



**Yarra
Ranges
Council**

Middle Years

STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN 2017 – 2021





Yarra Ranges Council respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners, the Wurundjeri People as the Custodians of this land. We also pay respects to all Aboriginal Community Elders, past and present, who have resided in the area and have been an integral part of the history of this region.

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'Yarra Ranges will be a place where every child and young person will be able to thrive, reach their potential and actively participate in decision making.' (YRC Child and Youth Strategy 2014 – 2024)

DEMOGRAPHIC



149,528 Yarra Ranges total population **9%** Middle Years 8-14 years (13,525)



Area Breakdown:
Urban **6488** | Valley **3663** | Hills **3237**

CHILDREN / YOUNG PEOPLE



over **96%** above the national benchmark in literacy and numeracy (grade 3, 5, 7)



4% (774) have a disability (5-14 years)



3% (417) speak more than one language at home (0-14 years)



1.7% (328) Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (5-14 years)

THE VOICES OF CHILDREN, PARENTS & SERVICE PROVIDERS

Middle Years children and young people told us they need:

- Spaces and programs outside of school
- Social opportunities outside of school
- Opportunity to be involved in sport
- Better and safer public transport
- Opportunity to discuss issues such as bullying

Parents told us there is a need for:

- Social skills, coping strategies and manage anxiety programs for children
- Consistent availability of family support services
- School & community mentors
- Non-sport enrichment activities e.g. theatre groups
- Low cost after school activities

Services told us there is a need for:

- Greater collaboration between schools and community services
- Integrated hub models
- More programs e.g. resilience
- Better access to afterhours programs and activities
- School & community mentors
- More family support services
- Professional learning re: wellbeing

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

1

Promote the voice and opinions of middle years young people

2

Pilot a place-based, comprehensive Middle Years Model

3

Develop a response to service gaps and environmental issues that impact on the middle years

4

Ensure middle years young people benefit from connected & informed services & supports that enhance their health and wellbeing

Our Vision and Key Priorities for the Middle Years in Yarra Ranges

The following Yarra Ranges Council vision and purpose statements underpin our work and role with middle years children, young people and their families.

“Whether you live here or visit, you will see how much we value our natural beauty, how connected our communities are, and how balanced growth make this the best place in the world.”
(Working Together to Shape the Future: Council Plan 2017-2021).

“Yarra Ranges will be a place where every child and young person will be able to thrive, reach their potential and actively participate in decision making.”
(Child and Youth Strategy 2014 – 2024).

“Communities are safe, resilient, healthy, inclusive and socially well connected. Quality services are accessible to everyone.”
(Connected and Healthy Communities 2017-2021).

“To foster connected, resilient and empowered children, families and communities to achieve their full health, social emotional and learning potential.”
(Family and Community Support Services Business Plan Purpose Statement 2017-2021)



Our Strategic Priorities and Actions for the Middle Years

Priority	Yarra Ranges Council will:
Promote the voice and opinions of middle years young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Survey children using the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) . › Include children, young people and their families in service planning and implementation
Pilot a place-based, comprehensive Middle Years Model.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Develop a project in the Upper Yarra to design and test evidence based interventions and new innovations in the middle years. › Evaluate the Upper Yarra project and expand or replicate ideas in other geographical areas. › Advocate for additional funding based on evidence from the Upper Yarra Project.
Develop a response to service gaps and environmental issues that impact on the middle years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Boost access for middle years children and young people to relevant support services. › Raise awareness of the needs of middle years children and young people amongst the relevant Council departments to influence future planning.
Ensure middle years young people benefit from connected and informed services and supports that enhance their health and wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Create network of professionals focused on the middle years. › Advocate for a greater focus on middle years in national and state policy and practice frameworks. › Identify the emerging issues for children and young people in their middle years. › Develop a Middle Years Communication and Information Strategy to connect middle years children and their families with the services they require.

Introduction

In 2016, the Yarra Ranges was home to 19,251 children and young people aged in 'the middle years' (8-14). These middle years are a critical period between childhood and adolescence. It is a time when children are experiencing significant physical, emotional and social development. There is a growing body of research in Australia and overseas highlighting the importance of the middle years as being a crucial time in a young person's life. The rapid change in the middle years can result in children and young people who engage in risk taking or who start to disengage from family, school and activities. It is becoming increasingly recognised that the middle years offers a 'window' and opportunity for early intervention and prevention and to build protective factors in children as they transition to the teen years.

