

Overview of Bermagui Preschool

Bermagui Preschool is well respected and trusted by our local and surrounding communities and currently holds a rating of Excellent, the highest rating awarded by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). Bermagui Preschool is one of only 18 Early Education and Care Services that has received this rating twice in Australia. We provide Preschool and Long Day Care at one location. Located on the far south coast of NSW, Bermagui Preschool is a regional service committed to providing high quality Early Childhood Education and care in Bermagui and the surrounding communities including Cobargo, Quaama, Tilba and Murrah. This includes children and families who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, children from a Cultural and Linguistically Diverse Background and children with additional needs. Our community continues in a state of crisis, including complex ongoing impacts resulting from bushfires, drought, floods, covid, social and economic disadvantage, lack of affordable housing and staffing shortages.

Current Crisis, including ongoing effects of Bushfires, Drought, Floods, Covid, Social and Economic Disadvantage, Lack of Affordable Housing, Staffing Shortages

- **Bushfires:** The ongoing effects of the 2020 bushfires remain evident. Families are still dealing with the loss of their homes, damaged property and mental health and wellbeing issues causing a spiral of reduced income, financial hardship, need for extended early education and care of their children and family support.
- **Drought/ Floods:** In our rural community many farming families are impacted by the cycles of drought and flood, leading to reduced income, financial hardship, need for extended early education and care of their children and family support. The severe weather events have also had a detrimental effect on our Preschool playground, with the grass areas destroyed, timber infrastructure in need of repair and shade sails needing replacement. The need for an outdoor play space that is resilient to our climate and weather is needed to ensure our children have access to a space that encourages physical activity and a connection to nature and the environment.
- **Covid:** Our Community relies heavily on tourism with many families with small businesses being impacted by covid and now staffing shortages, leading to reduced income, financial hardship, need for extended early education and care of their children and family support. Long Covid is impacting the health of our existing educators and their availability to work.
- **Social and Economic Disadvantage:** Bermagui has a population approximately 1865 with growth in the area estimated at +10.4% (the 2nd fastest in regional NSW). There has been a dramatic increase in the local birth rate and a steady movement of families with young children from other regions such as Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. Bermagui is increasingly becoming known as a tourist destination with over 52,000 visitors each year. Median weekly household incomes are \$1022. Relatively high unemployment and less job, study and further education opportunities in the area. Much of the work in the area is seasonal, causing hardship at certain times of year. Increased price of petrol, directly affecting tourism and threatening further lack of money. Large proportion of single parent families experiencing a lack of support. Large geographical area impacting on transportation, fuel costs and isolation. Lack of local services, need to travel, for medical, health, dental, high school, further education and even food shopping, to Bega & Narooma. Parents commuting to Bega, Narooma, Moruya etc for work and their need for extended hours for childcare.
- **Lack of Affordable Housing:** As with many regional areas, Bermagui is in a housing crisis. There is a lack of affordable long-term rental properties and a dramatic increase in rent, purchase price & rates, impacting families and our Preschool staff. Rental accommodation has escalated from an average of \$130 to \$450- \$700 a week. The average cost of purchasing a property has risen dramatically in a few short years from \$270 000 to \$950 000. We have lost many staff who have had to move away from the

area when they have lost their rental properties as owner put these houses on the market, or have been priced out of the rental and purchase of housing market while their wages remain amongst the lowest in the country.

- **Staffing Shortages:** The effects of staff burn out has emerged with staff needing time to cope with their own physical and mentally health due to the increased workload of working face to face with traumatised children and families, often acting as accidental counsellors due to the lack of on the ground support in our community. With many preschool directors and service leaders seriously close to breaking point and/ or close to retirement, they need to be well supported in their complex roles. Expectations on workforce needs to be adjusted to meet current work capacity of staff. Attraction and retention of staff is an ongoing issue. Despite our service offering wages 5% above- 8% above the award, it still does not match rising cost of living, housing crisis and other comparisons to other industries. The challenge for services is increasing wages without passing fees on to families, many of whom are under financial stress. Our staff are paid approx \$30 p/h. This compares to a Construction Labourer, where the going rate on Seek is \$35 per hour, no qualifications necessary, beyond a White Card which costs around \$99). Our Preschool has 20 staff when operating at appropriate capacity, however we have lost 3 staff in the last month, 12 staff in the past year and 32 in last 3 years. We previously had long term consistent staff. Reasons for staff leaving our service have included vaccine mandates, higher paying opportunities elsewhere (including primary school, NDIS, cafes, Woolies). Some have left due to professional exhaustion and there has been increased staff absences due to sickness, Covid and long covid. We have some staff who are unavailable to work or choosing not to work their previous hours due to personal circumstances and life style choices. Unfortunately, we have been forced to reduced service capacity. Due to staff shortages, the service is having to turn children away – the current waiting list is 60 children, more than double previous levels.

