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Socio-economic and
geographic inequality:
Early Childhood Education
and Care in Bellarine

2023

Prepared for Alison Marchant,
Member for Bellarine

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Acronyms

ECEC: Early Childhood Education and Care

IRSAD: Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage

NQF: National Quality Framework

NQS: National Quality Standard

ABS: Australian Bureau of Statistics

ACECQUA: Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

CBD: Central Business District

Glossary

Childcare desert: a geographical area where there are more than three children per available childcare place (Hurley et al., 2022).

Sessional kindergarten: standalone kindergarten service that is not integrated into daycare.

Integrated kindergarten: kindergarten that is integrated into long daycare services and often provides longer hours than sessional kindergarten.

Preschool: another term for kindergarten, often used interchangeably.

Long daycare: early childhood education that runs for long hours, allowing parents to work.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to assess the accessibility and quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in the electorate of Bellarine. It analyses the quality of ECEC services, gathers experiences of parents trying to access ECEC, assesses the roll out of the Free Kinder policy, and collects industry perspectives from ECEC providers to make a series of targeted recommendations for improving ECEC access in Bellarine.

To achieve this purpose, the report uses a mixed method research approach. This includes quantitative and qualitative data analysis of the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD), National Quality Framework (NQF) and Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population data, a survey of constituents promoted on Alison Marchant's social media, local news and posters, and interviews with ECEC providers.

Key findings and recommendations:

This report finds that the accessibility of high quality ECEC in Bellarine is dependent on the location and the socio-economic status of residents, with multiple suburbs significantly under resourced. The findings are summarised into the following points:

- The quality and accessibility of ECEC is a problem of geographic and socio-economic inequality.
- There is confusion among survey respondents about the Free Kinder policy, which results in constituents paying for kindergarten that should be free.
- The current enrolment system is overcomplicated. Consequently, ECEC providers find it difficult to plan and expand services because they do not have a centralised system of enrolment that provides data reflecting real demand.
- ECEC providers are struggling to attract experienced staff.

Based on these findings, this report makes the following recommendations:

- Locate the planned government-funded ECEC centre in St Leonards.
- Create a centralised enrolment system for ECEC. Include accessible information about childcare and kindergarten subsidies on this platform.
- Offer one-off grants to early childhood educators who want to provide family daycare services to help them establish this service.

-
- Ensure Diploma and Certificate III graduates in Bellarine have the necessary experience for ECEC settings by incorporating placements and work experience into ECEC courses.
 - Improve collaboration between governments and providers prior to the roll out of ECEC subsidies.

Non-inclusive word count: 6538

Introduction

Research question and purpose

The purpose of this report is to investigate the state of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) accessibility and quality in the electorate of Bellarine and make tangible policy recommendations to improve the accessibility of ECEC services. It has been guided by the research question: is high quality ECEC accessible in the electorate of Bellarine?

This report is the first piece of research to investigate ECEC access in Bellarine and assess the roll out of the Victorian Government Free Kinder policy which began in 2023.

Research methods

A mixed method approach was adopted for this research. Phase 1 of the research is qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQUA) data on the quality of ECEC centres in Bellarine, as assessed against the National Quality Framework (NQF), was used to determine the quality of each ECEC centre in Bellarine. This data was then segmented into suburbs, to allow a geographic assessment of the ECEC quality within the electorate. The NQF data was then compared against Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data and the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) to identify population and socioeconomic trends in ECEC quality.

Phase 2 of the research is a community survey. The survey was designed to gather community perspectives on the issue of ECEC access. It was open for one month and had thirty respondents. It was promoted using the social media of Alison Marchant MP, local newspapers, local Facebook groups and physical posters with a QR code link displayed in maternal and child health clinics.

Phase 3 of the research comprises two interviews with non-government ECEC providers in Bellarine and a member of the Greater Geelong City Council currently researching projected ECEC demand in the region, to gain industry perspectives on the issue of ECEC accessibility.

Chapters

The report is divided into four chapters: context, quality, community perspectives and industry perspectives. Chapter 1 contextualises the issue by reviewing existing literature on the accessibility of ECEC and provides background information about Bellarine. Chapter 2 focusses on the quality of ECEC services and their geographic distribution across the electorate. Chapter 3 analyses the survey data, categorising responses thematically to identify barriers parents face when trying to access ECEC. Chapter 4 discusses ECEC industry perspectives collected in the interviews, which include staffing strain and a desire for a centralised enrolment system.

Recommendations are included in the Conclusion.

Limitations

The survey data is limited as only a small proportion of the total Bellarine adult population completed it. Therefore, the results are not representative of the whole Bellarine community, and instead provide a collection of individual perspectives on ECEC access. In addition, this research did not include an in depth data analysis of the role of family daycare, as the sometimes informal nature of family daycare made it difficult to assess and obtain data on.

Chapter 1: Context

This chapter will provide an overview of ECEC access in Australia. It will also provide relevant background information about the electorate, and examine what is known about ECEC access in Bellarine based on existing data and literature.

ECEC in Australia

The ECEC sector in Australia is a complicated web of different public and private entities. Services are organised by local and state governments, community groups, schools and private not-for-profit and for-profit providers. The federal government is largely responsible for subsidising the cost of long daycare (childcare offered for long hours, usually 6:30am-6:30pm) and other childcare services (Department of Education, 2023). State governments provide funding and subsidies for kindergarten (State Government of Victoria, 2023). Local governments and community groups plan and manage centres in their community, often with collaboration with private providers (Gilley et al., 2015).

A summary of the relevant policies can be found in Appendix 1.

Socio-economic and geographic inequality

Existing research has identified that most 'childcare deserts', suburbs where access to childcare is most severe, are in regional or lower socio-economic areas (Hurley et al., 2022). In contrast, more advantaged suburbs have the greatest access to childcare services (Hurley et al., 2022). This is concerning, as ECEC has the potential to be a force for equality. A child's brain develops rapidly before the age of five, and early childhood education interventions can have significant positive impacts on a person's long term academic, financial, professional and health outlooks (Centre for Policy Development, 2021; Grudnoff & Denniss, 2020; The Front Project, 2019). The lack of access to quality childcare in many regional and lower-socioeconomic suburbs across Australia serves to entrench existing inequalities by denying children access to foundational knowledge and care (Hurley et al., 2022).

The key to female workforce participation

Accessing ECEC allows mothers, who represent the majority of primary carers in Australia, to re-enter the paid workforce (Centre for Policy Development, 2021; Grudnoff & Denniss, 2020). A consequence of the cost and lack of availability of

ECEC is that Australian women are more likely to be working part time than their OECD counterparts and are undertaking the majority of unpaid domestic duties (Grudnoff & Denniss, 2020; Hagiwara, 2016; Wood et al., 2020). The impact of domestic and caring duties continues throughout a woman's life, as a quarter of Australian women aged 60-69 care for a child that is not their own, likely a grandchild (Wood et al., 2020). This impacts women's productivity later in life, as women with children are more likely to be working part-time in their 50s and 60s than their childless counterparts (Wood et al., 2020). This contributes to long-term economic inequality between men and women in Australia, with Australian mothers earning on average \$2 million less than Australian fathers over their lifetime (Wood et al., 2020). This economic disparity between Australian men and women has been linked to ECEC inaccessibility by the Grattan Institute (Wood et al., 2020).

Early childhood educators: underpaid and hard to find

Low pay and job satisfaction in the ECEC sector is a significant contributing factor to the accessibility of ECEC services (McCutcheon, 2022; Joseph, 2018). Ensuring the retention and attraction of early childhood educators is critical to the operation of high quality ECEC centres, as the NQF requires educator to child ratios of 1:4-1:15 depending on child age (ACECQUA, 2023a). The lack of a competitive employment award agreement is a significant motivator for educators leaving the sector (Fenech et al., 2022). Educators can find higher rates of pay and less hazardous workplaces in industries such as aged care and primary school education, which puts pressure on providers to remain operational (Fenech et al., 2022). While the sector will experience a 5.75% increase to award wages on the 1st of July 2023, providers and unions have expressed a desire for increases of up to 25% to make the sector more attractive (FairWork Commission, 2023; Karp, 2023; Patten, 2023).