The Yarra Ranges Council has proactively invested in planning and development dedicated to children and young people. Council is committed to promoting and ensuring the health and wellbeing of children and young people who live in the Yarra Ranges. Contextually, three strategic action plans have been developed from the Yarra Ranges Council Child and Youth Strategy 2014 – 2024. It is anticipated that there will be a connection and some overlap in strategies between the three Plans; predominantly where the activities are tailored around the needs of young people aged 12-14.

- › *The Early Years Strategic Action Plan* covers children 0-8 years.
- › Building on from scoping work in 2015, Council has progressed to the development of a *Middle Years Strategic Action Plan* (this Plan) which seeks to identify and address key priorities for improving outcomes and increasing the health and wellbeing of children and young people aged 8-14 years.
- › *The Connecting Young People' Youth Strategic Action Plan 2016-2019* provides a three-year vision to deliver on the key outcomes and goals for young people aged 12-25 years old in the Yarra Ranges. There are three priority areas outlined in the Plan: Health – the spectrum of health from wellness to illness and includes mental health, health services, sexual health, general health, recreation and physical activity; Relationships – with families, friends, parents, children, teachers, employers and community groups; and Employment – education, employment readiness, training and support for accessing and maintaining work.

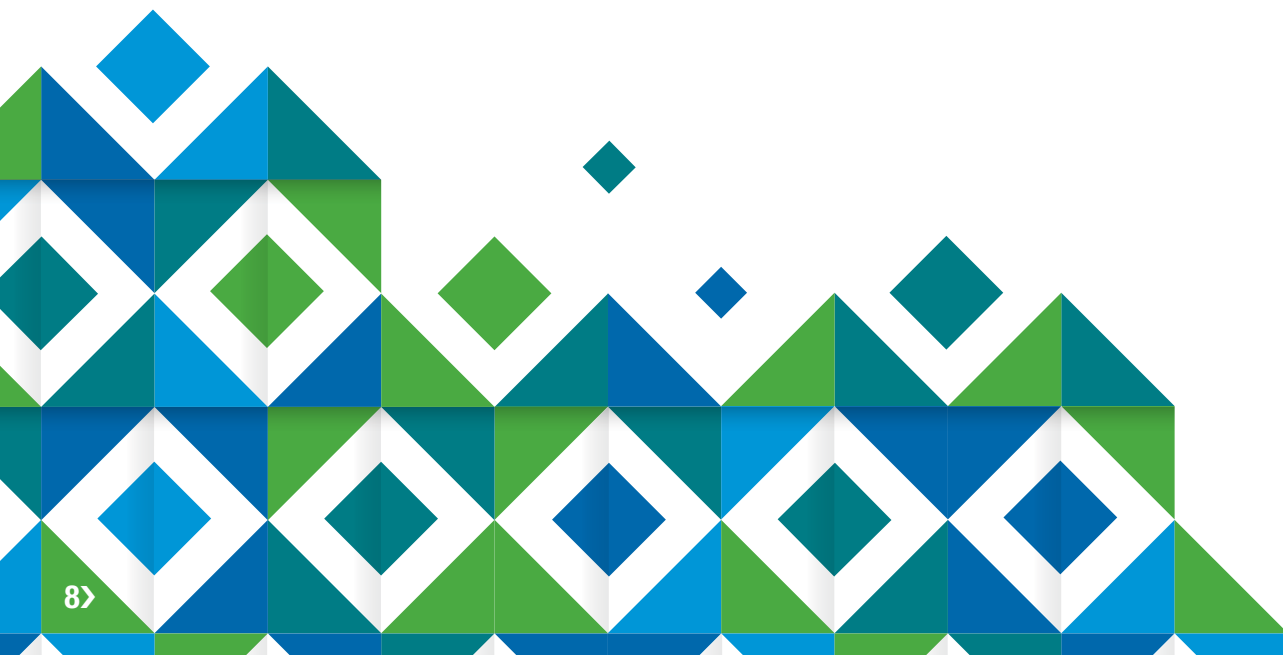


Developing the Yarra Ranges Council Middle Years Plan

The following activities informed the development of the Middle Years Strategic Action Plan.

- › Identification and analysis of available data related to current health, development and educational outcomes in the middle years.
- › Mapping of current services available for middle years children and their families. The service mapping sets out the spread of services across the Yarra Ranges catchment which assisted in identifying key service gaps, issues with service access and strategies for action.
- › A literature review of key factors that impact middle years children and young people and the range of evidence based interventions available for improving outcomes for this cohort.
- › Consultation with middle years children and young people and their parents.
- › Service provider consultation outlining key priorities for action for building service capacity and innovative interventions.