Our Innovative Solutions

- **Extended Services including LDC and OSHC** (Reimagining our Preschool to support our community).

Flexibility and extension of hours of early education and care is needed for many families, with traditional school hours of 9am-3pm no longer meeting the needs of many parents. In response to our community need for affordable, accessible and high-quality early education and care and our has expanded its services. 20 years ago our stand alone Preschool employed two staff and was open on Monday/ Wednesdays with 12 children attending and Tuesdays with 8 children attending. Our Preschool now provides 4 integrated services, including Preschool, Long Day Care, Before and After School Care and Vacation Care Programs, catering for 98 children between the ages of 6 weeks and 12 years. We have become one of the biggest employers in our fishing town, where unemployment is high particularly for women. With these initiatives we have increased workforce participation through the capacity of our families to reduce their stress, return to work and access and afford early education and care. Our extended service has enabled families with younger children to return to work, including a Torres Strait Islander mum who opened Gulaga Organics, a mother with additional needs working as an LSO in public school, nurses and ambulance officer and other professionals able to work hours, including ability to travel to regional towns such as Bega 45 mins away. Our children receive the care, attention and consistency to minimise stress and trauma that has led to behaviour challenges. Benefits for our children include continuity of early education and care with one service provider, less child burn out from who were previously accessing 3 different services and/or informal care, greater family engagement with children's learning and benefit from being part of a child-centred early education community. Our Preschool has become a "Community hub/ One stop shop for Early Education and Care"

What we have advertised

We have advertised for Cert 3 and Diploma qualified staff for nearly 3 years through available platforms (including local and regional newspapers, radio, newsletters, social media, employment sites, local TAFE and high schools and word of mouth) without one response. This has been extended to Canberra, Sydney and interstate, with still no response. Allied Health professionals have been engaged through existing health funding or volunteers, leading to inconsistency with the delivery of the programs our Preschool delivers.

Cost of Recruiting

To attract staff to fill our existing positions we offer the following incentives:

- 5% above Award. We are hoping to pay 15% above Award, which will bring average income of educators at the service currently at \$28 to just over \$35 per hour.
- Flexible days and hours.
- Above adult child ratios- improves outcomes for children but is critical for staff.
- Paid Individual Training Program for each staff to follow their interests, passions and strengths. This is needed particular for educators who have been fast tracked through courses and need further knowledge and skills to supplement their initial training.
- Mentor program, including allocation of an intentional mentor to each young educator which is vital to ensure new educators have the skills and knowledge needed to support the implement high quality early education and care programs.
- Free fees for staff children
- No out of hours meetings/ work. Paid overtime for any volunteer work outside of working hours.
- Mental health and well-being program (including access to workshops, counselling/ therapy, yoga, sauna, healthy snacks, tea/coffee).

Our competition

We have had many wonderful staff leave because they are paid significantly more to clean houses and/or work as NDIS carers. With increasing costs of living and escalating issues with affordable housing, we have some staff who are having to make drastic choices such as choosing between purchasing food or medication as they cannot afford both. Bermagui Preschool pays 5% above Award. (Around 68% of educators across the sector are paid at the Award, according to the 2021 ECEC Workforce Census). We are hoping to pay 8% above Award, which will bring average income of educators at the service to nearly \$30 per hour. However, this doesn't compare with other employment within our community including:

- NDIS carers \$60 p/h,
- School LSO: \$35 p/h
- Cafes and local supermarkets: \$30 p/h
- Trades Apprentice \$35 p/h
- Cleaners: \$50

The challenge for Bermagui Preschool is increasing wages without passing fees on to families, many of whom are under financial stress.

What we haven't got

- Ongoing sustainable funding for the program delivery including cost of staffing, funding for Therapists/ Experts and resources.
- Infrastructure/ Playground. As with many not-for-profit services, Bermagui Preschool is in dire need of capital works funding to repair and improve their aging facilities, specifically our playground that has been significantly damaged by floods and drought.