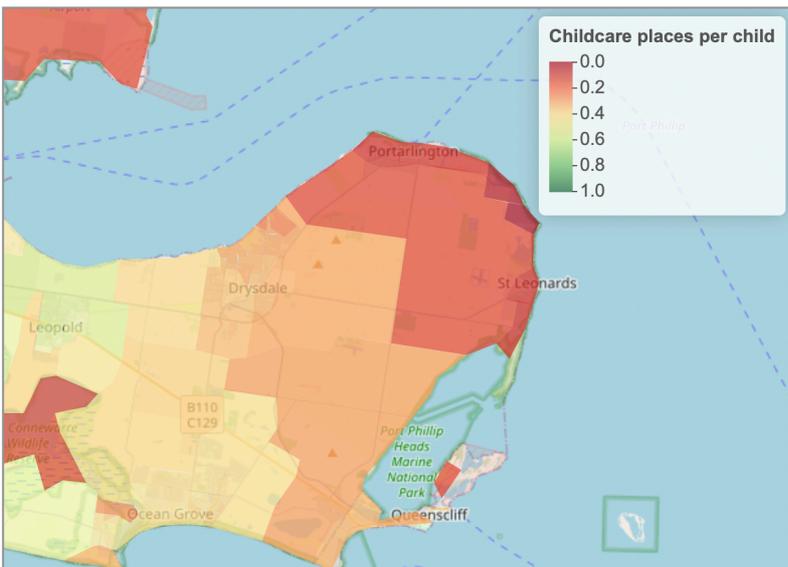
What does existing research tell us about ECEC access in Bellarine?

The electorate of Bellarine, which had a population of 71,339 at the 2021 Census, has seen significant population growth in the past decade (ABS, 2021a). Most significantly for this research, the electorate experienced a sharp increase of 4,213 families residing there between 2016 and 2021 (ABS, 2021a; 2016).

While there are no studies that focus on ECEC in Bellarine, research by the Mitchell Institute investigated childcare access across Australia and identified some Bellarine suburbs as childcare deserts (Hurley et al., 2022). This research indicates that the

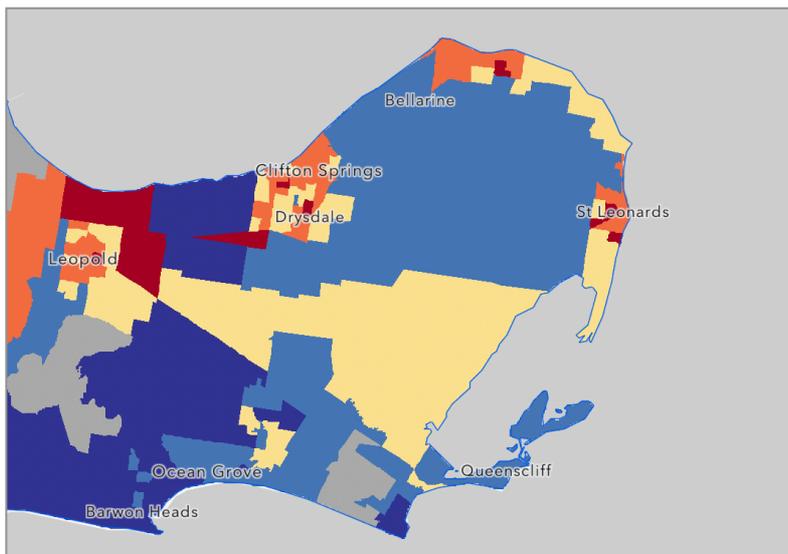
suburbs of Portarlington, St Leonards, Indented Head, Clifton Springs, Queenscliff and Point Lonsdale are childcare deserts (see Figure 1). These suburbs account for 812 children aged 0-4 (ABS, 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2021e; 2021f; 2021g). The inaccessibility of ECEC is most severe in Portarlington and St Leonards, where there are 0-0.1 available spaces in childcare centres per child (Hurley et al., 2022).

Figure 1: childcare access in Bellarine map (Victoria University, 2022)



These suburbs are among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged in Bellarine (ABS, 2021h). In contrast, the most advantaged Bellarine suburbs, Ocean Grove and Barwon Heads, have among the highest childcare access in the electorate, with 0.4 and 0.5 places available per child respectively (ABS, 2021h; Victoria University, 2022).

Figure 2: IRSAD ratings of Bellarine SA1 areas (ABS, 2021h)



While Bellarine generally follows the correlation between socioeconomic advantage and access to ECEC, Leopold is a notable outlier. This suburb has the greatest access to childcare in Bellarine, despite its low IRSAD rating. It is possible that Leopold’s high population is a contributing factor to this, as it is the second most populated Bellarine suburb with 13,372 residents in 2021 (ABS, 2021i). It is also the

Bellarine suburb that is closest to the Geelong and Melbourne CBDs, so it is possibly a convenient location for Bellarine parents who work in these business districts.

Chapter 1 key points

Access to ECEC is crucial for supporting female workforce participation (Wood et al., 2020). However, hundreds of thousands of Australian children and their parents live in childcare deserts where it is difficult to access ECEC (Hurley et al., 2022). In Bellarine, an electorate with a rapidly growing population, 812 children aged 0-4 live in childcare deserts (ABS, 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2021e; 2021f; 2021g). Generally, the suburbs where the inaccessibility of childcare is the most extreme have a lower socio-economic status, with Leopold being a notable outlier (Hurley et al., 2022; ABS, 2021h).

Chapter 2: Quality

This chapter will explain the significance of high quality ECEC and the NQF, and then analyse NQF, ABS population and IRSAD data to investigate the distribution of quality ECEC across the electorate of Bellarine.

Why is quality ECEC important?

Accessing high quality ECEC services is fundamental to ensuring a child's future education, career and health outcomes (The Front Project, 2019). Existing research has identified that the children who benefit the most from high quality ECEC are those from a disadvantaged background, and it is this demographic that is the least likely to have access to this care (Hurley et al., 2022; Pilcher et al., 2021). ECEC has the potential to be a great equaliser for Australian children, but the disparity in the accessibility of high quality services is a barrier to the future success of many Australian children (Hurley et al., 2022).

The National Quality Framework

The NQF was established in 2012 to 'improve education and care across long day care, family day care, preschool/kindergarten and outside school hours care services' (ACECQUA, 2023a, p. 8). It determines the quality of an ECEC centre by assessing it against the National Quality Standard (NQS), its application of approved learning frameworks, and national law and regulations (ACECQUA, 2023a). See Appendix 1 for additional information. This research has used NQF ratings of ECEC services in Bellarine to assess the current quality standards available to parents and children in the electorate.

Quality of ECEC by suburb

The results of this research identify a significant variation in the number and quality of ECEC centres in Bellarine suburbs. The NQF data on ECEC centres in Bellarine (shown in Figure 3) highlights that Ocean Grove, Point Lonsdale, Clifton Springs and Queenscliff have the best quality services in Bellarine. With the exception of Clifton Springs, these suburbs are geographically close to each other and are the most advantaged in the electorate according to their IRSAD rating (ABS, 2021h). This data suggests that, in Bellarine, higher socio-economic advantage correlates with higher quality ECEC centres in a suburb and neighbouring similarly advantaged suburbs.

Figure 3: NQF assessments of Bellarine ECEC centres.

