

SHIRE OF MORAWA
NEEDS ANALYSIS -
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE
(DAY CARE) CENTRE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Shire of Morawa has received requests from community members to investigate the development of an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Centre in Morawa and wishes to gain a better understanding as to whether the current family day care service fully meets community demand for early childhood education and care or if the economic contribution of families is limited by a lack of early childhood options. The Shire has concerns that an ECEC centre may not be sustainable in the longer term.

Jill Cameron and Associates were engaged by the Shire to undertake a study to assess the level of unmet need for early childhood education and care/childcare in the Shire of Morawa.

Findings and recommendations were informed by:

- a) desktop review of Commonwealth and State government policies relevant to ECEC and recent relevant reports,
- b) desktop review of ABS demographic data and Education Department data,
- c) identification of and consultation with the providers of ECEC services within 1 hour drive of Morawa,
- d) distribution of a surveymonkey questionnaire to parents of K-Yr6 children attending Morawa DHS,
- e) site visit to existing Family Day Care operating as an “in venue” service,
- f) targeted consultation with key stakeholders (by telephone and face to face), and
- g) analysis and preparation of a written report.

CONTEXT

There is substantial evidence that early childhood services have a strong impact on children's learning and development and that children who participate in these services do better on measures of educational performance when they attend primary school. This is particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Early childhood services can provide some children with opportunities for learning and development which may exceed those available solely in their families. In these cases, the provision of early childhood services provides government with an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and inequality that begins in early childhood.

Evidence is now emerging that high quality centre-based child care programs can successfully change this downward trajectory. A positive early childhood experience provides personal and economic benefits to the individual and then to the society as a whole. In addition, an ECEC centre providing quality ECEC services is important for attracting and retaining essential workers in the community.

FINDINGS

Current in-venue Family Day Care service

- Morawa families use a mix of informal child care provided by grandparents, other relatives and friends and formal early childhood education and care provided by ‘Wild Things’ family day care service.

- The Family Day Care Educator who has provided the Wild Things service at Morawa for some five years is highly regarded by the Ngala Coordination Unit. Given the average period of operation for a sole trader family day care provider is around two years, this demonstrates a long term commitment by the current provider to ensuring ECEC services are available to the Morawa community.
- While the Morawa premises are not 'perfect' and would be unlikely to meet the standard required for centre-based care, the Ngala Coordinator is satisfied that the physical environment meets all of the requirements for a family day care premises.
- Notwithstanding the small number of children attending the family day care service, and the preference some parents have for centre-based care, the family day care service is a critical resource in the Morawa community, particularly for parents employed at the hospital, school and shire who do not have extended family members able to provide informal care.
- It does not appear to be well understood that the family day care educator is a self-employed sole trader who operates in a complex ECEC system within clearly defined legislation, policies and rules, in a venue which is not without some limitations. Availability of an ECEC centre operating within a strict legal framework would not necessarily meet all community expectations. For example, opening hours are determined by the Approved Provider taking account of potential utilisation, the regulated staff:child ratio, cost and impact on financial viability. Days and hours of operating will therefore vary between centres (refer to p13).
- The family day care service is generally not accessed by Aboriginal families who are among the most disadvantaged and most developmentally vulnerable members of the community.

Considerations for the future

- While the Shire owned facility in which the family day care service currently operates has been assessed as suitable for family day care, it is unlikely to be fit for purpose in the medium to long term as standards and expectations increase. The quality of the ageing family day care premises is already a likely disincentive for some parents to use the existing service. Similarly, it has been found that an ECEC centre that is ageing and not fit for purpose can have difficulty attracting and retaining educators. The premises currently used for in-venue family day care will not be suitable for any future centre-based service.
- Availability of a contemporary ECEC centre is increasingly important for attracting and retaining staff for essential services such as education, health and police and for attracting migrants to relocate to regional areas.
- The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) measures the development of children in Australia in their first year of full-time school. The AEDC provides important information for communities, governments and schools to support their planning and service provision. In 2021 40% of Morawa/Perenjori children were identified as vulnerable in one or more domain and 20% were vulnerable in two or more domains compared with 9.4% across Western Australia as a whole. AEDC data also showed that nationally, the percentage of developmentally vulnerable children was higher in communities with small populations compared with children in communities with larger populations.

The following table describes the domains and identifies the percentage of children in Morawa/Perenjori assessed as being 'on track' in their development, 'at risk' and 'vulnerable'. Because of the small number of children in each community, the 2021 AEDC results for Morawa and Perenjori schools have been combined into a single Community Profile.

2021 AEDC COMMUNITY PROFILE: MORAWA AND PERENJORI

Domain	Description	% of children 'On track'	% of children 'at risk'	% of children 'vulnerable'
Physical health and wellbeing	Children's physical readiness for the school day, physical independence and gross and fine motor skills.	73.3%	6.7%	20%
Social competence	Children's overall social competence, responsibility and respect, approach to learning and readiness to explore new things	66.7%	13.3%	20%
Emotional maturity	Children's pro-social and helping behaviours and absence of anxious and fearful behaviour, aggressive behaviour and hyperactivity and inattention.	66.7%	13.3%	20%
Language and cognitive skills (school-based)	Children's basic literacy, advanced literacy, basic numeracy, and interest in literacy, numeracy and memory	60%	6.7%	33.3%
Communication skills and general knowledge	Children's communication skills and general knowledge based on broad developmental competencies and skills measured in the school context	80%	6.7%	13.3%

- The establishment of an ECEC centre in Morawa could have a critical role in reducing the level of developmental vulnerability of children, including Aboriginal children, as well as providing a centre-based service for current and future workers in essential services as well as community, business and professional services.
- **School enrolment data and a focus on 'Closing the Gap' for Aboriginal children together with evidence that the FDC service does not address all unmet need for ECEC in the Morawa district is sufficient to support the recommendation that consideration should be given to establishing a not-for-profit ECEC centre in Morawa.**
- Should the Shire make the decision to proceed with the establishment of an ECEC centre, given the time involved in sourcing funding, particularly in a challenging financial environment, and the time needed for planning and establishing a new service, it will be important to support the current family day care educator to ensure Morawa is not without an ECEC service that meets required standards and benefits both local services and young children's development. Consideration could also be given to giving assistance to the recruitment of a relief Educator.
- Given the limited availability of resources, external funding would need to be sourced for a project officer for the management of the planning and development process as well as community engagement with Morawa families and organisations including MEEDAC and MDHS and a potential future Approved Provider of the service.

Factors for success

Location

- The Shire of Morawa owns property across the road from MDHS, next to the school's kindergarten. However, the co-location of a new ECEC centre with MDHS, adjacent to the pre-primary centre which is also used by the playgroup attended by a number of Aboriginal families, has many benefits and is consistent with national trend to co-locate ECEC centres with schools.
- Location of an ECEC centre on school grounds contributes to utilisation when the ECEC centre provides outside school hours care for pre-primary and primary school aged children which contribute to service viability. It also gives a clear message that ECEC is a service that promotes young children's learning and development and is not 'just babysitting'.
- In Western Australia, where ECEC centres have been located on school grounds in both metropolitan and regional areas, a parcel of land has been excised from the school site and vested in the local Shire. This is a straightforward process. Examples are the ECEC centres at Three Springs and Perenjori.

Parent fees

- Fees are one of the key drivers of a parent's decision about use and quantity of use of child care. Decisions about the number of approved places and grouping of children must therefore consider the potential impact on the operating budget and parent fees. There is no direct government subsidy available for child care services outside of the family income-based child care subsidy so a provider must operate on a break-even basis. Parent fees are the sole source of income unless an additional source of external financial support is acquired. Subject to the passage of legislation in Federal Parliament a more generous child care subsidy will be introduced from 1st July 2023, making fees affordable for Aboriginal families and making it more attractive for higher income parents to enter the workforce. Availability of Closing the Gap and other emerging funding initiatives for a service with a clear goal of addressing Aboriginal disadvantage could provide additional funding. In addition, a Productivity Commission Inquiry could bring about additional changes by the time a service becomes operational.

Size

- A 19 place centre would provide the flexibility needed in the Morawa community and would be viable if the ratio of staff:children is well managed by a not-for-profit Approved Provider with experience managing small ECEC services in small rural communities with fluctuating birth rates.

Staffing

- The challenges faced by ECEC service providers in recruiting appropriately qualified educators are common across Australia and can be particularly difficult in rural and remote communities because of the smaller population base. A local ECEC centre provides an opportunity to provide training and employment opportunities for local Morawa young people including Aboriginal young people who want to continue living in their local community. MDHS could be an important entry point to the pathway to a rewarding career in ECEC.

Governance and management

Four options considered for a potential Approved Provider with responsibility for governance and management were Local Government (the Shire of Morawa), a local community based Incorporated Association, a private for profit provider, and a number of experienced not for profit organisations including one dedicated to the delivery of small ECEC services in small rural communities.

