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### **Franz Josef Community rallies around local Early Childhood Centre.**

Parents, local community members and business leaders met with Kidsfirst Kindergartens last night to ask questions, learn more and contribute ideas about the future of the Glacier Country Early Learning Centre. Kidsfirst has proposed closing the centre due to financial issues and staffing shortages.

Kidsfirst Kindergartens Chief Executive, Sherryll Wilson, says she was grateful to those who took the time to attend the meeting, especially those who travelled some distance to get there.

“People asked very insightful questions,” says Ms Wilson, “There was a lot of passion in the room and a very clear commitment from the community to work with us to explore every avenue to make it possible for the centre to remain open.”

“Understandably, people are very worried about job security if there is no service for their children, what will they will do for education and care- and how a closure would impact their family situation. In urban areas, childcare is completely taken for granted - parents have multiple choices when it comes to education and care for infants and toddlers, and workplaces do not have to factor in childcare when looking to attract stable staff. In a rural and isolated area such as Franz Josef, access to early childhood education is not just about the provision of a quality programme as a foundation for our youngest learners, it is essential to the long term economic development of the area”

The closure remains only a proposal at this point while staff participate in a consultation process. Kidsfirst is working with the Westland District Council, parents and the Franz Josef community to explore alternatives.

“It was good to have the opportunity to clarify some of the more complex cost and funding issues associated with running a quality early childhood service - especially the issues that are unique to a remote, rural location,” Ms Wilson says.

“Our kindergarten staff are state sector employees, just as primary and secondary teachers are, but kindergartens do not receive funding to help address the staffing issues that come with being located in isolated communities the way that schools do.”

In addition to difficulties in attracting trained, registered teaching staff (including a new Head Teacher) to the area, compounded by a chronic lack of local affordable accommodation, there are five other critical areas solutions must be found for:

- The Kidsfirst Glacier Country Early Learning Centre needs an occupancy rate of 90% to be viable (it is presently 84%)
- Changes need to be made to opening times
- Parent will need to pay fees from the start of 2019, as is the case across the Kidsfirst network
- The kindergarten must find a way to return to long term financial viability, which will entail some form of local/central government funding support.

“All of these factors are interdependent and need long term solutions,” says Ms Wilson, “It is not enough for us to just solve one or some of them, and any answers need to be sustainable.”

Ms Wilson says Kidsfirst was heartened by the support and offers of practical help from those who attended the meeting.

“There are some things we just can’t do because early childhood education is such a strongly regulated environment, and because we are committed to delivering quality education. However, a lot of good ideas were raised, and there was an undertaking to form a small working party made up of Kidsfirst representatives, community members, business leaders, the Council and others to explore the viability of these ideas.”

Ms Wilson says there is currently no fixed deadline for a decision to be made about the future of the Centre, as the Board is committed to ensuring that all options have been considered.

“So many lives would be impacted, should the closure go ahead. We understand the very large ripple effect that it would create throughout the community for this vital care and education resource to be lost. It is very important that the Kidsfirst board has all the information it needs and takes its time in making an informed decision, and that those potentially impacted have the opportunity to share their ideas and be heard.”

For more information please contact:

Susi Maclean, 0274 346667