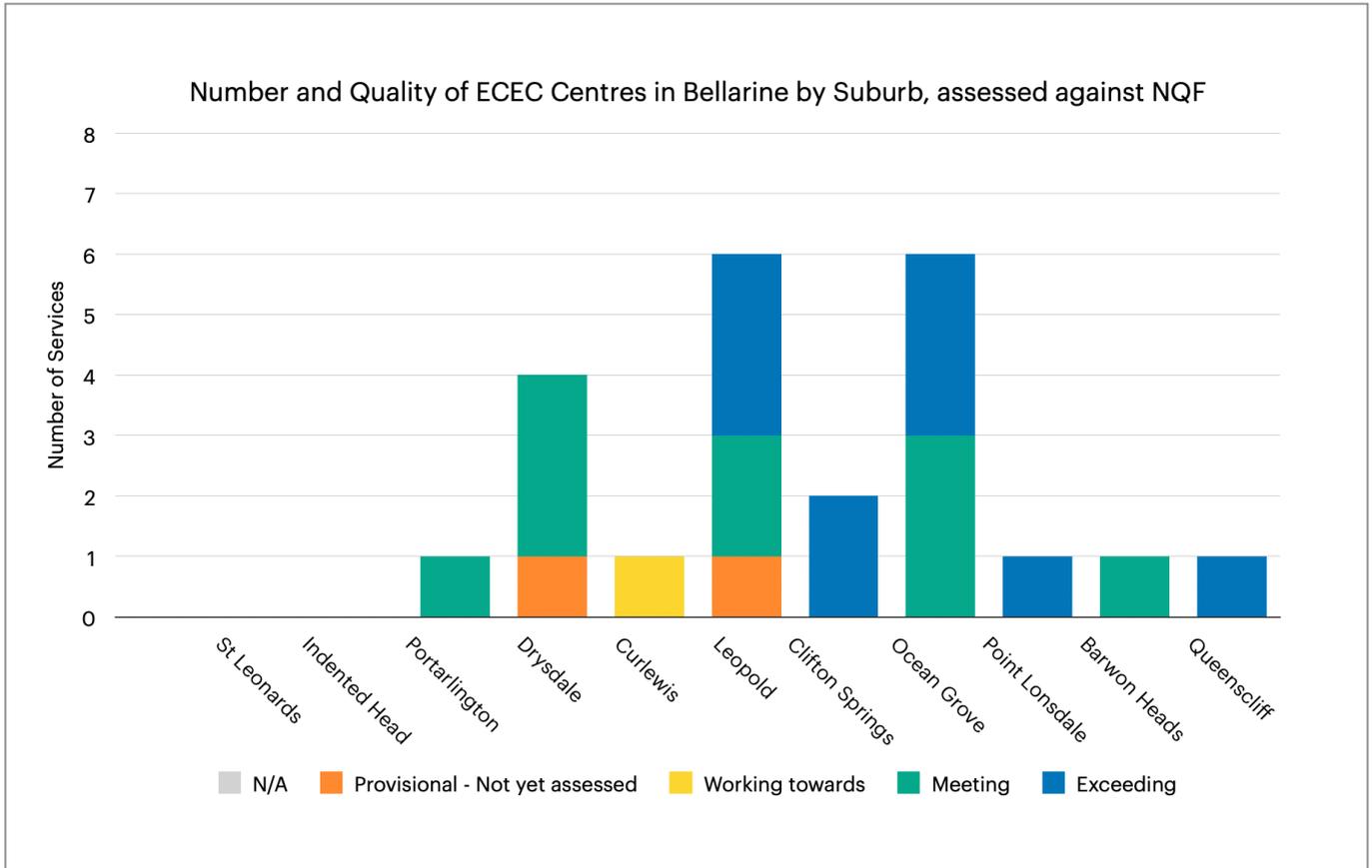
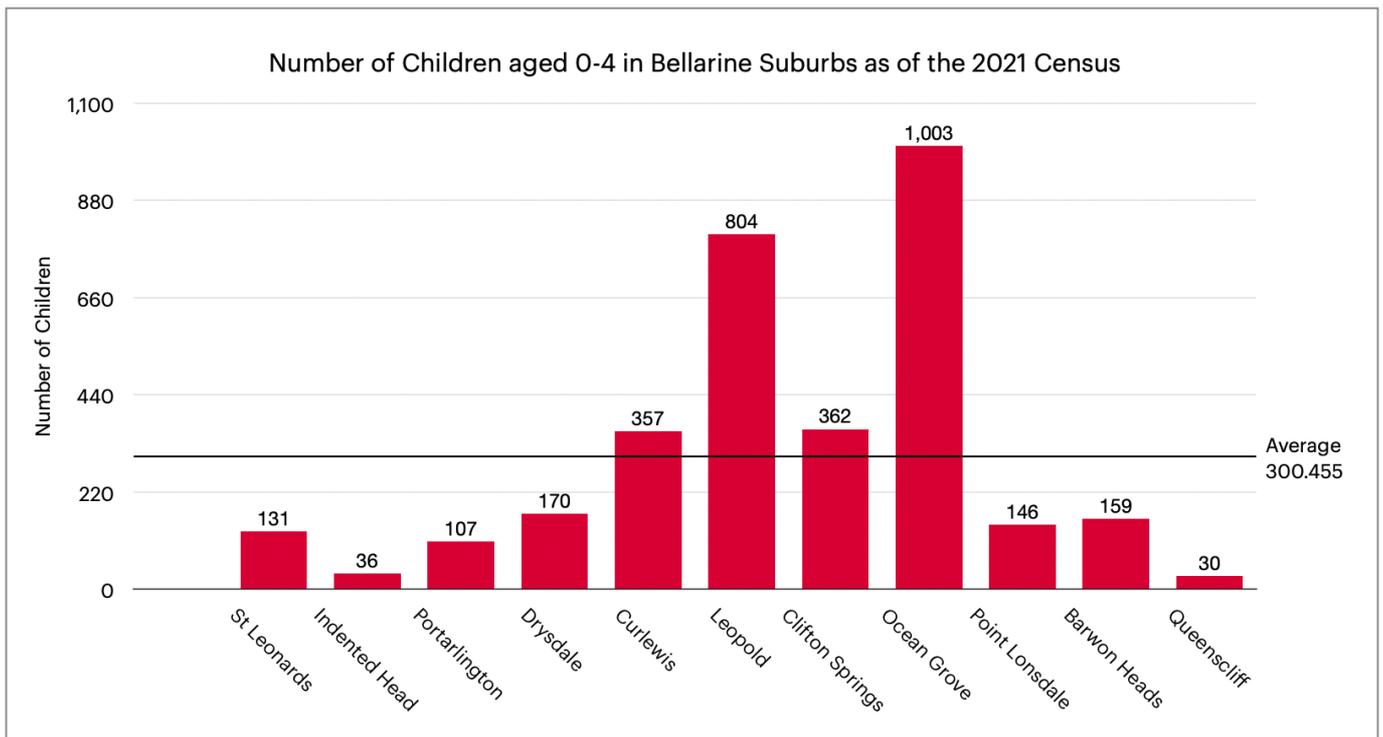


Figure 4: child population of Bellarine suburbs.



Quality ECEC and population

The vastly different distribution of high quality ECEC in Bellarine suburbs of similar population sizes highlights the significance of socio-economic advantage or disadvantage in determining ECEC access. In more advantaged suburbs with low populations of children aged 0-4, such as Point Lonsdale and Queenscliff, there is at least one ECEC centre per suburb that exceeds NQF standards (see Figure 4 for child population data). These suburbs are closely located to each-other, and Ocean Grove, a suburb with multiple high quality ECEC centres. Consequently, parents in these suburbs have a number of high quality centres to choose from. However, the less advantaged suburbs of St Leonards, Indented Head, and Portarlington, which have similar populations of children aged 0-4, only have one ECEC centre between them that meets NQF standards. This centre also only offers sessional kindergarten, and operates Monday to Thursday 9am-2pm (ACECQUA, 2023b). Consequently, parents in St Leonards, Indented Head and Portarlington must travel to access long daycare and integrated kindergarten, which provide more suitable hours for working parents. As existing research shows that disadvantaged children benefit the most from high quality ECEC, the under provision of services in these suburbs is concerning (Hurley et al., 2022; Pilcher et al., 2021).