The number of Local Government Approved Providers of ECEC services in Western Australia has decreased significantly over the past 10 years. Experience shows that private-for-profit entities have no interest in operating small ECEC services that cannot generate profits. Some large not-for-profit entities providing regional ECEC services are Approved Providers of a mix of large and smaller services in both regional and metropolitan areas. A number have withdrawn from providing small services in small communities. Regional Early Education and Development Inc (REED) is the only not-for-profit organisation established and dedicated solely to provision of ECEC services in small regional and rural communities. Given the support provided by the State Government and Lotterywest for the establishment of REED and REED's track record of providing regional ECEC services, Morawa Shire could confidently make a decision to select REED as the Approved Provider for a Morawa ECEC centre which could be included in REED's recently formed Mid West Cluster.

Additional innovative opportunities

- In the estimated 2-3 years between making a decision to establish an ECEC centre and a centre becoming operational, there is an opportunity to address other issues identified in the 2016 Morawa Ten Year Education and Training Masterplan.
- **VET AT MDHS**
A local ECEC centre can provide an opportunity for Aboriginal young people to start on a pathway to employment in a future ECEC centre. An ECEC centre with Aboriginal staff member/s has been found to increase participation of Aboriginal children which contributes to 'closing the gap' targets in addition to providing real employment opportunities and assisting financial viability of the centre. MDHS could have a key role in progressing this opportunity.
- **ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S CULTURAL AND LEARNING CENTRE**
The unused donga adjacent to the family day care premises could be relocated to the Shire owned land next to the MDHS kindergarten and repurposed to establish an Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre. This could provide a culturally safe environment for women to study Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care (and any other available courses of their choice such as aged care, disability services and agriculture) online through TAFE Central Regional – Geraldton as a pathway to employment for women, many of whom have had limited access to employment. The Centre would effectively provide an innovative intergenerational program and new opportunities for Aboriginal women.

Funding

Given the issues the Shire of Morawa is seeking to address, Lotterywest and other WA State and Commonwealth Government agencies with relevant community initiative funding may have an interest in contributing a significant level of funding for an innovative package including the ECEC centre, Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre, and salaries for the two identified positions, for a 2-3 year period. Lotterywest (and other agencies) would expect the Shire to

contribute in some way to funding the initiatives. Shire land and the existing unused donga could form part of the Shire contribution. Consideration could be given to varying the current criteria for eligibility for local grants. Funding to support Closing the Gap initiatives is another potential source of funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: That the Shire of Morawa support the establishment of a purpose-built Early Childhood Education and Care Centre in Morawa to address the needs of developmentally vulnerable children and unmet needs of essential workers for access to a quality service for their children.

Recommendation 2: That a parcel of land be excised from the grounds of Morawa District High School and vested in the Shire of Morawa for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education and Care Centre.

Recommendation 3: That the Shire of Morawa maintain support for the current Family Day Care Educator and make efforts to assist Ngala with recruitment of a relief Educator to ensure continuity of Early Childhood Education and Care for essential workers pending the establishment and approval of a new centre.

Recommendation 4: That the Shire of Morawa consider selection of Regional Early Education and Development Inc (REED) as the Approved Provider of Early Childhood Education and Care Centre and include REED in the planning and development of the centre.

Recommendation 5: That the Shire of Morawa seek funding for an ECEC centre and for a position to manage the planning and development process for the centre and for community engagement with Morawa families and organisations including MEEDAC and MDHS and the selected Approved Provider.

ADDITIONAL INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

Recommendation 6: That the Shire of Morawa consider relocation of the existing unused building next to the family day centre to Shire owned land adjacent to the kindergarten for repurposing as an Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre in consultation with Elders and women in the community.

Recommendation 7: That subject to acceptance of Recommendation 6, the Shire of Morawa seek funding for the relocation of the existing unused building next to the family day care centre and for a coordinator for the Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre for an initial 2-3 year establishment phase.

Recommendation 8: That Morawa District High School and Central Regional TAFE be requested to provide training opportunities for a future workforce for an Early Childhood Education and Care Centre.

WORKING GROUP

Recommendation 9: Subject to support in principle for the establishment of an ECEC Centre in Morawa and an Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre, it is recommended that the Shire of Morawa establish a Working Group to progress these initiatives. Membership of the Working Group should include the Shire, MDHS, MEEDAC, Elders and other relevant stakeholders and the Approved Provider following their selection.

1. BACKGROUND

The Shire of Morawa has received requests from community members to investigate the development of an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Centre in Morawa.

Morawa District High School (MDHS) and Western Australian College of Agriculture – Morawa provide regional education services with the primary school catering for local children. Early childhood education and care is provided by a family day care educator, who is approved to cater for up to 7 children depending on their age, in Shire owned premises.

The Shire wishes to gain a better understanding as to whether the current family day care service fully meets community demand for early childhood education and care or if the economic contribution of families is limited by a lack of early childhood options.

Community members point to the provision of ECEC services in Mingenew, Three Springs and Perenjori which have smaller populations but similar economic drivers as a reason for an ECEC centre to be located in Morawa.

The Shire has concerns that an ECEC centre may not be sustainable in the longer term.

Jill Cameron and Associates were engaged by the Shire to undertake a study to assess the level of unmet need for early childhood education and care/childcare in the Shire of Morawa.

2. APPROACH

The approach was underpinned by the Shire's wish:

- to ascertain the need for an Early Childhood Education and Care centre in Morawa,
- to identify the opportunities, barriers to success,
- to assess whether further investigation is warranted, and
- to prepare a written report.

Tasks undertaken included:

- a) desktop review of Commonwealth and State government policies relevant to ECEC and recent relevant reports,
- b) desktop review of ABS demographic data and Education Department data,
- c) identification of and consultation with the providers of ECEC services within 1 hour drive of Morawa,
- d) distribution of a surveymonkey questionnaire to parents of K-Yr6 children attending Morawa DHS,
- e) site visit to existing Family Day Care operating as an "in venue" service,
- f) targeted consultation with key stakeholders (by telephone and face to face), and
- g) analysis and preparation of a written report.

3. CONTEXT

3.1 Early Childhood Education and Care/childcare in Australia

3.1.1 Benefits of ECEC

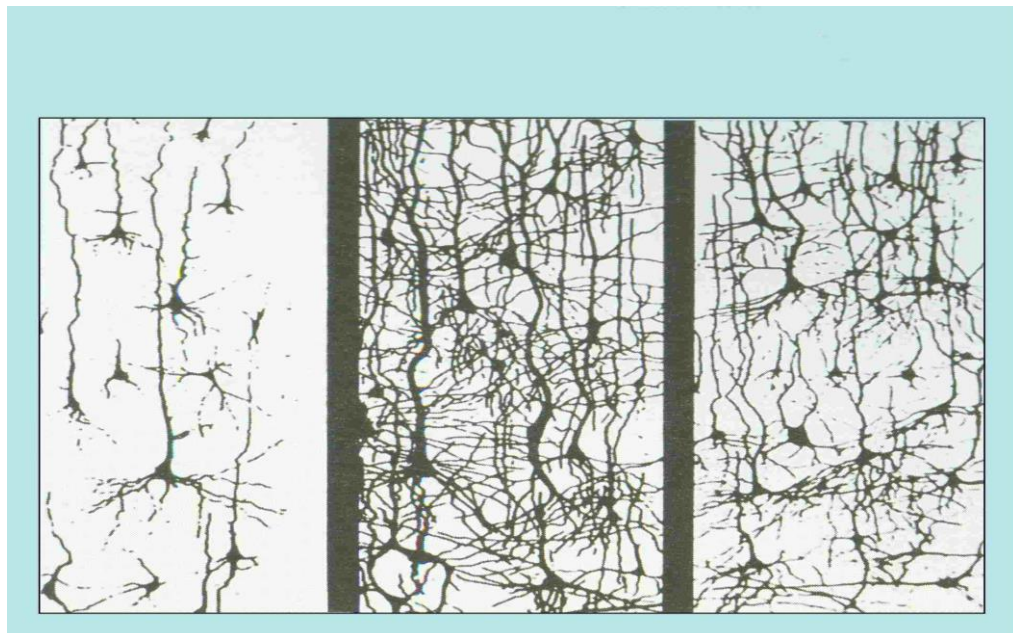
There is substantial evidence that early childhood services have a strong impact on children's learning and development and that children who participate in these services do better on measures of educational performance when they attend primary school. This is particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Provision of ECEC in the 21st century is responding to the reality that women will continue to participate strongly in the workforce. However, it is important that the rationale for providing good quality early childhood services is not confined solely to its value in supporting female workforce participation.

