

Enhancing EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE



Through the Enhancing Early Childhood Education and Care project, Central Highlands Development Corporation (CHDC) worked with local stakeholders to understand waitlists, workforce gaps, and training needs across the Central Highlands, providing insights that now inform targeted recommendations to build a stronger, more resilient early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector.

CHDC launched the Central Highlands Workforce Development and Accommodation Strategy (WDAS) in April 2024 to address ongoing regional challenges, including difficulties in attracting and retaining workers, housing shortages, and limited access to childcare.

The Enhancing Early Childhood Education and Care project was developed under Action 5 of the WDAS to specifically target the ECEC sector across the region. Funding was secured through Round 3 of the Queensland Government's Grow Your Own (GYO) Regional Workforce Program.

At its core, the project was designed to help centres not only survive but thrive.

CHDC, together with its consultant team from Astute Early Year Specialists and Infinitum Partners, worked with local centres to build a deeper understanding of those issues, quantify their impact, and align findings with community expectations. This work was complemented by community engagement activities that fostered informed and positive conversations about the sector, its challenges, and the community's role in supporting long-term solutions.

This summary presents the project, key findings, and recommendations to ensure the sustainability of the ECEC sector in the Central Highlands for years to come.

Our PRIORITIES

1

Expand long day care services, including building new rooms in Blackwater for 0-3-year-olds.

2

Establish in-region training and assessment capacity for ECEC pathways including requalification and school-based.

3

Develop a targeted recruitment strategy to secure 20 new educators.

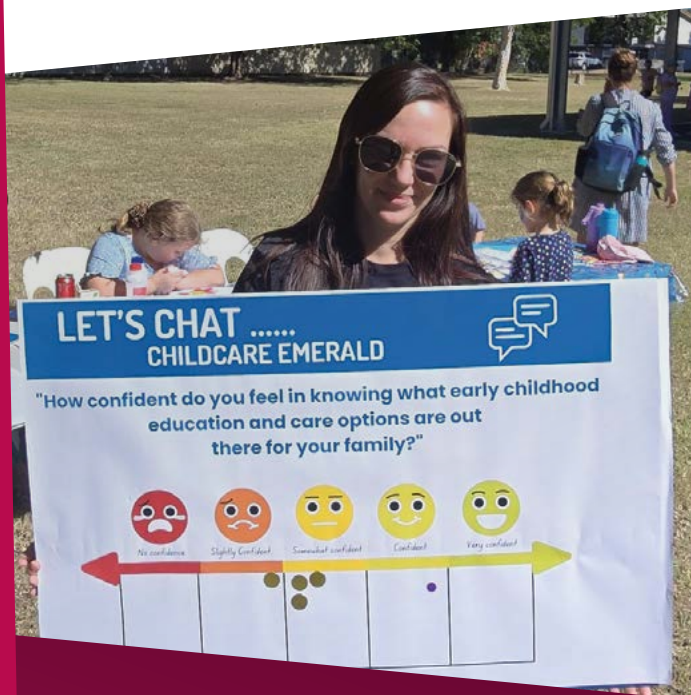
What DID WE DO?

The WDAS identified a range of challenges within the ECEC sector. This project was therefore designed to build a deeper understanding of those issues, quantify their impact, and align findings with community expectations and broader sector implications.

The project focused on the two largest towns of the Central Highlands, Emerald and Blackwater, with the expectation that the insights could later be extended and applied across the wider region.

By placing centres at the core of engagement, the project captured firsthand insights into daily operations and workforce pressures. These were considered alongside legislative and policy reforms, as well as the evolving needs and experiences of the community and major employers.

Over seven months, the project team delivered a comprehensive engagement program including consultation with centre directors, educators, families, schools, Regional Training Organisations (RTOs), major employers, government agencies, and the wider community. Surveys and face-to-face discussions ensured data was grounded, validated, and objective.



CHILDCARE CHATS

More than 140 residents joined Childcare Chats in Blackwater and Emerald, sharing insights to strengthen ECEC services across the Central Highlands. While both communities acknowledged the complexity of childcare challenges, Blackwater residents highlighted long-standing shortages in long day care and kindergarten hours, which limit workforce participation and growth of the permanent community.

In contrast, Emerald families raised concerns about staff turnover affecting care quality and consistency, and about the capacity of Outside School Hours Care (OSHC). Across both towns, residents strongly supported building a stable, well-trained workforce through local training, better leave provisions, and strategies to attract and retain educators, including from overseas.

THE CRISIS IN *Blackwater*

The situation in Blackwater is beyond critical, it is a genuine crisis requiring urgent action. There is a shortage of childcare spaces for children aged 0 to 3 years, significantly impacting local families and the workforce.

Many mothers are forced to travel to Emerald to access childcare, with some making multiple daily trips - dropping off their child, commuting back to Blackwater for work, and then returning to Emerald to collect their child before heading home. This cot-to-cot commute is unsustainable and highlights the severity of the issue.

Some families are splitting care across multiple centres to meet their needs, while others delay returning to work or postpone having children due to the lack of available childcare. In some cases, unregulated care is being used as a last resort, raising concerns about safety and quality.