Bellarine suburbs with an average child population and IRSAD ranking fall in the middle. Drysdale and Curlewis are geographically close to each other, have a mid-range population of children aged 0-4 (170 and 362 children respectively) and have an average IRSAD score (ABS, 2021j; 2021e; 2021k; 2021h). When compared to Bellarine suburbs with a smaller population of children aged 0-4, they have more overall ECEC centres, but have less centres exceeding NQF standards than more advantaged suburbs such as Point Lonsdale and Queenscliff. Therefore, Curlewis and Drysdale follow the correlation between IRSAD rating and the quality of ECEC centres (ABS, 2021h; 2021j; 2021k; 2021e).

Outliers

While population likely has some impact on the number of ECEC centres in Bellarine suburbs, the distribution of ECEC centres does not precisely follow population size. For example, Curlewis has just over double the ECEC aged children of Drysdale, but Drysdale has three more ECEC centres than Curlewis (ABS 2021j; 2021k). A possible explanation for this disparity is that Curlewis is located between Drysdale and Leopold, meaning that its residents can travel a short distance to the neighbouring

suburbs for additional ECEC options. Moreover, when the IRSAD scores are broken down to SA1 level, Curlewis is identified as the more advantaged suburb of the three, yet it has the lowest quality ECEC centre in the electorate (ABS, 2021h). Similarly, Clifton Springs has higher quality ECEC, but less centres than Drysdale which has a lower child population (ABS, 2021e; 2021k). These suburbs are neighbours and have the same IRSAD score (ABS, 2021h). This data shows that not all suburbs in Bellarine show a correlation between IRSAD score and ECEC quality, and highlights the possibility of local and geographic context contributing to the distribution of ECEC centres and their quality.

Leopold is another suburb that does not show evidence of a correlation between IRSAD score and ECEC quality. It is likely that the high population of 804 children aged 0-4 contributes to the high number of ECEC centres in the suburb, which is equal to the more populated and advantaged suburb Ocean Grove (ABS, 2021i; 2021h). While the quality of ECEC centres in Leopold is currently marginally lower than those in Ocean Grove, this is because one of the Leopold centres is awaiting NQF assessment.

Chapter 2 key findings

The quality and distribution of ECEC services in Bellarine is a problem of geographic and socio-economic access inequality. This is a novel finding. Generally in Bellarine, more socio-economically advantaged suburbs have greater access to high quality ECEC services (for example: Ocean Grove, Point Lonsdale and Queenscliff), while less advantaged suburbs have less access (for example: Portarlington, St Leonards and Indented Head). Leopold is a notable exception to this trend, as it has a high number of high quality ECEC centres despite its lower IRSAD rating (ABS 2021i; 2021h). The suburbs most in need of additional high quality ECEC are Portarlington, St Leonards and Indented Head as they only have one sessional kindergarten and zero daycare services between them.

Chapter 3: Community Perspectives

This chapter analyses the survey data. Thirty Bellarine residents responded to the survey. The survey had no mandatory questions, so some questions were not answered by all respondents. The vast majority (96.7%) of respondents were women. Survey respondents live in a mix of Bellarine postcodes. The respondents were a combination of parents, soon to be parents, and early childhood educators. They were asked about whether they had experienced difficulty accessing ECEC, the Free Kinder policy, and what, if anything, would improve their experience accessing ECEC in Bellarine. The responses can be categorised into the following (in some cases one response will fall into multiple categories):

Table 1: categorised survey responses.

RESPONSE CATEGORY	RESPONSE NUMBER
Need for ECEC services in Portarlington, St Leonards and Indented Head	8
Waitlisting	8
Lack of availability	7
Longer and more flexible ECEC hours for working parents	6
Retaining quality staff	5
Travel time	4
Cost	2
Free Kinder policy	2
Quality	2
Accessible enrolment and subsidy information for parents	1
Colocation with maternal and child health clinics	1
Family daycare	1

Access: a key problem for respondents

The results of the community survey support the assumptions of existing research and the quality section of this report: ECEC access is a key issue for Bellarine residents, but the severity of the inaccessibility varies by suburb (Hurley et al., 2022). The majority of respondents (82.1%) have experienced difficulty accessing ECEC services in the electorate. Of the 17.9% of respondents that have not had difficulty accessing ECEC services, 100% live in either Leopold or Ocean Grove, the two suburbs with the highest numbers of childcare and kindergarten centres.

Portarlington, St Leonards and Indented Head

The results of this survey corroborate the assumptions of existing research that identified Portarlington, St Leonards and Indented Head as the most severe childcare deserts in Bellarine (Hurley et al., 2022). A resident from Portarlington highlighted that an ECEC facility providing services for children aged 0-5 is 'desperately needed for the community'. Multiple respondents drew attention to the lack of daycare in these suburbs, and expressed a need for expanded kindergarten services. Currently, there is no provision for children aged 0-2 in Portarlington, St Leonards and Indented Head, and the kindergarten service is limited to one sessional program operating from 9am-2pm four days a week. This centre is approved to provide services to 53 children in the 3-4 age bracket, leaving many of the 274 children aged 0-4 residing in these suburbs without local ECEC (ACECQUA, 2023b; ABS, 2021b; 2021c; 2021d). Respondents from these suburbs also noted travel time as a barrier to accessing ECEC: due to the lack of local provision, one respondent had to travel 35 minutes to Drysdale for kindergarten, which was costly because of the price of fuel.

Lack of availability and waitlisting

The availability of ECEC and waitlisting have a causal relationship. As Rita Hagiwara notes, 'the problem of long waitlists for childcare will persist until the supply of childcare meets the demand' (2016, p. 45). Frustration with the months and years that children spend on waitlists was evident in the survey responses. Due to the unmet demand for ECEC services in many Bellarine suburbs, parents are left in limbo: hoping for a place to become available for their child yet without any clear indication of when or if that will happen. As one parent said, 'I'm on the wait list at 4 places and have been for 3 months and have been told that the only way a spot will open up is if one of the children decide to no longer attend'. Another mother shared her experience where she secured one day of childcare, but she 'didn't have a choice of

the day and if [she] didn't accept it there was no guarantee [she'd] get the day later when [she] had secured part time employment'. Consequently, she had to pay for the service 'just so [she didn't] lose [her] place', leaving her 'looking for part time work' but unable to 'commit to anything' as she was only available one day of the week. This mother's response can be found in full in Appendix 3.

Operating hours

The results of this survey show that parents need longer hours of ECEC to re-enter or enter the workforce. Working parents require long daycare hours (which typically operate from 6:30am-6:30pm), yet sessional kindergarten, which is offered in most standalone kindergarten centres, has shorter hours that make it difficult for parents to work (Olsen & Zigler, 1989; Boardman, 2005). Many respondents identified the unavailability of longer kindergarten hours as a barrier to re-entering the workforce. The shorter hours of sessional kindergarten, which is the only available option in some suburbs, were deemed by one respondent as 'impossible' for 'working mums'. Another respondent said that 'childcare longer hours' would allow her to enrol her children into ECEC services at a younger age 'so [she] could work more'.

For parents who work outside of traditional work hours, access to flexible ECEC hours is crucial. In Bellarine there are no kindergarten and daycare centres that are open on the weekend or after 7pm. One respondent highlighted the lack of resources available for parents who work 'outside the traditional Monday to Friday 9-5'. They suggested that there are parents who are eager to take on weekend shifts due to the higher hourly rate, and businesses in need of staff, but because 'there is no care' parents are left with little 'encourage[ment]... to work on the weekends'.

