



2026 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Portfolio Report

Anne Charter -QLD

It has been a busy and rewarding year as the ICPA Federal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Portfolio Lead, with many opportunities to advocate for improved access to quality early childhood education and care for rural, remote and geographically isolated (GI) families.

Throughout the year, I participated in weekly Microsoft Teams meetings facilitated by the Mindereroo Foundation's Thrive by Five initiative. These meetings have become an invaluable source of information on emerging ECEC policy, advocacy priorities and sector developments. Attendance regularly exceeds 50 participants and includes representatives from a broad range of organisations across the early childhood sector, including The Parenthood, The Front Project, SNAICC (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care), Playgroup Australia, Early Childhood Australia, community and not-for-profit providers, peak bodies, researchers, advocacy groups and government representatives. Other regular participants include grassroots advocates such as Man With A Pram, whose contributions help maintain a strong focus on families and children.

While the discussions are not specifically focused on rural, remote and geographically isolated communities, there is a strong understanding of the unique challenges faced by our families. Many of these organisations are undertaking significant advocacy and policy work that will ultimately benefit rural and remote Australia. The network also provides valuable opportunities for ICPA to contribute rural perspectives, share case studies and ensure that the voices of geographically isolated families are heard in national discussions.

During the year, I maintained regular communication with the Regional Education Commission providing input and feedback on a range of ECEC issues affecting rural and remote communities. I also had opportunities to contribute to Deloitte's research into the real cost of delivering ECEC services, ensuring the additional costs associated with rural and remote service provision were highlighted.

A significant body of work this year involved contributing to the review of the National Quality Framework (NQF). This process provided an important opportunity to advocate for greater flexibility and recognition of the unique operating environments faced by rural, remote and geographically isolated services. Through this work, it became increasingly evident that meaningful change may often be achieved through amendments to regulations that sit beneath legislation. Understanding these pathways has reinforced the importance of ensuring legislation and regulations are "rural proofed" before implementation, rather than attempting to retrofit solutions after policies have been enacted. ICPA will continue to advocate for policy and regulatory settings that recognise the realities of service delivery in low-population and geographically isolated communities.

The Building Early Education Fund (BEEF) has also been a positive development for many rural communities, with funding supporting the establishment, expansion and improvement of early childhood education and care facilities in areas where access has historically been limited. Improved infrastructure is undoubtedly an important part of the solution, and many communities will benefit from modern, fit-for-purpose facilities. However, ongoing discussions across the sector have reinforced that infrastructure alone will not address all access challenges. In many rural, remote and



geographically isolated communities, the greater need is often for support to sustain existing services, attract and retain educators, reduce administrative burdens and improve operational viability. Recent research and sector feedback continue to highlight that workforce capacity, service sustainability and funding flexibility are often more significant barriers than buildings themselves. As ICPA continues its advocacy, it will be important to ensure that investment is balanced between infrastructure development and the ongoing support required to maintain quality services in the communities that need them most.

One of the highlights of the year was participating in the Federal Council Delegation to Canberra. Meetings were held at Parliament House and with officials from the Department of Education, providing valuable opportunities to discuss ICPA priorities directly with decision-makers. These discussions reinforced the importance of ongoing advocacy and relationship-building to ensure rural, remote and geographically isolated families are considered in policy development and implementation.

I was also fortunate to attend the Western Australia State Conference in my capacity as a Federal Councillor. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to meet members from across Western Australia, hear firsthand about their experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing families in some of Australia's most remote regions. These conversations continue to strengthen and inform our advocacy efforts at the federal level.

Advocacy through the Federal Budget Estimates process has been another important focus this year. I prepared two Budget Estimates briefing papers, the most recent for Senator Matt O'Sullivan. The briefing paper highlighted a number of ongoing challenges facing rural and remote ECEC services and families, including the need for dedicated housing streams for ECEC educators, recognition of multi-age and flexible service delivery models in low-population communities, transport barriers resulting from long travel distances, the significant administrative burden placed on small rural centres, and the higher operating costs associated with delivering services in regional and remote areas.

Additional concerns raised included persistent workforce shortages despite existing incentive programs, challenges surrounding In Home Care (IHC) and the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), and the ongoing inequity whereby Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) support is not available for eligible early childhood education programs. It was encouraging to hear many of these issues raised during the Budget Estimates hearings, demonstrating the value of ICPA's evidence-based advocacy and the importance of continuing to highlight the unique needs of rural, remote and geographically isolated families.

As new organisations and advocacy groups continue to emerge within the ECEC landscape, there are increasing opportunities to champion rural case studies and demonstrate the challenges faced by geographically isolated families. However, ICPA remains the peak body representing the interests of rural, remote and geographically isolated families across all areas of education. Our strength lies in our ability to provide authentic lived experience, practical solutions and a united voice. It is essential that we remain focused, collaborative and committed to ensuring rural, remote and geographically isolated students and families have equitable access to quality educational opportunities from the early years and beyond.



I would also like to acknowledge and thank those who have supported the ECEC portfolio throughout the year. In particular, thank you to Louise Martin for her ongoing advocacy and for discussing with the Department of Education the challenges associated with In Home Care (IHC), including circumstances where providers are unable to accommodate the needs of rural and remote families due to the financial realities and profit margins associated with operating their businesses.

Thank you also to Assistant Secretary Shennah Joiner for attending the Early Childhood Australia Roundtable in Canberra and for engaging with the issues affecting rural, remote and geographically isolated families. Also to C7 Communication and Marketing for identifying media opportunities that help raise awareness of the challenges facing rural, remote and geographically isolated families and support ICPA's advocacy efforts at a national level.

I would like to thank Federal Council, State Councils and members for their ongoing support, contributions and commitment to improving educational outcomes for rural, remote and geographically isolated children and families across Australia.

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank all members, families, educators and service providers who have taken the time to contact me throughout the year and share their experiences. These conversations are invaluable in helping inform ICPA's advocacy and ensuring that the challenges faced by rural, remote and geographically isolated families are accurately represented. Facts, figures and real-life examples provide the evidence needed to support our case for change, particularly when advocating for amendments to regulations that sit beneath legislation. The stronger our evidence base, the stronger our advocacy.

While it is important that we continue to highlight barriers and challenges, I would also welcome hearing more of the positive stories from across rural Australia. There are countless examples of innovation, collaboration and determination within our communities—families, educators and service providers finding practical solutions and simply getting on with the job of educating children despite the obstacles they face. These stories not only deserve recognition but also demonstrate the resilience, ingenuity and strength that exist within rural, remote and geographically isolated Australia. I encourage members to continue sharing both their challenges and successes as we work together to achieve meaningful change.