Our families cannot afford the level of fees that we would need to charge to cover operating costs. Last year in 2022, we ran at a deficit of **\$75,531.00**. We are also struggling to meet the cost to continue several of our programs that ensure our quality programs are delivered and outcomes for our children, families and the broader community are improved. **Attraction and Remuneration of Staff (including Educators, Teachers, Administration Assistant and Cleaner)**

To operate in response to the needs of our community and incentivise qualified teachers and educators to come to the area, we need to offer a competitive salary package to fill vacant positions.

Staff needed to support the existing programs

LDC: 1 educator @ \$28 (7.5hr x 5days x 40 weeks = \$42 000)

OSHC: 2 educators @ \$28 (2.5 hrs x 5 days x 40 weeks = \$28000)

Vacation Care: 2 educators @ \$28 (7.5hr x 5 days x 10 weeks = \$21 000)

Total= \$91 000

Early Education and Care wages are amongst the lowest of any sector. Without decent remuneration for the highly skilled and important work we do, staffing shortages will continue to impact on the quality of education and care and the outcome for our children, families and broader community. Funding to allow us to fund our staff 15% above the current award (in line with changes/wages of other female dominated industries such as aged care and nursing) would support the attraction and retainment of early education and care staff.

Total= \$99450

- **Allied Health Program** (Early Intervention in our Community)

Early intervention is critical to identify and support children with additional needs. Our Preschool currently has access to STEPS vision screening, community dental health and some child and family psychology/ therapy. This is beneficial to our families who can now access these services in a place that their children are familiar and confident in, without the need for travel (particularly for people on low incomes impacted by increasing cost of living and petrol) and the need for the children to loss a day of Preschool and families to loss a day of work to travel to regional town and cities that are 1-5 hours away from Bermagui. To consolidate these services and provide wholistic early intervention to the children and families with in our community access to further allied Health Program is needed.

To expand this program the following is needed:

Speech, Physio and OT Therapy sessions once a week for a 12 month period (i.e. 2 hours a week for each therapy activity over 40 weeks, including 1 x facilitator @ \$160 p/h (\$12800) and 1 x support educator @ \$28 p/h (\$2240), plus resources (\$1000), plus admin and promotional costs (\$100) **Total= \$16 140**

Program	Details	What We Have	What We Need	Cost
Extended Services	Reimagining our Preschool to support our community through the provision of Long Day Care and Out of Hours school Care.	Access to CCS to reduce fees for families to access early education and care	Staff to support the program LDC: 1 educator @ \$28 (7.5hr x 5days x 40 weeks = \$42 000) OSHC: 2 educators @\$28 (2.5 hrs x 5 days x 40 weeks = \$28000) Vacation Care: 2 educators @\$28 (7.5hr x 5 days x 10 weeks = \$21 000) Total= \$91 000	\$91 000
Increased Wages	Increasing staff wages to support recruitment and retainment	Currently paying staff 5% above award	Funding to allow us to fund our staff 15% above the current award	\$99 450
Allied Health Program	Early Intervention in our Community through the provision of onsite Speech, Physio and OT Therapy	Access to STEPS vision screening, Access to community dental health	Speech, Physio and OT Therapy sessions once a week for a 12 month period (i.e. 2 hours a week for each therapy activity over 40 weeks, including 1 x facilitator @ \$160 p/h (\$12800) and 1 x support educator @ \$28 p/h (\$2240), plus resources (\$1000), plus admin and promotional costs (\$100) Total= \$16140	\$16 140
Moodji Cultural Garden/ Farm	Connection and Reconciliation in our Community through the culturally sensitive programs to aid in rebuilding a stronger community together	The Moodji Garden/ Farm has been developed, creating an amazing place for learning and	Djiringanj (local Aboriginal) Cultural and Language sessions once a week for a 12 month period (i.e. 2 hours a week for each therapy activity over 40 weeks, including 1 x facilitator @ \$55 p/h (\$4400) and 1 x support educator @ \$28 p/h (\$2240), plus resources (\$1000), plus admin and promotional costs (\$100) Total= \$7740	\$7 740

		growing together		
Creation of a Nature Focused/ Environmentally Sustainable Outdoor Play Space	Future Proofing our Preschool with an outdoor play space that is resilient to extreme weather events and enables children opportunities for physical activity and connection with nature	A playground in need of renovation.	Playground rejuvenation, including nature play elements from Proscap Playground designs Total= \$75 000	\$75 000
		TOTAL		\$289 330

On behalf of Bermagui Preschool and its community partners, we would like to thank you for considering our submission and invite you to come and visit our Preschool to see our remarkable projects and programs in action.