children. Thankfully my employers are understanding, as many are, but it doesn't come without its challenges and ability to give your 100 percent focus.



What we need is really simple: a reliable, nearby childcare centre that understands the needs of rural families. One that opens consistently, respects children's wellbeing, and supports parents trying to keep their careers. It would be well supported.

**Because right now, the system isn't just stretched — it's leaving highly skilled people behind which will make it harder for them to get back into the workforce when their children are grown up.**



### Ella, Hobart

I am mum to three children under the age of 6 in Hobart. My daughter is 5 and attends after school care and vacation care. My twin boys are 2 and attend long daycare. I didn't have trouble getting a spot for any of them, as I'd been told to get them on a waitlist as early as possible.

However, as life and work patterns have shifted over time, it's been very difficult to pick up extra days or change the booked days of care. Both me and my husband work and I've had to negotiate a reduced fraction at a new job due to not being able to get enough childcare for my twins. Luckily my workplace was understanding, but I was really concerned it would mean they no longer wanted to offer me the position.

It also puts a strain on our finances - as a family of five, the cost of living pressures are high. We don't have any family support to help with consistent care or school pick ups, so childcare is the only way we can participate in the workforce.

### Anon, East Coast

I work as a Child Health Nurse and service the East Coast. There are 60 births a year across the East Coast. It comes in flurries across communities.

It's really hard to get into childcare. Ideally people would have paid parental leave, then go back to work at 6 months if they got care. Parents need respite, they really do. Even just a couple of hours. Instead, now, they increase the screentime for children. The impact is that families are facing burnout. There is more stress and more difficulties at home.

Even at the 6-week mum and bub check, there isn't time to talk about the mum anymore. It's just vaccine and go. I heard one mum say, "With every child you lose a tooth", because you give all of yourself to growing and raising a baby, and you can't meet your own basic needs.

### Karen, School Social Worker

There are limited childcare options on the East Coast. We need more flexible childcare options available to support child wellbeing and safety, and for parents impacted by family violence and safety concerns, safe havens to access support. For parents with significant trauma, facing family violence or escaping family violence, how do they access and navigate support if they're not in a safe place and their children aren't either? Parents need responsive and timely childcare, especially when there are risks involved.

The childcare centre here is at capacity, and it's a constant juggling act for them. The demands of childcare far exceed what they can offer. It's the biggest concern I see in my work.

It's one thing having access, but who supports the parents to make the connection with a service? Some parents have anxiety leaving their kids with someone else - it can be a trauma response. Some families come to the CFLC and we can provide wraparound support.

There's such a need for expanded services on the East Coast. Some families can't meet their basic needs due to an inability to access childcare. I know some parents who visit the doctor to support their children's needs; but never get any time to see the doctor for their own physical and emotional needs as they are juggling several young children which places increased stress on seeking support. Childcare also supports parents' mental health, so they have the capacity to attend appointments and access the necessary support.

### Sally, St Helens

We have a restaurant, but I can't work there as there's no after hours care options here. If I could arrange care, I'd clean during the day and admin for the business, in terms of what I could do.

How can I figure out how much care will be when it's based on EOFY income, which is obviously vastly different from the previous year, as a first-time mum anyway? So you just get a surprise at the end of the year to figure out how much it costs? Which is then very confusing to figure out if you should work and enrol in care or if you're financially better off staying at home.

The cost of daycare is not just financial, it's emotional and puts your whole family at more risk of sickness as everyone knows... Which, when you run a small business that is service based, I'm not sure if the unknown cost is worth it.

### Kaylee, East Coast

I'm a local GP and I have three kids who are 12, 9 and 3. We lived in remote Arnhem Land for three years, before moving back to Tasmania.

I've been doing monthly women's health clinics with the Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs). There are lots of women needing to be seen but it's hard for them to come to the regular clinic with their kids, so at the CFLC there's adjunct care available.

We started childcare at St Marys when the boys were younger. They started with one day and then two.

My youngest is now at the St Helens daycare. The challenge there is getting kids in. A few months before we arrived I said we were coming back and luckily the centre manager advised that I do all the paperwork and I got two days.

### Kaylee, East Coast cont'd

I have asked if I can do Wednesday or a longer day on Thursday, as I have to pick up my daughter at 3pm as there aren't enough staff. I have lots of friends in a similar situation. You have to get in early, take what you get, and then you're stuck with it.

I arrive just before 8am to drop my daughter off. Drop offs were hard at the start so I had to tell the centre that I needed someone to take her and have a cuddle with her. She now has a strong bond with an educator - it's not a good day if she's not there!

They provide toast and morning tea at childcare but not lunch and so forth. When you're dealing with kids with other issues, offering more food might be good.

There's a definite need for more childcare. Our Practice Manager has a two-year-old and can't get any care. We had a new doctor start but they couldn't get any care so his wife isn't working. It's really hard for them.