Retaining quality staff

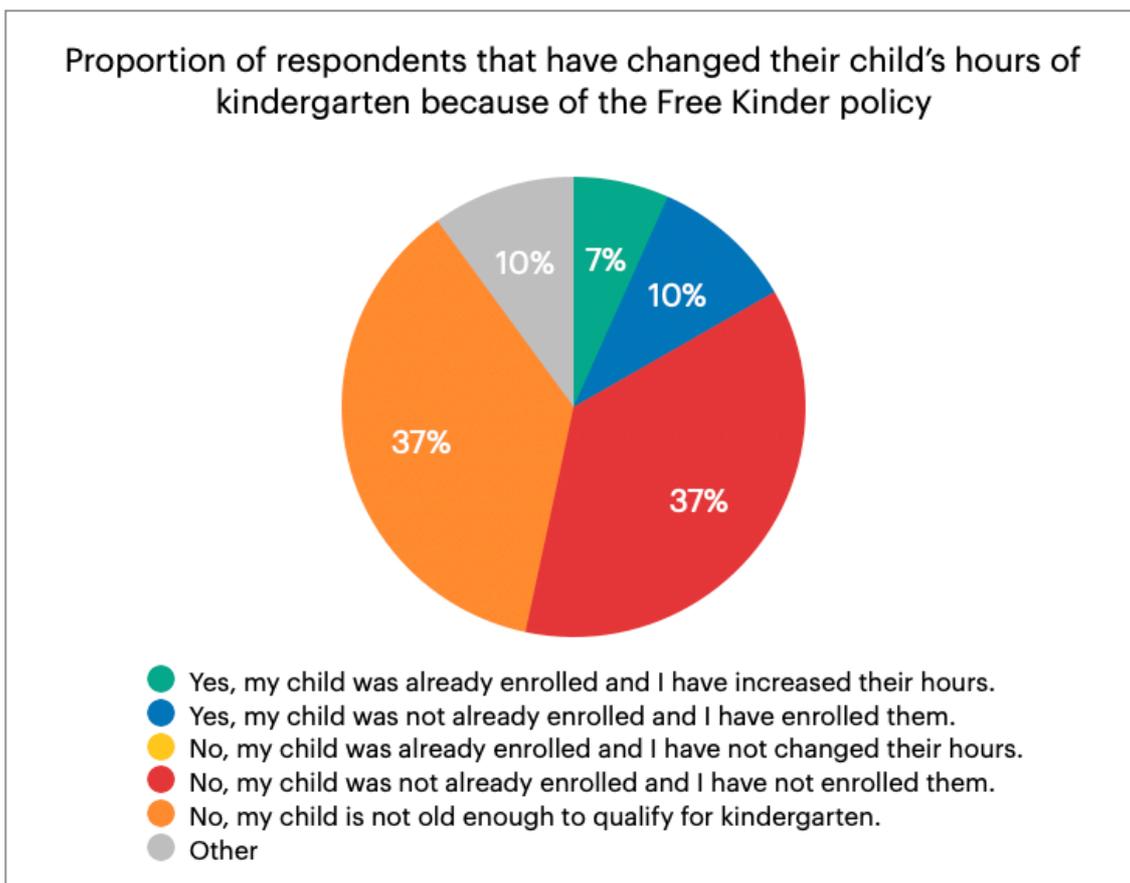
'High staff turnover' was identified as a problem for multiple respondents. Both parents and early childhood educators expressed their disappointment in the working conditions that might be causing this turnover. For one parent, the 'inconsistent' staffing arrangements 'negatively impacted [her family's] experience'. This sentiment was often accompanied by requests for 'more staffing'. One early childhood educator suggested that 'better quality staff ratios' would improve parent, child and worker experiences, as 'a lot leave due to poor work conditions'. This was echoed by another respondent working in the sector, who said 'ensuring you keep great educators in the system and not be overwhelmed is important'.

Cost

There remains a lack of clarity on the importance of cost as a barrier to accessing ECEC in Bellarine. Affordability has been the primary concern of existing research on ECEC accessibility in Australia (Jenkins, 2021; Joseph, 2018; Phillips 2014; Scott, 2022; Wood et al., 2020). However, this report finds that cost was not at the forefront of respondent complaints about ECEC access in Bellarine. Just two of the thirty respondents (6.67%) mentioned reducing cost when asked what would improve their experience accessing ECEC. In both cases, the desire for 'more affordable' services coincided with the need for more flexible ECEC hours. This does not mean that cost is unimportant to residents of Bellarine, but it was not the primary concern of the group who responded to the survey. A possible explanation for this is that cost becomes less of a concern when the availability of ECEC is low; if there is no available place to pay for, then cost becomes a secondary concern.

Free Kinder: have parents changed their child's kindergarten hours?

Figure 5: survey responses to the Free Kinder policy question



The results of this survey indicate that the Free Kinder policy has motivated some parents to change their child's hours of kindergarten. While the majority of survey respondents had not changed their child's hours of kindergarten because of the Free Kinder policy, this majority are not using kindergarten services (see Figure 5). Of those that are using kindergarten services, 10% have enrolled their child in kindergarten for the first time because of the Free Kinder policy. In addition, 7% increased their child's hours of kindergarten because of the policy.

Free Kinder: policy confusion

The responses to the question about increasing a child's hours of kindergarten indicate that parents are confused about the Free Kinder policy. Two respondents used the 'Other' option to explain their difficulty accessing the kindergarten subsidy. One of these respondents explained that 'the whole "free" debacle' resulted in her child not receiving a place in her chosen kindergarten centre, as she tried to enrol her child at the start of 2023 but the centre 'declined [their] enrolment because no one knew about the funding rules'. By the time the centre 'clarified' the specifics of the policy, the respondent could no longer enrol her child as their place had been filled.

Parents are also paying for integrated kindergarten, which should be free. Another respondent explained that she 'pays for integrated kindergarten as free sessional kindergarten doesn't suit [her] work hours'. Under the Free Kinder policy, integrated kindergarten should be included in the roll out of subsidised kindergarten, however, centres must opt in and then pass on the subsidy to parents (State Government of Victoria, 2023). This sentiment was echoed in responses to other survey questions. Multiple respondents displayed the misunderstanding that 'only sessional kinder is free', and that the policy did not cover integrated kindergarten.