Research has demonstrated that the skills and abilities acquired in early childhood are fundamental to a person's success and well-being in later life. A positive early childhood provides personal and economic benefits to the individual and then to the society as a whole.¹ Research has also shown that 90% of a child's brain develops by the time they are 5 years old.²

The following image of brain development³ highlights firstly, just how rapidly brains develop in the first few years of life, with proliferation of connections and secondly, how later development – the 'pruning' of connections that reflects learning of particular skills – builds on the network that develops in the earlier years. Social disadvantage continues to limit children's chances – early childhood is a time when some children fall behind and the early years provides a particular window of opportunity; it is much harder and much more expensive to help children later on.

THE DEVELOPING BRAIN



AT BIRTH

AT 6 YEARS OLD

AT 14 YEARS OLD

Early learning not only supports the development of cognitive, social, emotional and motivational skills, but also drives later learning and achievement, which in turn

¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004b) *Children's emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains*. Working Paper No. 2. Available online: <http://www.developingchild.net/pubs/wp.html>.

² <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/brain-development-in-children>

³ Image presented at a conference in Melbourne in 2006 by Prof J Shonkoff, a paediatrician who leads Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, a researcher 'who brought about the brain science revolution in understanding child development'.

contributes to the “*human capital*” which underpins the economic wellbeing of the broader community.⁴

There is substantial evidence that early childhood services delivering high quality centre-based child care programs can provide some children with opportunities for learning and development which may exceed those available solely within in their families. In these cases, the provision of early childhood services provides government with an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and inequality that begins in early childhood.⁵

3.1.2 ECEC business model

The business model for the provision of early childhood services in Australia is essentially one in which organisations must manage income to ensure that it exceeds the full cost of providing the service. At its core the model demands organisations be well-managed so that they are financially viable and are maintained as ongoing concerns. Approved Providers, both for-profit and not-for-profit, are independent, autonomous business owners and operators.

The task of managing any early childhood education and care service is now a significant business process operating within a complex legislative framework and Government requirements. Human resources management, capital works, maintenance and legal and professional responsibilities, all occurring within the context of ensuring child and staff development and safety, require sophisticated business management skills.

3.1.3 ECEC service types

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is delivered in:

- *Long Day Care (LDC) centres*. The Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)⁶ approves Not-for-Profit (NfP) and Private-for-Profit (PfP) providers of centre-based ECEC for children of pre-school age and before school, after school and/or vacation care for children of school age. Special conditions may apply where programs are provided for school age children. Financial viability of a LDC service can be improved by inclusion of programs for children of school age.
- *Family Day Care (FDC)*. A Family Day Care Service is an approved service provider (NfP or PfP) comprising of a co-ordination unit and a network of registered and qualified educators who operate a business from their own home for children aged from birth to 13 years. In regional Western Australia, ‘In Venue’ FDC may be provided by a self-employed Educator in a community facility leased from or provided by a Shire. This is an important service option in rural communities too small for the operation of a viable LDC centre or where FDC in a home is not feasible because of a widely dispersed population and/or home premises that don’t meet the National Quality Standard. In Morawa, Ngala Family Day Care Service is the Approved Provider and coordination unit, with “Wild Things” being the operated by the self-employed Educator.
- *Outside School Hours Care (OSHC)* is approved to provide before school care, after school care and/or vacation care. The number of stand-alone OSHC services in regional Western Australia is a relatively small.

⁴ Heckman, J. (2000a) “*The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: Invest in the Very Young.*” Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies: Chicago

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) *Starting Strong II, Early Childhood Education and Care*. OECD Publications. Paris.

⁶ <https://www.acecqa.gov.au>

3.2 National Quality Framework and Legislation ⁷

Early childhood education and care in Australia is governed by interrelated Commonwealth and state and territory laws. The National Law sets a standard for early childhood education and care across Australia. Providers must be approved under the National Law to operate a service however it is the Regulatory authorities in each state and territory that grant this approval.

Details of the National Quality Framework and Legislation are provided in Appendix 1.

3.3 Family Assistance Law

Family Assistance Law sets the rules for administering the Commonwealth Government's Child Care Subsidy (CCS). Providers must be approved under Family Assistance Law to administer the Child Care Subsidy at their service. The Australian Government grants this approval.

3.3.1 Child Care Subsidy ⁸

Australian families receive help with the cost of child care through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS). CCS is paid directly to providers and passed on to families as a fee reduction. Families pay the gap between the daily fee and their approved level of subsidy. To be approved to administer CCS, providers must be approved to provide early childhood education and care and administer the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) in Australia. The standard or advertised daily fee is determined by each Approved Provider and varies significantly between services.

Approval to operate a service and administer CCS requires approval from:

- **The relevant state or territory government.** This deems providers suitable to ensure the health, safety, wellbeing and educational outcomes of children. This is known as National Law approval or state regulatory approval.
- **The Australian Government.** This deems providers suitable under Family Assistance Law to administer CCS.
- **The Child Care Subsidy System (CCSS).** This is the online system used to administer CCS payments. It holds records like enrolments and session reports. This information is used to calculate payments for families. It is also where a range of mandatory obligations and tasks are monitored.

3.3.2 Additional Child Care Subsidy

Additional Child Care Subsidy provides additional fee assistance to support vulnerable or disadvantaged families and children. This support recognises the preventative and protective influence of quality child care on a child's health, wellbeing and development; and the importance of continuity of care (see 3.1.1).

There are four different payments under Additional Child Care Subsidy:

- Additional Child Care Subsidy (child wellbeing)—to help children who are at risk of serious abuse or neglect.
- Additional Child Care Subsidy (grandparent)—to help grandparents on income support who are the principal caregiver of their grandchildren.
- Additional Child Care Subsidy (temporary financial hardship)—to help families experiencing financial hardship.
- Additional Child Care Subsidy (transition to work)—to help low-income families transitioning from income support to work.

⁷ Sources: <https://www.communities.wa.gov.au>; <https://www.acecqa.gov.au>

⁸ <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/child-care-subsidy>

3.3.3 Eligibility for Child Care Subsidy

Families must meet eligibility criteria to get Child Care Subsidy (CCS). The amount of CCS a family can get depends on their circumstances. Parents must:

- care for their child at least two nights per fortnight or have 14% share of care
- be liable for child care fees at an approved child care service
- meet residency requirements.

Their child must:

- meet immunisation requirements
- not be attending secondary school (unless an exemption applies)
- be 13 or under (except in certain circumstances).
- From 11 July 2022, children who haven't attended a session of care in 26 consecutive weeks will no longer be eligible for CCS.

3.3.4. Family income

Services Australia works out a family's CCS percentage based on their **family income estimate**. The CCS percentage is the amount they'll subsidise. It will apply to the hourly fee or the relevant hourly rate cap, whichever is lower. Details of CCS rates and hourly caps are provided as Attachment 2.

3.3.5 Activity level

The hours of subsidised care a family can get each fortnight depends on their **activity level**. The higher the level of activity, the more hours of subsidised care families can get.

In two parent households, Services Australia looks at both parents' activity level. They use the parent with the lower activity level to determine a family's hours of subsidised care.

There are 4 activity levels:

Hours of activity each fortnight	Hours of subsidised care, per child, each fortnight
Less than 8 hours	0 hours if you earn above \$72,466 24 hours if you earn \$72,466 or below
8 hours to 16 hours	36 hours
More than 16 hours to 48 hours	72 hours
More than 48 hours	100 hours

Families need to do a recognised activity to get CCS. The amount of CCS a family can get depends on the **type of care** they use. A family's CCS percentage will apply to the lowest of either:

- the hourly rate cap
- the hourly fee charged at a service.

NOTE: Some exemptions apply for parents who cannot meet activity test requirements

3.3.6 Residence rules

A parent or their partner must be living in Australia and have one of the following continue to meet the residence rules for as long as they get this subsidy:

- Australian citizenship
- a permanent visa
- a Special Category visa

- a certain temporary visa type, for example a Partner Provisional or Temporary Protection visa.

3.3.7 Government policy changes from July 2023

Changes to take place from July 2023, subject to the passage of legislation in federal parliament, will:

- lift the maximum Child Care Subsidy (CCS) rate to 90% for families earning up to \$80,000 for their first child in care,
- increase CCS rates for around 96% of families with a child currently in care earning under \$530,000, and
- keep higher CCS rates for families with two or more children aged 5 years or under in care.

3.3.8 Third party payment of gap fees

The following information regarding third party payment of gap fees addresses the concern expressed that an ECEC service may not be affordable for Aboriginal families.

“A key principle and requirement under Family Assistance Law is that all parents who receive Child Care Subsidy (CCS) must make a co-contribution to their child care fees by paying the gap fee. The gap fee is the remaining total of the fees, after the CCS amount has been applied. Where a third party helps a family pay their child care fees, the amount of CCS paid reduces, maintaining a gap fee. However, state and territory governments (and their agencies) can pay some or all of the gap fee, without the CCS payment diminishing, for disadvantaged and vulnerable children. This helps remove barriers to disadvantaged and vulnerable children accessing child care.