Some nurses haven't been able to work as they haven't had care. We struggle so much to get professionals, and they would come and put down roots but they can't work here.

Some people travel far to take their kids to care.

Some families are in need of support. A few days of childcare would help but they also need support for parenting strategies.

I've had some patients with children with behavioural issues or sensory issues and they've had to pull their child from childcare as they're not supported. But what do we do for a parent when they're at home 24/7 with this child? Or they remain in daycare and they effectively take a whole carer off the floor?

### Alice, Bicheno

I'm an RN and Practice Nurse. My workplace is very understanding as my manager has kids too.

I'm meant to start work at 8:30am but school gates don't open until 8:30am. I have to drop the kids off early - which I'm sometimes told off for - my job involves immunising the kids in the community, and on a recent occasion I had a critically unwell child on the doorstep at work when I got there at 8:45am. If I'm not there there is no nurse to provide care.

I feel like I've done a day's work before I even get to work, with the race to drop off kids at school and care in order to get to work on time.

My older child comes from school in the afternoon and sits at the GP practice, with lots of energy!! I finish work at 5:30pm and when I pick my other kids up from daycare the cleaner is already on the job and it's dark.

When I work at St Mary's at 7am, I have to drop the kids to their grandma, who's had to change her work days in order to take care of them. She also works in healthcare. When my childcare has been cancelled or not approved, I've spent a lot of time phoning around all day to find someone to take care of the kids on these shift work days.

I have considered moving my childcare option to St Marys as there is a childcare on the hospital site, but currently only 10 places, so I wouldn't get a spot.

My husband works for himself, from 6am to 6pm. He has to work that much with the cost of living at present and my inability to get care for my youngest child.

Childcare hours need to be adjusted to start at 7 or 7:30am and finish at 6pm, this would accommodate more people in the workforce.

There is a huge need for aged care supports here in the community, along with the need for skilled childcare workers. We could train the younger generation of our community, equipping them with skills that not only provide a pathway to meaningful careers but also strengthen and contribute to the growth of our region.

### Rachel, Coles Bay

There has been a lot of work put in to try and get a childcare option in Coles Bay (30 minutes drive south of Bicheno). We were included - then dropped - from the Early Learning for 3 year olds program by the Department of Education. Two different childcare providers had looked into the economic viability of starting something here. For numerous reasons they all find a stop point.

We need a commitment from someone or a provider who is prepared to start with small numbers and watch it grow. If they wait for volume they will always be disappointed.

When I had 3 children 4 years and younger, there would have been at least 20-30 0-4 year olds living here at that time. All of the mothers were professionals and we all juggled motherhood with work and childcare, most utilising Little Penguins in Bicheno or others opting for a work from home or shift work arrangement. At that time, there were more than enough children in the right age bracket to be appealing to the childcare centre providers who needed to make money before committing to a service in our town.

Over the past 10 years I have seen the number of children in that age bracket dwindle and I believe not having access to adequate childcare locally has contributed to that. It's not appealing for families to move here anymore, instead choosing Bicheno because they have a childcare centre.

I feel we need something that begins small and is funded in a way that allows for the natural growth of the community. I know this would have such a flow-on effect for our community and businesses to retain staff and skills because their employees have an in-town option. If they wait for the numbers of 20 plus again they may never come without childcare. The return drive for a parent to take their child to Little Penguins each day is approximately 2.5 hours on a good run but can blow out. This is a lot, especially if you are then going and working your 8 hour shift between drop off and pick up.

We need a service which is subsidised or funded regardless of numbers. I imagine the uptake may be slow because the people already here may have rearranged their working lives around what is and isn't available to us.

And then there is after school care. This doesn't exist in Bicheno and I don't think it does at Swansea either. We have no options.

### Brenda, Scamander

I am a mother of two, a boy aged 4.5 years and a girl aged 14 months. For at least the past four years I have attempted to secure permanent childcare through our local provider. Just prior to my son being born I relocated from Launceston to Scamander. At the time there was a local family daycare operating at Stieglitz (20 minutes drive away), which I had planned to use due to more flexible hours. Unfortunately they closed shortly before my return to work.

On returning to the workforce I relied on my mother in law to mind my son and could only resume less than my regular hours. Working only 6 shifts a fortnight, I explored all options with my son commencing casual days at the local daycare as there was no availability for permanent places.

When casual care was not available (which was often), my mother in law or, at times when desperate, great grandparents would care for my son. It was an immense pressure for my mother in law, who at the time was also caring for my terminally ill father in law.

We requested very early on a permanent place for my son at the local daycare, but were told it wasn't looking promising - with many families on the waitlist. Between 2024-2025 there was a change in management. Several staff members left, and I heard various accounts that staff and children were unhappy.

Don't even get me started on the countless admin tasks that resulted from the change in management... re-enrolment paperwork, the new app, new communication system, new fees if you fail to sign in or out on the app.