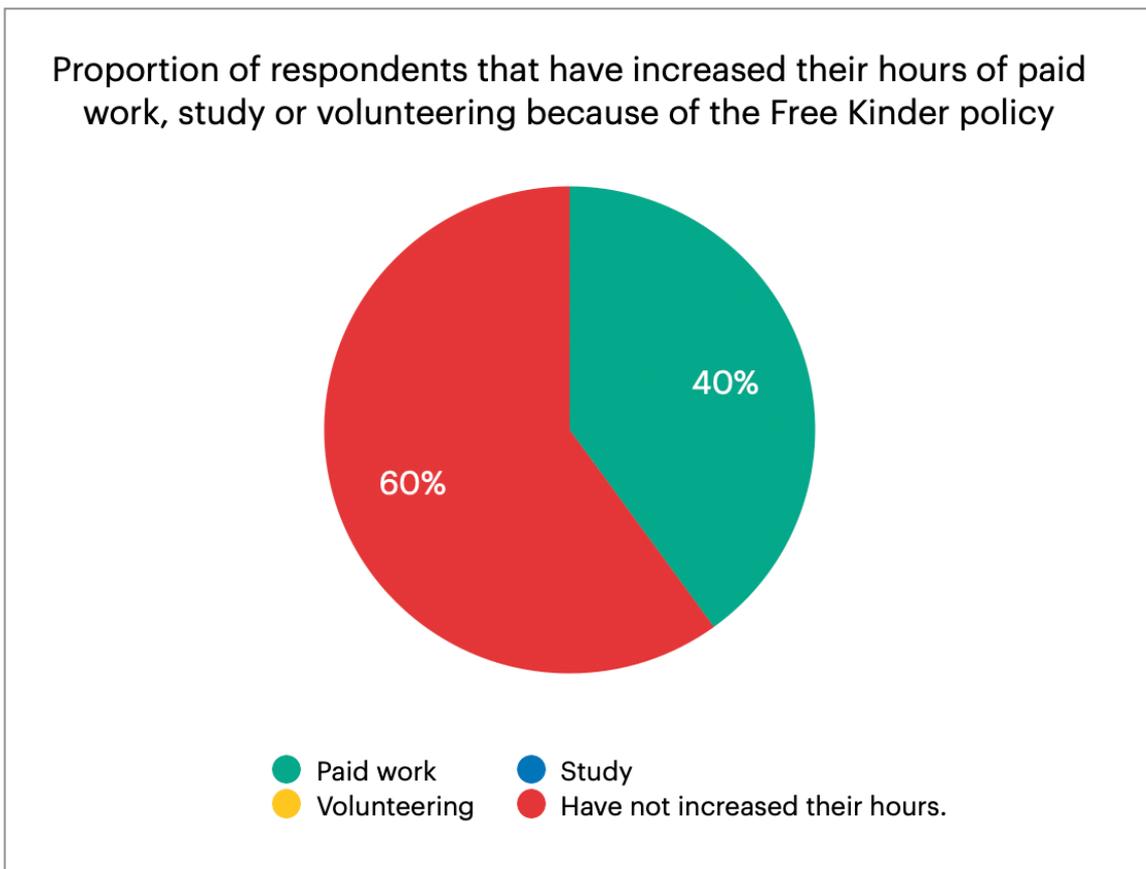
Similarly, an early childhood educator expressed that she 'think[s] free kinder and integrated day care kinder needs to be assessed'. While this response does not explicitly indicate that the respondent thinks integrated kindergarten is excluded from the Free Kinder policy, it draws attention to the false distinction that many respondents made between 'free kinder' and 'integrated kinder', when the latter is designed to be free as well. Therefore, at the provider and/or parent level, there is confusion about what forms of kindergarten are eligible for the subsidy. This is detrimental to parents and children as many may be missing out on the up to fifteen free hours of kindergarten per week because their provider has not opted in to or

passed on the subsidy. As the early childhood educator noted, this is an area that needs further assessment.

Free Kinder: parent productivity

The survey results indicate that the majority (60%) of parents using the Free Kinder policy have not increased their hours of paid work, study or volunteering while accessing the subsidy (see Figure 6). A primary purpose of the Free Kinder policy is to support parents re-entering the paid workforce (State Government of Victoria, 2023). While 40% of respondents have increased their hours of paid work because of the policy, it is not working as intended to promote the productivity of the majority of respondents. None of the respondents increased their hours of study or volunteering.

Figure 6: survey responses indicating the impact of the Free Kinder policy
parent productivity



If, as the results of this survey suggest, parents are experiencing difficult accessing the Free Kinder subsidy for integrated kindergarten, which has longer hours and is

therefore attractive for working parents, this may explain why only a minority has been able to increase their productivity.

Chapter 3 key findings

This chapter found that:

- 82.1% of survey respondents have had difficulty accessing ECEC in Bellarine.
- Survey data confirms the Chapter 2 findings that Portarlinton and St Leonards are in need of ECEC services.
- There is confusion at a parent and/or provider level about the Free Kinder policy. Multiple respondents indicated that they thought the policy only applied to sessional kindergarten, not integrated kindergarten. This is not correct, as providers can opt-in to the policy and allow parents access to 5-15 hours of free integrated kindergarten (State Government of Victoria, 2023). This is a significant finding, as the roll out of the Free Kinder policy has not yet been assessed in existing literature.

Chapter 4: Industry Perspectives

This chapter will analyse three interviews from professionals in the ECEC sector. One participant worked for the Greater Geelong City Council, and is currently researching projected demand for ECEC services in the region. The other two participants were from private providers: one smaller local provider, and another multi-centre kindergarten provider offering services across Bellarine.

The City of Greater Geelong owns a number of ECEC centres across Bellarine that offer a range of services such as long daycare, kindergarten and maternal and child health services (see Figures 7 and 8). For its provision of kindergarten services, the Council often collaborates with the kindergarten provider Meli, using Council buildings and Meli services. Bellarine also has a number of independent centres from smaller providers.

For the purposes of anonymity and ease the interviewees will be referred to as follows: local council interviewee (LC), large provider interviewee (LP) and small provider interviewee (SP).

Figure 7: Bella Wiyn Birraleee Family Centre in Drysdale (Lyons Construction, 2020)



Figure 8: Boorai Centre in Ocean Grove (Perkins Architects, 2013)



Access and demand

All interviewees agreed that Bellarine is facing an ECEC accessibility problem. Whether they are managed by the Council or providers, ECEC centres are turning away parents and using waitlists. LP explained that their enrolments have increased steadily over the past five years, noting population growth as a likely cause for this. This sentiment was reiterated by LC who identified population growth and kindergarten reform as the two key variables driving demand for ECEC services in Bellarine. This interviewee also explained that the accessibility of and demand for ECEC services varies across different suburbs: ‘some areas have been identified as having sufficient provision and other areas require attention to meet capacity needs’.

The high demand for ECEC services is putting pressure on providers in Bellarine, which is particularly apparent for smaller providers. SP noted that their two centres in Bellarine have experienced an increase in demand of approximately 30% since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It is likely that this uptick in demand for ECEC places is related to the influx of residents Bellarine has experienced since 2019, with a larger population necessitating a greater provision of services (City of Greater

Geelong, 2021). In particular, the smaller provider is 'unable to cater for the demand for children under 18 months' due to a lack of educators and already filled capacity.

Family Daycare

In line with existing research which emphasises the role of family daycare, respondents discussed family daycare as an alternative ECEC option in suburbs where centre-based care is unavailable (Education Services Australia, 2021). LC noted family daycare is being used by parents to substitute centre-based care in some instances. She questioned whether there was adequate incentives for educators to 'set up a family day-care to suit the needs for children and families' and suggested that 'improv[ing] support for family daycare' in suburbs where the provision of centre-based ECEC is low would improve access.

St Leonards

One suburb identified by LC as having significant unmet demand was St Leonards. The council had 'commenced planning for an early years facility in St Leonards' prior to the Victorian Government announcement for a centre in the Portarlington SA2 area. LC explained that an ECEC centre is needed in St Leonards 'from an accessibility and equity point of view'. She noted that the suburb currently has no provision of ECEC or maternal and child health services, and argued in favour of government intervention in St Leonards to ensure they have a 'local provision of [ECEC] services'.

Staffing strain

While the interviewees agreed that the sector was facing staffing strain, they are experiencing different pressures. When asked if they had difficulty sourcing appropriately trained staff, SP stated that 'it has been difficult' and that they are 'constantly looking for more educators'. SP indicated her support for wage increases in the sector to attract and retain staff.

In contrast, LP indicated that they have 'generally... not had trouble getting staff... because [she thinks their] reputation means that staff want to come and work for [them]'. However, LP did emphasise a lack of job ready graduates and experienced staff. LP suggested that the new 'fast-tracked courses' produced educators who are 'not skilled enough to do the jobs'. 'They just haven't got the experience' she noted, and highlighted that this was particularly troublesome in sessional kindergarten

settings where there is not a team of educators that can 'help lift the quality of some of those less experienced staff', as is the case with long daycare.

Enrolment chaos

The interview data suggests that the current enrolment system is complicated for providers and parents. LP acknowledged that existing enrolment waitlist data is not a true indicator of demand, as 'we have parents waiting for a place for their children, but they're actually accessing somewhere already' or are on multiple waitlists. Similarly, LC noted that council waitlists include 'unborn babies and children waiting for future years'. Consequently, LC explained that planning new council centres is made more difficult by a lack of 'real data' indicating demand.