The requirement for a parent to make a co-contribution does not apply if the family is eligible for Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) (child wellbeing) or ACCS (grandparent) for the child as this generally covers 100 per cent of the fee charged”.⁹

3.3.9 Universal Access

During 2021, a new *Preschool Reform Agreement 2022 – 2025* (PRA) was negotiated between the Commonwealth Government and States and Territories. The WA Minister for Education and Training signed the PRA on behalf of the State of WA on 9 February 2022.

Under the PRA, from 2023, the Commonwealth requires PRA funding to flow to all sectors that have children enrolled in 600 hours of preschool per year. This will be the first time that such funding will be available to the WA ECEC sector. Previous Commonwealth funding delivered under successive Universal Access National Partnership Agreement have only been available to WA school-based kindergartens. While implementation of the PRA in Western Australia is still being developed, the outcome should be financially beneficial for families and the Approved Provider of ECEC services.

⁹ <https://www.education.gov.au/child-care-package/child-care-subsidy/child-care-fees/third-party-payments>

4 SHIRE OF MORAWA

4.1 Overview

Morawa in the Mid West region is located approximately 4 hours by road from Perth and 1.5 hours from Geraldton.

The local economy is mixed, with broadacre cropping, mining, education, healthcare and associated services providing most of the employment in the Shire. Morawa has a swimming pool, community resource centre, police and St John ambulance services with a supermarket, pharmacy, post office, newsagency, agricultural suppliers, bakery and café, clothing and hardware stores providing a range of community, retail and commercial services. The town and surrounding region is a popular tourist destination during the wildflower season from late winter through to early October when the hotel, bed and breakfast accommodation and caravan park with quality self-contained units are heavily booked.

The impact of Severe Tropical Cyclone Seroja which crossed the coast between Kalbarri and Geraldton on Sunday 11 April 2021 on the Mid West region including Morawa was significant and is ongoing.

Morawa is described as a family-orientated town with a strong sense of community with affordable housing ¹⁰. ABS data 2010-2020 ¹¹ shows a downward trend in the annual estimated residential population and a range from 6 to 22 births, with such fluctuations being a common feature of small rural communities.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Estimated residential population	886	911	892	872	835	800	762	731	698	675	661
Number of births	19	22	7	21	9	12	12	8	6	14	13

Morawa Perenjori Health Service (Hospital) includes a 24 hour emergency department, occupational therapy and physiotherapy services, respite care and permanent residential aged care, Aged Care Information and Referral Service, paediatric medical services and an Integrated Family Service.

A well-used Youth Centre for youth aged between 8 and 18 years provides an After School Program each week during the school term. A School Holiday Program operates for set days during each school holiday period.

The Shire is part way into a six month trial to attract migrants to relocate to Morawa to develop a more culturally diverse population and address workforce shortages. To date, single males have participated in the trial but none have relocated family members. Should the program develop beyond the trial stage, it is anticipated that families with children will become a part of the Morawa community.

Morawa Shire owns land across the road from Midland District High School, next to the school's off-site kindergarten. A plan of the school is provided as Appendix 3.

¹⁰ <https://www.morawa.wa.gov.au/community/about-your-community/liveability-in-morawa.aspx>

¹¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/births-australia/latest-release#data-download>

4.2 Education

4.2.1 Morawa District High School (MDHS)¹²

Morawa town is the location of the district high school (Kindergarten-Year 12) and the agricultural college (Years 10-12) offering farm skills, automotive, engineering and plant/animal science-based subjects and providing residential facilities. Students come from within Morawa itself, nearby towns and adjacent farming areas.

Students in Year 11 and Year 12 have a flexible senior school programme, with the school endeavouring to meet the needs of all students by using different ways of delivery. Both VET and ATAR courses are offered. ATAR English and Maths subjects are offered face to face in conjunction with the WA College of Agriculture Morawa.

The choice of senior school pathways offered include WACE, ATAR, Wholly School Assessed Subjects and Vocational Education and Training Cert IIs in ICT, Kitchen Operations and Hospitality and Engineering and Automotive. Students have the opportunity to transition between campuses, classes, training programs and further education with ease, maintaining continuity in their career pathway.

In Semester 1, 2021, the school catered for a population of 38.3% Aboriginal students, and had a 43.1% student transiency rate.¹³ At the start of Semester 1, 2022, there were 70 Aboriginal students representing 37% of MDHS enrolments. The school has close links with local Elders.

*“Our local Aboriginal culture is celebrated in Morawa annually as we proudly host the Midwest NAIDOC Event. This is a collaboration between the Australian Government, the Shire of Morawa, MEEDAC and the NAIDOC Working Group. We are privileged to have local Widi Elders living and working in our community, making a real difference. The key to this event, is successfully engaging our community by building authentic relationships with our Aboriginal and Non Aboriginal families and community members alike”.*¹⁴

WA Education Department school census data shows an increasing school population.¹⁵

Morawa District High School Student Numbers - Trends

Semester 1	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Primary (Excluding Kindergarten)	81	79	80	88	85
Lower Secondary	58	67	67	74	74
Upper Secondary	19	18	16	11	20
Total	158	164	163	173	179

Variations in enrolments in each year group reflect fluctuations in the birth rate in the community.

Number of students enrolled at Morawa District High School in Semester 1 2022¹⁶

Kindergarten	Pre-primary	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
7	12	14	16	7	11	9	16	88

Note: Kindergarten children attend part-time

¹² <https://www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolsonline/overview>

¹³ Information provided from MDHS records

¹⁴ MDHS Newsletter 2022 Issue 5 accessed on <https://sway.office.com/ehJ1KlyIVjUzkNUo?ref=Link>

¹⁵ https://www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolsonline/student_trends.do?schoolID=4086&pageID=SP03

¹⁶ https://www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolsonline/student_current.do?schoolID=4086&pageID=SP01

4.2.2 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) measures the development of children in Australia in their first year of full-time school. The AEDC provides important information for communities, governments and schools to support their planning and service provision.

“Communities can influence the earliest years of children’s lives. The AEDC results give communities a snapshot of children’s development as they arrive at school. The results can support communities to understand the local levels of developmental vulnerability and where that vulnerability exists within their community.

The AEDC provides communities with an opportunity to reflect on what the influences may have been for children before arriving at school.

Recognising the influences that can impact on children’s development can provide communities with the opportunity to consider what is working well and what needs to be improved or developed to better support children and their families. By providing a common ground on which people can work together, the AEDC results can enable communities to form partnerships to plan and implement activities, programs and services to help shape the future and wellbeing of children in Australia.

Investing time, effort and resources in children’s early years – when their brains are developing rapidly – brings lifelong benefits to them and to the whole community. American economist and Nobel prize winner James Heckman argues that once children fall behind in their learning, they are likely to remain behind. Gaps in children’s performance levels open up early, and stay mostly constant after eight years of age. Beyond eight years, school environments can only play a small role in reducing these differences.

Investing in the early years can reduce expenditure on special education, criminal justice and welfare, and can increase national productivity by improving the skills of the workforce, reducing disadvantage and strengthening the global competitiveness of the economy.”¹⁷

The instrument used to collect information consists of approximately 100 questions across five key domains, which are closely linked to child health, education and social outcomes.

Because of the small number of children in each community, the 2021 AEDC results for Morawa and Perenjori schools have been combined into a single Community Profile.¹⁸

The following table describes the domains and identifies the percentage of children in Morawa/Perenjori assessed as being ‘on track’ in their development, ‘at risk’ and ‘vulnerable’.

¹⁷ <https://www.aedc.gov.au/about-the-aedc/why-the-aedc-is-important>

¹⁸ <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/community-profiles>

2021 AECD COMMUNITY PROFILE: MORAWA AND PERENJORI

Domain	Description	% of children 'On track'	% of children 'at risk'	% of children 'vulnerable'
Physical health and wellbeing	Children's physical readiness for the school day, physical independence and gross and fine motor skills.	73.3%	6.7%	20%
Social competence	Children's overall social competence, responsibility and respect, approach to learning and readiness to explore new things	66.7%	13.3%	20%
Emotional maturity	Children's pro-social and helping behaviours and absence of anxious and fearful behaviour, aggressive behaviour and hyperactivity and inattention.	66.7%	13.3%	20%
Language and cognitive skills (school-based)	Children's basic literacy, advanced literacy, basic numeracy, and interest in literacy, numeracy and memory	60%	6.7%	33.3%
Communication skills and general knowledge	Children's communication skills and general knowledge based on broad developmental competencies and skills measured in the school context	80%	6.7%	13.3%

40% of Morawa/Perenjori children were vulnerable in one or more domain and 20% were vulnerable in two or more domains compared with 9.4% across Western Australia as a whole. AEDC data also showed that nationally, the percentage of developmentally vulnerable children was higher in communities with small populations compared with children in communities with larger populations.

