Southern & Hills Local Government Association

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Media Release

SHLGA calls for better access to childcare across regional communities

The Southern and Hills Local Government Association (SHLGA) is calling for a more flexible, place-based approach to improving access to childcare in regional communities.

In a submission to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's early childhood education and care system in rural, regional and remote communities, SHLGA has highlighted significant differences in childcare accessibility across the Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu Peninsula and Kangaroo Island.

SHLGA President Mayor Moira Jenkins said access to reliable childcare was important for families, but also had wider implications for regional communities and their economies.

"Childcare is essential infrastructure for our communities. If families can't access the care they need, it affects their ability to work, and it makes it harder for regional employers to attract and retain the people they need," Mayor Jenkins said.

"Importantly, this isn't a problem that looks the same everywhere. Even within the same council area, there can be significant differences in access."

Research by the Mitchell Institute shows that four of the 13 Statistical Areas Level 2 (SA2s) across the SHLGA region fall within its definition of a "childcare desert": Strathalbyn Surrounds, Mount Barker Surrounds, Uraidla–Summertown and Lobethal–Woodside.

The data demonstrates the importance of understanding childcare needs at a local level.

"A regional centre can appear relatively well serviced while families in surrounding communities have very limited access to care," Mayor Jenkins said.

"If we only look at council or regional averages, these local gaps can easily be missed. Investment needs to be informed by what is actually happening in individual communities."

Mayor Jenkins said the number of childcare places available was also only part of the story.

"A childcare place on paper isn't necessarily a childcare place a family can actually use," Mayor Jenkins said.

"Families may face long waiting lists, limited operating hours, a lack of places for children of a particular age, long travel distances or services that cannot operate at full capacity because they can't find enough staff.

"We need to understand those real-world barriers if we want investment to result in childcare that genuinely meets the needs of families."

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SHLGA's submission also highlights the important role councils can play in helping to develop local solutions, including bringing together providers and communities, identifying suitable land and facilities, incorporating childcare into growth and infrastructure planning and advocating for government investment.

"Councils know their communities and can play an important role in bringing the right people together and helping make good projects happen," Mayor Jenkins said.

"But councils and regional ratepayers cannot be expected to become the provider or funder of last resort when the childcare market doesn't meet community need.

"We want local government to be supported as a partner in finding solutions, while ensuring responsibility for structural gaps in the childcare system isn't simply shifted to councils."

SHLGA is calling for governments to measure actual childcare access, provide sustainable and flexible support where conventional markets cannot meet community need, recognise local government's enabling role, and ensure councils retain the ability to determine the extent of their involvement based on local circumstances and financial capacity.

ENDS

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