The interview results indicated a consistent desire for a centralised enrolment system for all ECEC in Bellarine to fix this problem. According to LC, 'a centralised enrolment system would assist in providing some clarity on actual demand and availability... including oversight of waitlists'. This was corroborated by LP who suggested that 'a centralised enrolment system' was the only way to get a 'true sense of unmet demand'. She noted that there is a precedent for centralised enrolment, as many large providers, including her own, use one to manage their centres.

Government-provider collaboration

An area of particular concern for LP was greater collaboration between providers and governments. One specific example was the announcement out of the Free Kinder policy: she hoped that in the future the government would 'let the sector know before the [parents are notified]' so that 'they could plan for the demand' and be 'proactive'. LP said informing the sector so they can adequately prepare for increased enrolments and respond to parent questions is 'critical for the reform to actually be... implemented' and avoiding confusion.

Chapter 4 key findings

This chapter found that:

- Providers would benefit from greater collaboration with and briefing from governments prior to the announcement of new policies that impact them.
- The enrolment process for ECEC services is overcomplicated and does not produce data that reflects actual demand. This makes it difficult for the council and providers to plan around projected demand, as the real data is not currently

available. Interviewees suggested a centralised enrolment system would fix this issue.

- ECEC providers are in need of experienced staff. Smaller providers are struggling to attract staff in general, and larger providers express a need for staff with work experience for a kindergarten environment.

Conclusion

The beginning of this report posed the research question ‘is high quality ECEC accessible in the electorate of Bellarine?’. The answer to this question is that the accessibility of high quality care is dependent on geographic location and is often linked to socio-economic advantage, although there are some overarching factors such as staffing strain, confusion about kindergarten subsidies, and a complicated enrolment system that reduce the accessibility of ECEC across the electorate.

Findings

Finding 1

Socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs in Bellarine, such as Portarlington, St Leonards and Indented Head, have less access to high quality ECEC than more advantaged suburbs of a similar child population size, such as Queenscliff and Point Lonsdale. While there are some outliers to this trend, such as Leopold, this finding suggests that access to high quality ECEC in Bellarine is a problem of geographic and socio-economic inequality. This report is the first to identify this problem.

Finding 2

The roll out of the Free Kinder policy has created confusion at the parent and/or provider level, causing parents to pay for integrated kindergarten when they should be able to access 5-15 hours free per week. The discrepancy between the reality of the policy and parent perception is a significant novel finding.

Finding 3

There is a need for a centralised enrolment system that would give providers access to real data reflecting demand as the current system is overcomplicated.

Finding 4

Providers would benefit from collaboration with or briefing from governments prior to the announcement of ECEC policy, which would allow for a smoother roll out of new policies.

Finding 5

ECEC providers in Bellarine are in need of experienced and qualified educators, and staffing strain impacts the accessibility of ECEC services.

Based on these findings, this report recommends a number of targeted solutions to alleviate the inaccessibility of ECEC in Bellarine. The infographic in Appendix 3 summarises the findings and recommendations of this report.

Recommendations

Equitable Access

- Recommendation 1.1: Locate the planned Victorian Government ECEC centre in St Leonards. Based on the findings of this report, it is recommended that an ECEC centre, similar to the council run family centres across Bellarine, is constructed in St Leonards to provide desperately needed ECEC and maternal health services to a suburb that has no provision of either. This recommendation is in line with current state government policy, which approved the construction of a public ECEC centre in the Portarlington SA-2 area. Of the suburbs within this SA-2 area, St Leonards is the ideal candidate as it has the highest number of children aged 0-4 and the least access to ECEC services (ABS, 2021c; Hurley et al., 2022).
- Recommendation 1.2: Create a centralised enrolment system for ECEC in Bellarine. This report has found that the current enrolment system is complicated for parents and providers. A centralised system is needed to make the enrolment and waitlist process easier for parents and create real data on ECEC demand for providers. This system should be online with a simple interface. Parent preferences for hours, location and services should be taken into account. This is also an ideal location for accessible information about ECEC subsidies, as currently some parents are confused about the Free Kinder policy.
- Recommendation 1.3: Support early childhood educators in Bellarine to establish family daycare businesses by providing one-off grants of \$2000. Existing research highlights the importance of family daycare as a more flexible alternative for working parents who struggle to access formal care (Education Services Australia, 2021). Interview data in this report suggests that family daycare is being used to supplement the lack of ECEC centres in suburbs with unmet demand. This policy has been adopted by the Orange City Council in New South Wales and has improved the accessibility of ECEC by providing parents with more flexible alternatives to traditional care (Education Services Australia, 2021). Bellarine would likely experience similar benefits.

Quality

- Recommendation 2.1: Increase the award wage of ECEC workers to retain and attract highly skilled educators. The existing award for early childhood educators is not competitive with other sectors such as primary school education or aged care, causing high staff turnover as many leave the sector (Fenech et al., 2022). Staff turnover was identified as a key issue for parents and educators in the survey, and there was provider support for increased wages in the interviews. Retaining and attracting staff is crucial to providing accessible ECEC, and making the sector's wages competitive would assist this.
- Recommendation 2.2: Include placements and apprenticeships in ECEC Certificate III and Diploma courses. This report found that some providers believe graduates from 'fast-tracked' courses do not have the relevant experience. Including work experience within these courses would allow graduates to improve their workplace skills. This recommendation could be achieved through collaboration between ECEC providers, higher education providers and the Australian Government Local Jobs Program, which is designed to support local labour markets by re-skilling and up-skilling residents (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023).

Administration

- Recommendation 3.1: Governments should brief relevant stakeholders, in this case ECEC providers, prior to the announcement of large scale policy like the Free Kinder policy. This was a key concern for one of the interviewees, who explained that they could not answer parent questions about the policy when it was first announced, contributing to confusion. Increasing government and provider collaboration on ECEC policy would reduce confusion, which is particularly significant when said policy is designed to make ECEC more accessible across the state.

Further research

This report has found that there is a disconnect between the reality of the Free Kinder policy and some parents perception of the subsidy. Consequently, some parents are paying for integrated kindergarten that should be free. Further research is urgently needed to determine the causes, extent and ramifications of this confusion in Bellarine and wider Victoria.