4.2.3 Ten Year Education and Training Plan for the Morawa Shire and Wider North Midlands Region (August 2016)

The Shire of Morawa funded development of a *Morawa Ten Year Education and Training Masterplan*. The plan developed by Peter Browne Consulting and Barbara Browne Consulting in August 2016 identified issues *"each representing a major challenge to be addressed by all levels of Government and local communities to ensure the viability of the schools and quality education for all children in the North Midlands"*.¹⁹

The Issues facing Morawa and the wider North Midlands schools were identified as:

1. Early Childhood Education
2. Declining School Populations
3. Limited Residential Accommodation
4. Student Welfare
5. Disengaged students
6. Aboriginal Education
7. Attraction and Retention of Staff
8. Breadth and Depth of Learning Opportunities
9. Infrastructure and Facilities

¹⁹ Ten Year Education and Training Plan for the Morawa Shire and Wider North Midlands Region, Peter Browne Consulting and Barbara Browne Consulting, August 2016, p.3

- 10. Career Pathways and Post School Options
- 11. Digital Infrastructure and IT
- 12. Reputational Management

Given the importance of addressing disadvantage in children's early years, it is significant that the Ten Year Education and Training Masterplan identified Early Childhood Education as the first of the 12 issues facing Morawa and the wider North Midlands schools.

The plan included the following recommendations for Early Childhood Education in Morawa, Perenjori, Mingenew and Three Springs.

"1.1 That Midland District High School (MDHS) lobby for a Child and Parent Centre (Family Centre) to be built on the school site as soon as possible;

NOTE: While the WA State Government is not funding any new Child and Parent Centres, it was noted that MDHS has a strong focus on early childhood education, providing a venue and support for a playgroup and parenting programs delivered by Ngala. In 2021, the school was funded for an additional Education Assistant to support teachers in Kindergarten to Year 2 which enabled the continued employment of two 0.4 FTE Education Assistants who are timetabled across the early childhood classes to assist with small group and individual instruction, and oversee early intervention Literacy and Numeracy programs. Education Assistants have benefited from undertaking professional learning.

1.2 That MDHS be proactive in forming an Early Childhood Cluster/Hub with Perenjori, Mingenew and Three Springs;

1.3 That MDHS continues implementing early intervention initiatives to decrease the number of developmentally vulnerable children entering Kindergarten;

1.4 That MDHS establish a partnership with the Child and Parent Centre-Rangeway attached to Rangeway PS in Geraldton;

1.5 That MDHS continue with implementing the Bright Stars Family Day Care model; and

*1.6 That MDHS visit the Bid-Bidi Centre in Mt Magnet."*²⁰

The family day care model as described in 4.3.2 below has been maintained (recommendation 1.5), however, stakeholders interviewed for this report identified the provision of an early childhood education and care (ECEC) centre in Morawa as a potential significant driver for decreasing the number of developmentally vulnerable Morawa children entering Kindergarten (recommendation 1.3).

4.3 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)/childcare provision in Morawa and the wider Mid-West Region

4.3.1 Morawa History

The current centre, operating as an in-venue Family Day Care, at 27 Dregghorn Street, Morawa, was originally the Infant Health Centre built in 1956-57. The centre became a day care centre in 1995 when the infant health centre relocated.

Information provided by a number of people consulted indicated that the centre was initially managed as a community based not-for-profit child care centre. When the child care centre was not equipped to cater for babies, parents raised funds to purchase and locate an air-conditioned 'donga' on land adjacent to the centre to accommodate babies. The donga is still there but not currently in use.

²⁰ Ten Year Education and Training Plan for the Morawa Shire and Wider North Midlands Region, Peter Browne Consulting and Barbara Browne Consulting, August 2016

The community-based centre discontinued when the core group of children progressed to school and the management committee was no longer viable, a pattern consistent with the challenge of maintaining committees and centres in many small rural communities.

A private for-profit provider who operated at least one other centre in the Geraldton area appears to have subsequently operated the Morawa centre for a period of time. Evidence shows that small rural services are not financially viable for private providers which is a likely reason for the operator withdrawing and the centre closing.

The Tiny Tigers childcare centre re-opened in the facility owned by the Shire, on 26 April 2016 *'filling the large gap in local childcare'*.²¹ The Morawa service was provided as an 'in-venue' family day care service with Ngala becoming Approved Provider for the Bright Stars Family Day Care service for which the City of Greater Geraldton was the previous Approved Provider. The City of Greater Geraldton had identified Bright Stars Family Day Care as a business activity to which Competitive Neutrality principles applied. Noting that *'The City's former Bright Stars Family Day Care unit that supported the provision of quality home based child care transitioned its services to Ngala, a specialist business provider of Early Parenting and Early Childhood services. Council recognised this transition as an excellent outcome for the community with services to operate under the same business model'*.²²

It is understood that for a period of time, prior to the current Family Day Care Educator operating 'Wild Things' family day care, two individual family day care educators may have operated in the two adjacent premises.

4.3.2 Ngala Family Day Care Service – "Wild Things"

The Family Day Care Educator who has provided the Wild Things service at Morawa for some five years is highly regarded by the Ngala Coordination Unit. Given the average period of operation for a sole trader family day care provider is around two years, this demonstrates a long term commitment to ensuring ECEC services are available to the Morawa community.

While the Morawa premises are not 'perfect' and would be unlikely to meet the standard required for centre-based care, the Ngala Coordinator is satisfied that the physical environment meets all of the requirements for a family day care premises. A kitchen recently installed by the Shire is a welcome improvement. It is estimated that time for cleaning and administration in addition to providing the service from 8am-5pm, and completing Certificate 111 study, the Educator would generally work a 50 hour week. Efforts to recruit a relief Educator to cover the current Educator during absences from the service such as for illness or to attend business hours appointments have been unsuccessful.

Ngala Family Day Care Educators:

- provide a safe and welcoming homely environment for children,
- develop and tailor a program for each child based on their learning and development needs,
- keep a development record for each child in their care,
- manage their own business, administration and hours of work,
- must hold or at least be 'actively working towards' an approved Certificate III level education and care qualification,
- must meet first aid qualification requirements.

²¹ <https://www.morawa.wa.gov.au/documents/1363/20152016-annual-report>, p4

²² <https://www.cgg.wa.gov.au/council-meetings/ordinary-council-meeting/17-october-2017/117/documents/12-ccs290-attachment.pdf>, p17

Trained Ngala staff regularly visit the Wild Things Educator to monitor the children's progress and provide support, resources and ongoing training in contemporary childcare and education practice, as well as assisting in establishing the business.

4.3.3 Overview of ECEC services in the Mid West Region (except in the City of Greater Geraldton)

ECEC SERVICES IN THE MID WEST (EXCL. THE CITY OF GREATER GERALDTON)

Service	Approved Provider	Number of places	Days/hours
Carnamah Child Care Centre	Carnamah Child Care Centre Inc	12	Mon-Thurs: 8.00am-5.00pm
REED - Mingenew	Regional Early Education and Development Inc	11	Mon-Thurs: 8.00am-5.00pm
REED-Northampton	Regional Early Education and Development Inc	20	Tues-Fri: 8.00am-4.30pm
REED - Perenjori	Regional Early Education and Development Inc	19	Mon-Thurs: 7.00am-5.00pm
Three Springs Early Childcare Centre	Three Springs Childcare Inc	19	Mon-Thurs: 8.00am-5.00pm Fri: 8.00am-4.00pm
Denham - In venue Family Day Care	Ngala Children's Services	Up to 7 depending on age N/A	N/A
Morawa – In venue Family Day Care	Ngala Children's Services	Up to 7 depending on age	Mon-Thurs: 8.00am – 5.00pm

This table shows a mix of Approved Providers being Family Day Care supported by Ngala Children's Services, community-based services managed via a volunteer management committee or those managed by Regional Early Education and Development Inc.

4.3.4 Regional Early Education and Development Inc (REED)²³

Currently REED is the Approved Provider for Mid West ECEC services in Perenjori, Mingenew and Northampton. These services are supported by a dedicated Cluster Manager, who performs a managing and coordinating role across and between services in their designated cluster area.

The establishment of REED was a response to the urgent need for a service delivery model to address the sustainability of ECEC services in regional Western Australia, which had been a challenge for more than a decade.

REED is governed by an independent skills-based Board and committee structure and managed by a qualified, experienced General Manager, senior management team members and cluster managers. REED recognises that provision of ECEC services in regional areas is not only about attracting and keeping essential workers and their families in communities and contributing to the viability of other services and businesses in regional communities but also supporting child developmental needs. Increasing the number of younger families in the regions ensures that schools, health, medical and other essential services and businesses are maintained and skilled workforces supported, as well as maintaining the population in a livable community.