The amount of illness in the centre is a constant battle. I understand this is the nature of early childhood environments but outbreaks of gastroenteritis, hand foot and mouth and influenza seem to be frequent and I do question if the space could be better equipped to prevent such outbreaks from occurring.

In early 2024 I was expecting our second child and, due to the amount of illness, staffing concerns and lack of available care, my son again was cared for by his nan. I took my maternity leave and while on leave explored options for both my children. I attempted to get just even one of the children in for permanent days at the daycare. Nothing was available.

For so long we had no daycare availability that my childcare subsidy paperwork lapsed due to no attendance - I had to resubmit the entire application (which is not ideal as a working mum with limited time). I spent the first month back at work relying on my mother in law again who had recently lost my father in law. My mother in law has bipolar disorder. She does her utmost to support our family but she does face challenges with her mood and struggles to care for herself at times. I worry about the effects of this instability on my children, with behavioural concerns with our four year old son - I am still unsure how much of these behavioural concerns stem from the care environment he has endured. Frequently I have no option but to use carers leave when she is unable to cope with my two children.

We have managed to get a few casual daycare bookings for my son lately, and he has settled in very well. Recently we have been in a situation where my mother in law has been unable to help with any care whatsoever due to deterioration in her mental health. I again approached the daycare for some consistent days for my two children. I have been regularly communicating in regards to progress regarding permanent bookings.

A few months ago I was told there may be three permanent days a week for my son but nothing for my daughter. I am still yet to be allocated any permanent or regular days. Currently we live on a week to week basis for our daycare bookings. I know it's not the fault of the local service but a bigger problem. Short staffing, resulting in ratios being out and staff on leave, are the main things I am told when I ask why there is no care available.

Unfortunately, if I don't have care I am unable to work due to no alternative options in a rural small town.

A point of concern that has come to my attention is the "triage" process that daycare applications seem to be subject to. Having access to a supportive early learning environment should not be an opportunity afforded only to those that have made it through the waitlist. I have been told I am "priority" as a working parent, but the opportunity to have access to daycare should be equal. I feel for those mothers that are currently not working parents. One of the very reasons they aren't working could be that they don't have access to care.

Of late I have felt so penalised as a parent. I am striving to remain an active member of the workforce, caring for my community as well as my family. But most days I can't help but feel it would be easier to be unemployed.

My job entails shift work and my husband regularly works away from home. I work as a registered nurse at our local hospital. My morning shifts commence at 0700 hours. Finding appropriate care for my children is a constant struggle. There have been days where I have no choice but to be 40 minutes late to work. The daycare does have an early day they offer at 0630 hours but due to lack of staffing they are hardly ever able to offer this time! My workplace is not conducive to bringing my children with me. In trying to serve my community I can't help but feel so let down by the lack of access to essential services that it provides. In a town with as many young families as we have I feel we should be able to access care for our children. One daycare centre for St Helens that is understaffed, underfunded and under immense pressure is not doing our children and their families any benefit.

I feel that so many of us as working mothers want to solve this problem but we don't have the time or resources to do so. We already have limited time just to be present parents with our babies. Many other countries are advanced in their understanding of early childhood development and life. Our maternity leave for one is significantly lacking compared to areas in Europe.

Our time also shouldn't be occupied solving something that we don't have the resources to fix. At a government level it should be common sense to support rather than stress those trying to engage with the workforce while doing their best to support the next generation. Definite change is needed if our community and children are to thrive and succeed. Lack of access to daycare not only causes undue pressure on parents who are trying our best to negotiate the tangled spiderweb of work/family commitments, it also largely impacts on our children with lack of continuity affecting the bonds they form with caregivers. Imagine having to leave your child screaming and distressed at 0730 as you are already late to work by half an hour and not having even ten minutes up your sleeve to settle them for the day.

Perhaps Minister you might be free to mind my children next Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, as currently there is not any care available. Of the 8 casual days I have requested for my next roster currently there is only space for 3 of those days. I am certain that at this level of government you are in a position to facilitate much needed change, it's whether or not you give it the attention it so very much requires.

**Yours sincerely, a Tasmanian nurse/mother trying to make things work.**

## About The Parenthood

We are a community working together to make Australia the best place in the world to be a parent. Because when parents are supported, children can thrive & our whole community is stronger.

We launched in 2013 with the ambition of creating a movement of Australian parents working together to create a better world for our children. With the support of long-term partners & collaborators we've built a community of over 80,000 mums, dads & carers. We come from every state and territory across Australia, we are not-for-profit and independent.

## Acknowledgements

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## Acknowledgement of Country

The Parenthood acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to both their land and seas. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and recognise that universal access to early childhood education and care must include First Nations-led solutions for First Nations families. The majority of the research for this report was conducted in Lutruwita (Tasmania) and we acknowledge the Palawa/Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the original owners of Lutruwita. This report was predominantly written on the land of the Wurundjeri people, in Naarm/Melbourne.