Essential workers, including teachers, are particularly affected. Many are unable to return to work due to the absence of childcare options, and some have been denied extensions to maternity leave, requested only due to the childcare shortage.

“ I have three kids - one at school, one in care in Blackwater, and one in care at Emerald. I work part-time in Emerald. My kids are booked in full-time regardless of whether I use the day or not.”

Mother, Blackwater

FINDINGS

Families across Blackwater and Emerald are facing critical childcare shortages, with limited 0-3 places and growing waitlists keeping many essential workers out of the workforce. Businesses are also feeling the impact, struggling to fill local roles.

A shortage of around 20 full-time educators, combined with housing challenges and limited training opportunities, makes it increasingly difficult to attract and retain staff. High leadership turnover and restricted access to professional development further add to existing pressures.

OSHC is at capacity in Emerald and unavailable in Blackwater, forcing working families to rely on unregulated options.

Community confidence and service quality are at risk, highlighting the urgent need for collective action to expand access, strengthen the workforce, and build a sustainable and resilient early childhood system across the region.

The reality is that talent will not come to or stay in the region without systemic change. This challenge extends beyond the early childhood sector, it reflects a broader workforce attraction and retention crisis across regional Australia.



CRITICAL SHORTAGE OF 0-3 PLACES

Blackwater's only long day care centre holds 44% of the regional waitlist. Additional rooms for the 0-3 age group are urgently needed.



IMPACT ON ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Essential workers, including teachers, are unable to return to work due to a lack of care options, and maternity leave extensions are being denied.



RESTRICTING BROADER WORKFORCE

Businesses across the region are struggling to fill vacancies due to limited care options. There is growing pressure and reliance on fly-in fly-out and drive-in drive-out workers.



LEADERSHIP INSTABILITY

High turnover in leadership roles destabilises services, and a negative community perception of some leaders exists, despite their tenure.



TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

There are limited opportunities in the region for workforce development and career progression for educators.



HOUSING AFFECTING ATTRACTION

There is a current shortfall of 20 FTEs, with centres citing the lack of affordable housing as the main barrier.



UNMET OSHC NEEDS

The existing OSHC centre is facing community trust issues, and the lack of formal outside school hours care in Blackwater forces families to rely on unregulated care.



QUALITY OF CARE AND TRUST IN SERVICE

Family day care is in decline, and general community concerns about quality and trust remain high. Recent safety concerns will result in legislative changes.

TRAINING AND CAREER BARRIERS

Accessing ECEC training in regional Queensland remains challenging, with significant barriers affecting both aspiring educators and the broader workforce. Limited in-person training options, a shortage of qualified local trainers, and difficulties securing practical placements slow learner progress and reduce motivation. The funding model, which ties provider payments to student completion rates, places additional strain on RTOs in regional areas.

The challenges also restrict career advancement, particularly for educators seeking to move beyond Certificate III qualifications. High costs, travel requirements, and the absence of local pathways prevent progression. This contributes to high turnover and persistent workforce shortages.



RECOMMENDATIONS

SERVICE PROVISION AND OPTIMISATION

1. **Expand the long day care facility in Blackwater.**
Work with Education Queensland and the existing provider to confirm requirements and necessary procurement.
2. **Reconfigure Emerald services to increase 0–3 capacity.**
Collaborate with identified centres to expand service capacity.
3. **Investigate and plan for the expansion of OSHC.** Identify potential sites and clarify procurement requirements.
4. **Provide targeted operational support to identified centres.** Invite identified centres to access direct operational support.

WORKFORCE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

5. **Develop a targeted recruitment strategy for 20 educators including international labour.** Seek grant funding to deliver the regional recruitment strategy, using the *Smart Move* campaign as a foundation.
6. **Advocate for enhanced leave entitlements and regional incentives.** Advocate to government for portable long service leave and an additional week of leave for regional areas.

SECTOR CAPACITY, COORDINATION AND PROFESSIONALISM

7. **Establish in-region training and assessment capacity for ECEC educators.** Seek grant funding to pilot an RTO program servicing Central Queensland.
8. **Formalise the ECEC Central Highlands Network.** Establish the network, including a shared casual workforce pool.

STRATEGIC POLICY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

9. **Launch a sector-wide positive engagement campaign to boost confidence and career opportunities.** Using the *Smart Move* campaign, seek grant funding to deliver a targeted regional campaign.
10. **Develop a strategic funding and partnership model.** Work with the Central Highlands Resources Roundtable to develop a targeted model, initially focused on Blackwater.

The implementation of the recommendations will require a concerted effort across all stakeholders to progress.

Thank you

to the centres who actively participated in the project, providing valuable insights that deepened our understanding of the on-ground realities.

- Borilla Community Kindergarten
- C&K Blackwater Community Childcare Centre
- C&K Blackwater Community Kindergarten
- Emerald Christian College Little Gems
- Emerald Outside School Hours Care
- Emerald Preschool & Community Kindergarten
- Emerald World of Learning
- First5Years Emerald
- Goodstart Early Learning Emerald

With additional input from C&K Emerald South Community Childcare Centre, Lady Gowrie Blackwater Community Kindergarten, and St Brigid's Catholic Kindergarten.



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