²³ <https://reedwa.org.au>

Since Regional Early Education and Development Inc (REED) was officially launched by Hon Simone McGurk MLA, Minister for Child Protection; Women's Interests; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Community Services on 16th March 2018, REED has to date become the Approved Provider or Licensee for 22 child care centres, a family day care service and an outside school care service in the Wheatbelt, South West and Mid West regions.

Prior to joining REED, these centres operated with a locally based volunteer management committee or were being managed by the relevant local Shire. Many did not have the income to cover staff salaries, and volunteer management committees of Incorporated Associations did not always have the expertise to identify the problems and take the actions necessary to resolve this situation.

Shires have opted to transition ECEC services to REED in acknowledgement that being the Approved Provider of an ECEC service is outside its core business operations. REED services for which a Shire was the former Approved Provider include the Shires of Cunderdin, Darkan, Quairading and Perenjori. Other Shires that had previously supported volunteer management committees by taking responsibility for functions such as financial or payroll management were able to transfer this responsibility to REED.

5. FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

- People consulted included representatives from the Shire, the hospital, MDHS, Child Health, Ngala, Wild Things Family Day Care, REED and Approved Providers of ECEC services in neighbouring Shires.
- A number of people said that an ECEC centre is needed to meet the needs of a new generation of parents whose preference is for a centre-based service rather than the smaller family day care service. Community expectations are changing, and in the future many grandparents are likely to be in the workforce and unavailable to provide informal care.
- The view was expressed by a number of people that the current family day care service in Morawa is not flexible enough – that it should be available earlier than 8am and close later than 5pm, provide childcare/babysitting on a casual basis and be available for babies younger than 6 months, for example. It is inconvenient for employers and parents when the Educator is not available and the service closes for a day or longer - sometimes at short notice and the parent is unable to work.
- Some people who recognised that it is unrealistic for the family day care educator to extend hours of operation beyond her current 9 hour day, suggested that alternative options could be discussed and negotiated to accommodate specific circumstances and needs with major employers such as the hospital and the Shire. For example,
 - a 'buddy system' could be developed to fill the gap between the commencement of a nurse's shift at 7.00am and the opening of the family day care service at 8.00am,
 - the hospital could negotiate a special arrangement with the Family Day Care service and Educator to cater for circumstances when a nurse is called in at short notice to fill a shift, during the covid pandemic, for example, if the arrangement is legally compliant for both the educator and the parent,
 - the hospital, Shire and school could jointly purchase an equivalent full-time place to be available within the family day care operating hours for when a staff member is required at short notice.

- There is a view that because the adjacent Shires of Perenjori and Three Springs have purpose built multifunctional centres that include a 19 place ECEC service, Morawa with a larger population than these two communities should have an ECEC centre of comparable quality.
- Because health services for Morawa children and families are located in the high quality health service (hospital), and playgroup is accommodated in MDHS, Morawa needs only a stand-alone ECEC centre without the additional dedicated rooms provided in the Three Springs and Perenjori centres.
- A new ECEC centre should be welcoming for members of the Morawa community, regardless of their financial status or ethnicity.
- An ECEC centre would have an important role in reducing the level of developmental delay among Aboriginal children and lifting overall school academic performance.
- A centre should be accessible for children, parents and staff with disabilities and meet the developmental needs of children with disabilities.

Location of an ECEC centre in Morawa would be very unlikely to impact negatively on utilisation of existing centres in Perenjori, Three Springs, Mingenew or Carnamah.

The consultants are aware that the low response rate to a parent survey was impacted by poor telecommunication connectivity and lack of computer access for many families. While the survey did not provide statistically valid results, responses did provide some useful insights:

- There is a mix of parents using formal ECEC (family day care in Morawa or a centre in another location) while others use informal care (eg. grandparents, other relatives, friends, babysitter).
- Families living in Morawa town and parents who have used formal childcare elsewhere appeared more likely to use the formal family day care service in Morawa.
- Parents who work in education, health and local government are the most likely employees to use formal ECEC now and in the future.
- The most important factors that equally influence parents' decisions to place their child/ren in a child care centre or family day care were that 'it's important for my child/ren's learning and development' and 'it allows me to work or study'.

6. COMPARATIVE SCHOOL DATA²⁴

ECEC Approved Places	Kindergarten	Pre Primary	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Morawa District High School								
5 (FDC)	7	12	14	16	7	11	9	16
Perenjori Primary School								
19	6	7	4	8	4	5	6	7
Three Springs Primary School								
19	5	9	9	6	8	10	10	8
Mingenew Primary School								
11	10	11	8	13	13	9	7	4
Carnamah District High School								
12	4	5	3	4	3	6	6	3
Coorow Primary School								
	8	8	4	4	6	3	5	3
Mullewa Primary School								
	5	7	3	8	3	5	5	7

NOTE: There is no ECEC centre in Coorow or Mullewa.

7. FINDINGS

7.1 Current in-venue Family Day Care service

Morawa families use a mix of informal child care provided by grandparents, other relatives and friends and formal early childhood education and care provided by 'Wild Things' family day care service.

Notwithstanding the small number of children attending Wild Things family day care service, and the preference some parents have for centre-based care, the family day care service is a critical resource in the Morawa community, particularly for parents employed at the hospital, school and Shire who do not have extended family members able to provide informal care.

It does not appear to be well understood that the family day care educator is a self-employed sole trader who operates in a complex ECEC system within clearly defined legislation, policies and rules, in a venue which is not without some limitations. Availability of an ECEC centre operating within a strict legal framework would not necessarily meet all community expectations. For example, opening hours are determined by the Approved Provider taking account of potential utilisation, the regulated staff:child ratio, cost and impact on financial viability. Days and hours of operating will therefore vary between centres. (Refer p.13).

As a self-employed sole trader, the family day care educator does not have sick leave or paid annual leave and will inevitably need to close the service, sometimes at short notice, when she is ill or has important business to attend to. It is understood that this can be inconvenient for parents and their employers. It is common for ECEC services to close for 2-4 weeks during the Christmas/New Year period when utilisation of services is usually very low.

Efforts could be made within the Morawa community to recruit a relief educator. While income for a relief educator would not be regular, this role would provide a valuable community service.

²⁴ <https://www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolsonline>

Ngala Family Day Care service would provide support for anyone willing to be recruited to the role.

The family day care service is not accessed by Aboriginal families who are among the most disadvantaged and most developmentally vulnerable members of the community.

7.2 Considerations for the future

While the Shire owned facility in which the family day care service currently operates has been assessed as suitable for family day care, it is unlikely to be fit for purpose in the medium to long term as standards and expectations increase. The facility would not meet standards for a centre-based service.

The quality of the ageing family day care premises is already a likely disincentive for some parents to use the existing service. This is unlikely to change in the future. Similarly, it has been found that an ECEC centre that is ageing and not fit for purpose can have difficulty attracting and retaining educators. Therefore, the premises currently used for in-venue family day care will not be suitable for any future centre-based service.

Availability of a contemporary ECEC centre is increasingly important for attracting and retaining staff for essential services such as education, health and police and for attracting migrants to relocate to regional areas.

There is strong evidence that establishment of an ECEC centre in Morawa could have a critical role in reducing the level of developmental vulnerability of Aboriginal children as well as providing a centre-based service for current and future workers in essential services, and for business and professional services. The availability of before and after school care and vacation care at a future ECEC service will meet the needs of school aged children who are not old enough to attend the Youth Centre.

School enrolment data and a focus on ‘Closing the Gap’ for Aboriginal children together with evidence that the FDC service does not address all need for ECEC in the Morawa district is sufficient to support the recommendation that consideration should be given to establishing a not-for-profit ECEC centre in Morawa.

Should the Shire make the decision to proceed with the establishment of an ECEC centre, given the time involved in sourcing funding, particularly in a challenging financial environment, in addition to the time needed for planning and establishing a new service, it will be important to support the current family day care educator to ensure Morawa is not without an ECEC service that meets required standards and benefits both local services and young children’s development. Availability of funding aimed at Closing the Gap for a service with a clear goal of addressing Aboriginal disadvantage could provide additional funding.

Given the limited availability of resources within the Shire, funding would need to be sourced for a (time limited) project officer for the management of the planning and development process as well as community engagement with Morawa families and organisations including MEEDAC, MDHS and a potential Approved Provider of the service. The project officer would also have a key role in preparation of funding applications for construction and equipping an ECEC centre, communication with the selected Approved Provider and navigating the funding system in preparation for supporting families whose children will be attending the ECEC centre.

7.3 Factors for success

Location

The Shire of Morawa owns property across the road from MDHS, adjacent to the school's kindergarten. However, the co-location of a new ECEC centre with MDHS, close to the pre-primary centre which is also used by the playgroup attended by a number of Aboriginal families, has many benefits and is consistent with national trends to co-locate ECEC centres with schools.