Appendices

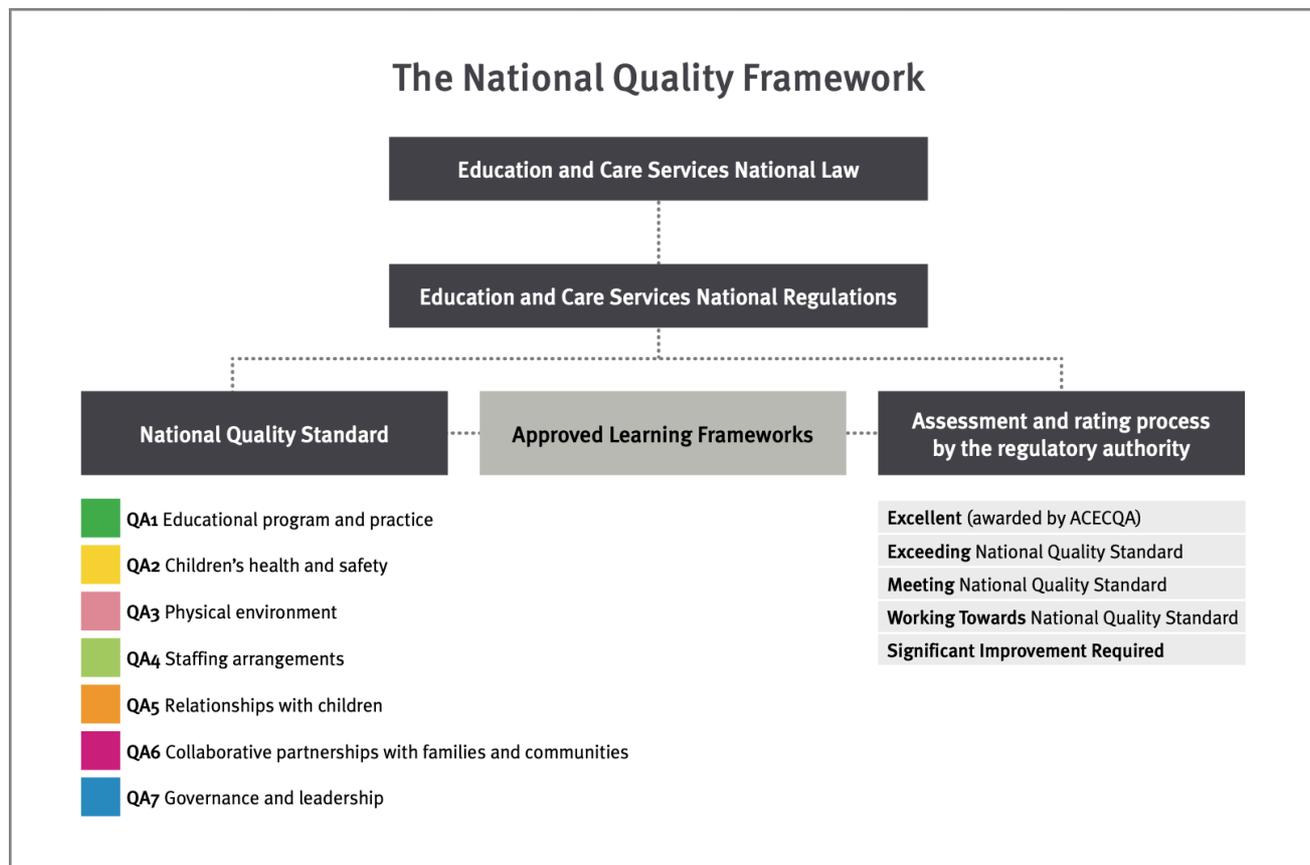
Appendix 1

Table summarising the relevant ECEC policies and policies mentioned in this report.

FEDERAL LEVEL (Department of Education, 2023)	
Child Care Subsidy	A policy that subsidises the cost of childcare depending on parent income.
Additional Child Care Subsidy	An additional subsidy for families struggling to access childcare and children in need of additional support.
Community Child Care Fund	A range of grants for ECEC service providers in communities that are deemed in need of additional support.
National Quality Framework	A national system for evaluating the quality of ECEC.
Local Jobs	A program designed to 'accelerate... reskilling, upskilling, and employment' in local communities, targeting industries that are in need of skilled workers (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023, para. 2).
STATE LEVEL: VICTORIA (State Government of Victoria, 2023)	
Free Kinder	A subsidy providing parents with 5-15 free hours of kindergarten per week.
Early Start Kindergarten	A policy that provides eligible children with fifteen free hours of kindergarten per week in the two years before school. This policy predates the Free Kinder policy.
Early Learning Centres	The state government will construct fifty early learning centres across Victoria in the next decade. One of these centres is in the electorate of Bellarine, in the Portarlington SA-2 area.
LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL (City of Greater Geelong, 2022)	
Family Centres	The Greater Geelong City Council owns and manages multiple Family Centres across the electorate of Bellarine that offer ECEC services, maternal and child health services and playgroups.

Appendix 2

Infographic explaining the NQF (ACECQA, 2023a).



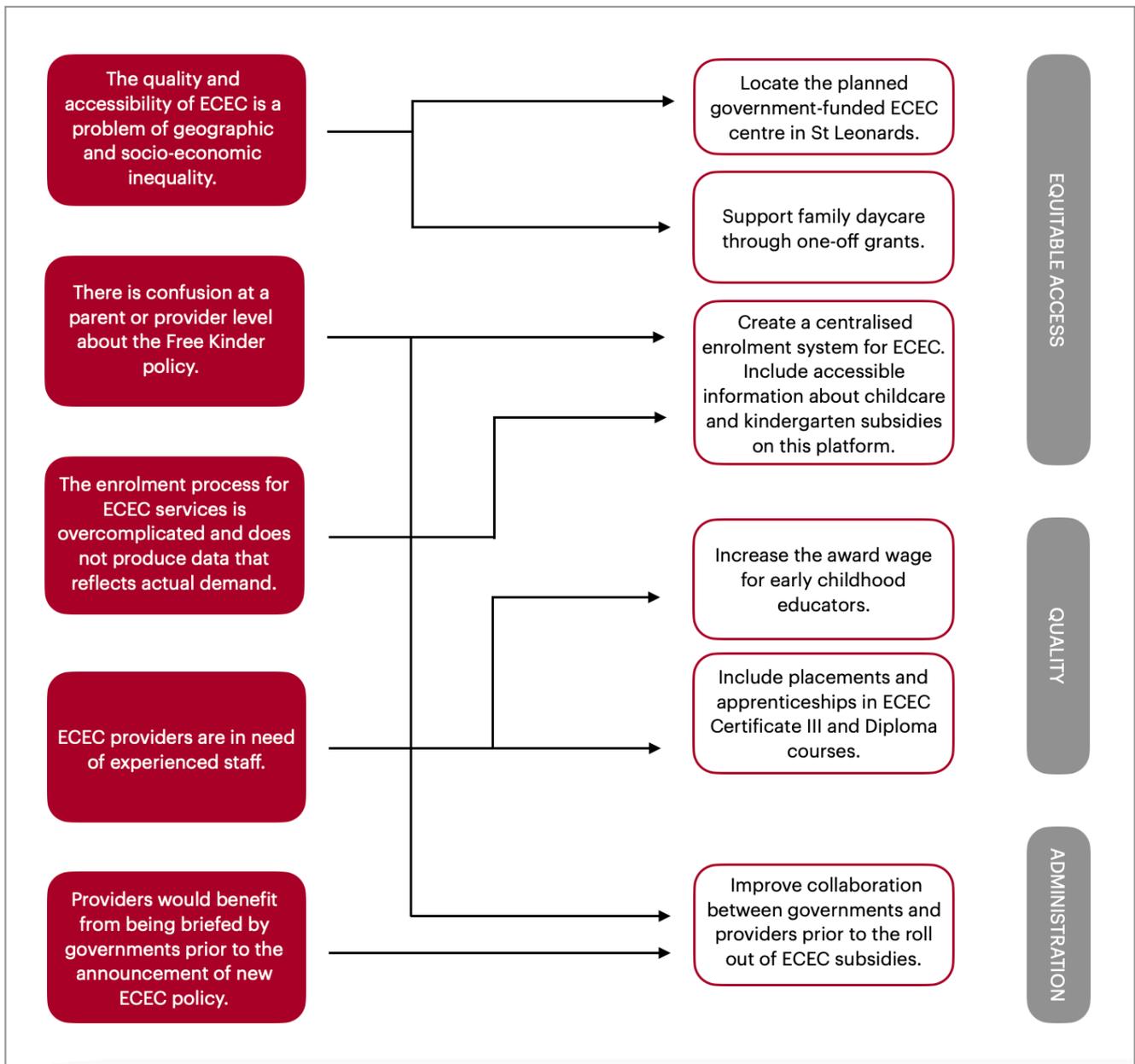
Appendix 3

Survey response from a mother struggling with ECEC availability in Bellarine. This quote was in response to the question: what, if anything, would improve your experience with accessing childcare and kinder in Bellarine?

Greater availability. Having had my name down at multiple centres since early pregnancy I have only now managed to secure 1 day of childcare and my child has just turned one. Additionally I didn't have a choice of the day and if I didn't accept it there was no guarantee I'd get the day later when I had secured part time employment. So I'm paying for childcare at the moment just so I don't lose my place. Ideally I would like 3 days. So I'm looking for part time work but can't actually commit to anything as I only have childcare.

Appendix 4

Infographic summarising key findings and relevant recommendations they link with.



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