Location of an ECEC centre on school grounds contributes to utilisation when the ECEC centre provides outside school hours care for pre-primary and primary school aged children which contributes to service viability. It also gives a clear message that ECEC is a service that promotes young children's learning and development and is not 'just babysitting'. Additionally, it reduces child safety risks and minimises operating costs for the Approved Provider who does not need to provide additional staff to support the safe transition of children from school to the out of school hours care location when these are located separately.

In Western Australia, where ECEC centres have been located on school grounds in both metropolitan and regional areas, a parcel of land has been excised from the school site and vested in the local Shire. This is a straightforward process. Examples are the ECEC centres at Three Springs and Perenjori where, based on their prior experience operating in sub-optimal facilities separate from the school, the communities had a strong preference for co-location with their school.

Parent fees

Fees are one of the key drivers of a parent's decision about use and quantity of use of child care. Decisions about the number of approved places and grouping of children must therefore consider the potential impact on the operating budget and parent fees.

There is no direct government subsidy available for child care services outside of the family income-based child care subsidy so a provider must operate on a break-even basis. Parent fees are the sole source of income unless an additional source of external financial support is acquired.

Subject to the passage of legislation in Federal Parliament a more generous child care subsidy will be introduced from 1st July 2023, making fees affordable for Aboriginal families and making it more attractive for higher income parents to enter the workforce. In addition, a Productivity Commission Inquiry could bring about additional changes by the time a service becomes operational.

It should be noted that fees are set by the Approved Provider of the service, however an understanding of the fee structure set by the Approved Provider should be an important consideration for the Shire when considering selection of an appropriate Approved Provider to operate a service in Shire owned premises.

Size

A 19 place centre would provide the flexibility needed in the Morawa community and would be viable if the ratio of staff:children is well managed by a not-for-profit Approved Provider with experience managing small ECEC services in small rural communities. In rural and regional communities, the numbers of children attending approved ECEC are low compared to the metropolitan and major regional centres where 80 – 100 approved place centres are common. This can be exacerbated by year to year population fluctuations in the relevant age group.

Therefore, while a service may have capacity to accommodate the maximum number of approved places, the Approved Provider has the flexibility to adjust numbers depending on family demand and staff availability. As experienced in most small centres, each approved place is likely to be utilised by different children each day the centre is open, due to the part-time pattern of enrolments. It is likely that enrolments would build up over time and unlikely that all 19 places would be used every day.

Generally, around 80% of the operating budget in a not-for-profit approved child care service is staffing costs. Therefore, for viability purposes, it is imperative that the staff-to-child ratios in the regulations are optimised and child vacancies kept to a minimum. Some points considered when an Approved Provider is determining the most appropriate configuration for numbers in each age group or in mixed age groups to ensure an efficient staffing budget include:

- Children from birth to 24 months require a 1:4 educator-to-child ratio. This is the most expensive group to provide care to on a per child basis. With parental leave policies now in place, there is generally not a high level of demand for care for babies younger than 6 months.
- Children from 24–36 months require a 1:5 educator-to-child ratio. The service for this age group is less expensive care to provide than the younger group on a per child basis. This age group has the highest level of demand in Western Australia generally.
- Children from 36 months and over require a 1:10 educator-to-child ratio and a qualified educator/staff member is not required until there are 10 children. This is the least expensive care to provide on a per child basis. A higher number of enrolments for children 36 months and over can help balance the higher cost of the younger children. However, with Universal Access to kindergarten and pre-primary programs, and co-location of kindergartens with schools, the level of demand for children 36 months and over has decreased significantly in Western Australia. The impact of availability of Universal Access (See 3.3.9) funding to eligible ECEC services, particularly those in small services is not yet clear.

Staffing

The challenges faced by ECEC service providers in recruiting appropriately qualified educators are common across Australia and can be particularly difficult in rural and remote communities because of the smaller population base. A local ECEC centre provides an opportunity to provide training and employment opportunities for local Morawa young people including Aboriginal young people who want to continue living in their local community.

While recruitment of staff is a responsibility of the Approved Provider of the service, the ability to access locally based staff, supplemented by a professional recruitment and development program supports continuity of operations.

Governance and management

The four options considered for potential Approved Provider with responsibility for governance and management were Local Government (the Shire of Morawa), a private for profit provider, a local community based Incorporated Association and a number of experienced not for profit organisations including one dedicated to the delivery of small ECEC services in small rural communities.

- i. The number of Local Government Approved Providers of ECEC services in Western Australia has decreased significantly over the past 10 years. In rural areas, both Shires that assumed the role of Approved Provider when there was no other choice, and community based Incorporated Associations have been found to be unsustainable and operating at a loss, in part because of a lack of relevant skills and knowledge to operate in a complex ECEC operating environment.

- ii. Experience has demonstrated that private-for-profit providers have no interest in operating small ECEC services that cannot generate profits.
- iii. Experience has demonstrated that community based Incorporated Associations have lacked relevant skills and knowledge to operate in a complex ECEC operating environment. Establishment of Regional Early Education and Development Inc (REED) was funded by the WA State Government and Lotterywest to address this problem.
- iv. Some large not-for-profit Approved Providers of ECEC services provide a mix of large and smaller services in both regional and metropolitan areas. There are examples of large not-for-profit providers withdrawing from services which were found to be 'unprofitable' because of their small size. While Ngala provides a multiple range of services for families in the metropolitan and regional areas, including the family day care service in Morawa and other family day care services in the wider Mid West region, it is unlikely that Ngala would have an interest in managing a small Morawa ECEC centre in the future.

Conclusion: REED is the only not-for-profit organisation dedicated solely to provision of ECEC services in small regional and rural communities. As an established ECEC Approved Provider operating in the Mid West, REED is working to overcome staffing challenges by implementing a concerted ECEC workforce development program:

- to increase regional and rural job opportunities,
- to increase participation of Aboriginal people in the workforce which will also increase participation of Aboriginal children in ECEC²⁵,
- to raise the standard of knowledge and skills in the regional ECEC workforce.

This strong focus on providing development opportunities and career pathways leads to empowering Educators with knowledge, ensuring the delivery of high quality services and job satisfaction for its workforce.

Given the support provided by the State Government and Lotterywest for the establishment of REED and REED's track record of providing regional ECEC services, Morawa Shire could confidently make a decision to select REED as the Approved Provider for a Morawa ECEC centre which could be included in REED's recently formed Mid West Cluster.

8. ADDITIONAL INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

In the estimated 2-3 years between making a decision to establish an ECEC centre and the opening of a centre, there is an opportunity to progress other issues identified in the Morawa Ten Year Education and Training Masterplan.

8.1 VET at MDHS

The employment of educators from the local community can be a real strength for an ECEC service, particularly in a challenging employment environment when there is a severe national shortage of early childhood educators. MDHS has a significant Aboriginal student population. A local ECEC centre can provide an opportunity for Aboriginal young people to start on a pathway to employment in a future ECEC centre. An ECEC centre with Aboriginal staff member/s has been found to increase participation of Aboriginal children which contributes to 'closing the gap' targets in addition to providing real employment opportunities and assisting financial viability of the centre. MDHS could have a key role in progressing this opportunity.

²⁵ <https://mailchi.mp/8db5590d8609/reedthenewssept2022>

When the current Family Day Care Educator completes her Certificate III at the end of 2022, she will be able to provide work experience for MDHS students. Negotiation with Central Regional TAFE to expand the range of available VET courses at MDHS to include Early Childhood Education and Care would enable Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to make a start on the pathway to a rewarding career in ECEC in regional Western Australia and beyond.

8.2 ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S CULTURAL AND LEARNING CENTRE

Another possibility is to consider seeking funding to relocate the unused donga adjacent to the family day care premises to the Shire owned land adjacent to the MDHS kindergarten for conversion to an Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre and for employment of a local Aboriginal woman to establish and manage the centre.

An Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre could provide a culturally safe environment for women to study a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care (or other areas of their choice such as aged care, disability services and agriculture) online through TAFE Central Regional – Geraldton, as a pathway to employment for women many of whom have had limited access to employment.

The donga is equipped with a kitchen and bathroom with junior toilets. Grandmothers could provide informal care for young children while their mothers complete their coursework with support from each other. The centre could prepare food for breakfast and lunch for children attending the ECEC centre without having adequate nutrition. Programs involving school students in collection of bush tuck with Elders who could prepare bush tucker meals in the kitchen would also be a possibility. The Centre would effectively provide an innovative intergenerational program and new opportunities for Aboriginal women with a further opportunity to capitalise on the growing tourism industry within the Shire.

9. FUNDING

While the Shire of Morawa manages two local funding opportunities²⁶ it is clear that additional externally sourced funding would be needed to progress implementation of the ECEC centre and an Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre in consultation with Elders and women in the community.

Given the issues the Shire of Morawa is seeking to address, Lotterywest and other WA State and Commonwealth Government agencies with relevant community initiative funding may have an interest in contributing a significant level of funding for an innovative package including the ECEC centre, Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre, and salaries for the two identified positions, for a 2-3 year period.

Lotterywest (and other agencies) would expect the Shire to contribute in some way to funding the initiatives. Shire land and the existing unused donga could form part of the Shire

²⁶ <https://www.morawa.wa.gov.au/community/grants-assistance/the-community-funding-grant.aspx>

The Community Small Grants Fund is a pool of funding discreet to the funding opportunities already provided by the Morawa Sinosteel Future Fund. The total funding amount available for this grant across a financial year (1 July to 30 June) is capped at a total of \$5,000. No single application can exceed \$1000 and once the total \$5,000 limit is reached no other applications will be considered in that financial year.

Morawa Sinosteel Future Fund Grant. Morawa Sinosteel Future Fund seeks to provide funding to grass-roots community organisations, including sporting groups, educational organisations and community support organisations.

contribution. Consideration could be given to varying the current criteria for eligibility for local grants. Funding to support Closing the Gap initiatives is another potential source of funding.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: That the Shire of Morawa support the establishment of a purpose-built Early Childhood Education and Care Centre in Morawa to address the needs of developmentally vulnerable children and unmet needs of essential workers for access to a quality service for their children.

Recommendation 2: That a parcel of land be excised from the grounds of Morawa District High School and vested in the Shire of Morawa for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education and Care Centre.

Recommendation 3: That the Shire of Morawa maintain support for the current Family Day Care Educator and make efforts to assist Ngala with recruitment of a relief Educator to ensure continuity of Early Childhood Education and Care for essential workers pending the establishment and approval of a new centre.

Recommendation 4: That the Shire of Morawa consider selection of Regional Early Education and Development Inc (REED) as the Approved Provider of Early Childhood Education and Care Centre and include REED in the planning and development of the centre.

Recommendation 5: That the Shire of Morawa seek funding for an ECEC centre and a position to manage the planning and development process for the centre and for community engagement with Morawa families and organisations including MEEDAC and MDHS and the selected Approved Provider.

ADDITIONAL INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

Recommendation 6: That the Shire of Morawa consider relocation of the existing unused building next to the family day centre to Shire owned land adjacent to the kindergarten for repurposing as an Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre in consultation with Elders and women in the community.

Recommendation 7: That subject to acceptance of Recommendation 6, the Shire of Morawa seek funding for the relocation of the existing unused building next to the family day care centre and for a coordinator for the Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre for an initial 2-3 year establishment phase.

Recommendation 8: That Morawa District High School and Central Regional TAFE be requested to provide training opportunities for a future workforce for an Early Childhood Education and Care Centre.

WORKING GROUP

Recommendation 9: Subject to support in principle for the establishment of an ECEC Centre in Morawa and an Aboriginal Women's Cultural and Learning Centre, it is recommended that the Shire of Morawa establish a Working Group to progress these initiatives. Membership of the Working Group should include the Shire, MDHS, MEEDAC, Elders and other relevant stakeholders and the Approved Provider following their selection.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK AND LEGISLATION

The National Quality Framework

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care is a national approach to regulation and quality assessment of ECEC services including most long day care (including family day care) and outside school hours care services. The Framework includes a:

- national legislative framework that creates a uniform national approach to the regulation and quality assessment of education and child care services in Australia,
- National Quality Standard that sets a national benchmark for the quality of education and care services,
- national quality rating and assessment process that rates services against the National Quality Standard.

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is the national body that oversees and implements the National Quality Framework. Under the National Quality Framework, state and territory Regulatory Authorities are responsible for the approval process within their own jurisdiction. In Western Australia, the Department of Communities approves and monitors education and care services through its Education and Care Regulatory Unit (ECRU).

The National Quality Framework in Western Australia is comprised of the:

- i. Education and Care Services National Law (WA) Act 2012
- ii. Education and Care Services National Regulations 2012
- iii. National Quality Standard
- iv. Rating and Assessment process.

The National Law and Regulations

Under the *Education and Care Services National Law (WA) Act 2012* and *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2012*, long day care, outside school hours care, and occasional care are regulated as centre-based services. The National Law determines three interrelated approval processes for entities and individuals:

- i. Provider approval which is nationally recognised and enables providers to apply for one or more service approvals.
- ii. Service approval which authorises an Approved Provider to operate an Approved Service. Each Approved Service must have a Nominated Supervisor.
- iii. A supervisor certificate which is a nationally recognised approval that allows a person to be appointed as the Nominated Supervisor for an Approved Service or to be temporarily placed in charge when the Approved Provider or Nominated Supervisor is absent. An Approved Provider may obtain a Supervisor Certificate and be the Nominated Supervisor for their service or the Approved Provider may employ an educator with a Supervisor Certificate who consents to fill the Nominated Supervisor role.

The National Quality Standard

The National Quality Standard comprises seven quality areas which include standards each with multiple elements.²⁷

1) *Educational program and practice*

Standard 1.1 Program: The educational program enhances each child's learning and development.

Standard 1.2 Practice: Educators facilitate and extend each child's learning and development.

Standard 1.3 Assessment and planning: Educators and coordinators take a planned and reflective approach to implementing the program for each child.

2) *Children's health and safety*

Standard 2.1 Health: Each child's health and physical activity is supported and promoted.

Standard 2.2 Safety: Each child is protected.

3) *Physical environment*

Standard 3.1 Design: The design and location of the facilities is appropriate for the operation of a service.

Standard 3.2 Use: The service environment is inclusive, promotes competence and supports exploration and play-based learning.

4) *Staffing arrangements*

Standard 4.1 Staffing arrangements: Staffing arrangements enhance children's learning and development.

Standard 4.2 Professionalism: Management, educators and staff members are collaborative, respectful and ethical.

5) *Relationships with children*

Standard 5.1 Relationships between educators and children: Respectful and equitable relationships are maintained with each child.

Standard 5.2 Relationships between children: Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships.

6) *Collaborative partnerships with families and communities*

Standard 6.1 Supportive relationships with families: Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role.

Standard 6.2 Collaborative partnerships: Collaborative partnerships enhance children's inclusion, learning and wellbeing.

7) *Governance and leadership*

Standard 7.1 Governance: Governance supports the operation of a quality service.

Standard 7.2 Leadership: Effective leadership builds and promotes a positive organisational culture and professional learning community.

The Early Years Learning Framework

Under the National Law and Regulations, services are required to base their educational program on an approved learning framework. This should focus on addressing the developmental needs, interests and experiences of each child, while taking into account individual differences. National learning frameworks recognise children learn from birth. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Belonging, Being and Becoming) is an early childhood curriculum framework that guides early childhood educators in developing quality, early childhood education programmes.

²⁷ <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard>

The framework describes the principles, practice and outcomes to support and enhance young children's learning from birth to five years, as well as their transition to school. The Framework for School Age Care guides before and after school hours care and vacation care programs. Embedded in the frameworks is recognition of the importance of responding to student diversity and ensuring the participation of all students as learners.

APPENDIX 2: CHILD CARE SUBSIDY THRESHOLDS AND HOURLY RATE CAPS FOR 2022-2023

The following table outlines the CCS family income thresholds for 2022–23.

Family income	CCS percentage
Up to \$72,466	85 %
More than \$72,466 to below \$177,466	Decreasing to 50% Subsidy gradually decreases by 1% for each \$3000 of family income.
\$177,466 to below \$256,756	50%
\$256,756 to below \$346,756	Decreasing to 20% Subsidy gradually decreases by 1% for each \$3000 of family income.
\$346,756 to below \$356,756	20%
\$356,756 or more	0%

Families with more than one child aged 5 or under in care will get a higher subsidy for their second child and younger children.

They'll get an extra 30% on top of their income tested rate for eligible children, up to a maximum of 95%.

The following table outlines the different hourly rate caps for 2022–23.

Service type	Hourly rate cap (children below school age)	Hourly rate cap (school-age children)
Centre Based Day Care	\$12.74	\$11.15
Outside School Hours Care	\$12.74	\$11.15
Family Day Care	\$11.80	\$11.80

CHANGES TO CCS TO TAKE EFFECT FROM JULY 2023 SUBJECT TO THE PASSAGE OF LEGISLATION. ²⁸

The Australian Government is committed to:

- lifting the maximum Child Care Subsidy (CCS) rate to 90% for families earning \$80,000 or less
- increasing CCS rates for around 96% of families with a child currently in care earning under \$530,000
- keeping higher CCS rates for families with two or more children aged 5 years or under in care.

In addition, the Productivity Commission will conduct a comprehensive review of the child care sector. This will include consideration of a universal 90% child care subsidy rate.

²⁸ <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/cheaper-child-care>



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