A background report summarised the findings from the above steps. Key to the process was the 'voice' given to the primary and secondary school students, parents, school staff and service providers. The information gathered from consultations provides a vital 'picture' of middle years children and young people and offers suggestions for improved health and wellbeing.





Why a Middle Years Strategy?

With one foot in childhood, and one foot in adulthood, the middle years are sometimes described as an “in between” stage of development.

With one foot in childhood, and one foot in adulthood, the middle years are sometimes described as an “in between” stage of development. This “in between” status has, too often, led to invisibility as far as service providers and policy makers are concerned. Typically, the efforts of service providers and policy makers focussed on young children or teenagers, with little attention directed to those that fall in between. The middle years represent a period in which protective behaviours can be developed or, conversely, when risk-taking and damaging patterns can emerge. There is also evidence that the middle years are a key period for early intervention. Therefore, investing in the middle years can be a crucial means of steering children and young people towards positive life courses.

Adolescent health researchers and leaders in education have been investigating the middle years and early puberty for nearly two decades but the findings are only now gaining traction. The middle years have been thought of as a ‘latent’ or quiet time before the onset of puberty, with brain development stopping at age 7 years. Some significant factors have led to a change in this view. Mental health problems are becoming increasingly more evident in young people by the age of 14 years; modern technology and MRIs have revealed there is rapid brain development between ages 8 – 14 years and evidence is showing that some marginalised, middle years children are entering puberty earlier.

What does research about the Middle Years tell us?

There is an increasing number of published papers on middle years research and more yet to be published from Australia and overseas.

There is an increasing number of published papers on middle years research and more yet to be published from Australia and overseas. It is now understood that biologically puberty is not a single process but 'a complex cascade of hormonal changes beginning around eight years of age'. During the middle years, a child's ability to adapt significantly affects their health, emotional development, family relationships and education. Very recent Australian research reveals that social and economic disadvantage can be a trigger for early onset of puberty. This places disadvantaged children at a higher risk of future health problems including various emotional and social problems. The research also found boys from the lowest socio-economic households were four times more likely to reach puberty early and for girls it was two times as likely.^{iv}

In general, the research tells us that most young people in the middle years are doing well. However, for some young people there are four key influencers impacting their wellbeing; these are hunger and severe deprivation; missing school; experience of pressure from schoolwork; and the availability of support networks that protect young people's wellbeing.

Young people in their middle years who are identified as 'marginalised' have a high concentration of low wellbeing. For example, young people who have a disability, young carers, socioeconomically disadvantaged, CALD, Indigenous, those who live in a rural area and those in out of home care. The different forms of low wellbeing are also linked to those who go hungry and miss school frequently; these factors also have a strong correlation with health complaints, bullying and low engagement at school.^v

Research into the growth of electronic media shows that boys' increasing use of video games significantly raises the odds of developing conduct and emotional problems. Television viewing is associated with greater hyperactivity and inattention in boys. The study found no significant relationships for girls. Because of the increasing rates of electronic media use by children, these findings may have important implications for child mental health.^{vi}

Work involving Australian school children shows that either being a bully, or being a victim of bullying can predict poorer mental health outcomes. These factors place young people at higher risk of developing psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, anti-social personality, substance abuse and psychotic disorders'. The most common age for cyberbullying, like 'traditional' bullying, appears to be in the transition ages from primary to secondary school. Girls report slightly higher involvement in cyberbullying than boys, both as bullies and victims. The negative impacts of bullying are well known. Extreme feelings of sadness and anger and references to self-harming and suicidal thoughts demonstrate this is a significant issue. A concerning finding is that young people are rarely proactive in informing adults about being cyberbullied.^{viii}

Analysis of NAPLAN data shows that 'disadvantaged' children have a gap in learning outcomes and they do not catch up. Most of this learning gap develops between Year 3 and Year 9. There is a gap of ten months in Year 3 which triples by Year 9 to a thirty-month gap. The gaps in learning outcomes also play out geographically and students in low socio-economic and regional areas can 'start behind' and make less progress in school.^{ix}

Research also highlights the importance of middle-years school transition and that the *'period of transition from primary to secondary school as an opportunity to build resilience and self- esteem'*. Analysis of the problems arising in the middle years indicates that these are complex issues and therefore require child centred and collaborative approaches across policy and services. Consultation directly with young people is also essential if a genuine and wider understanding of wellbeing among young people is to be understood. The lived experiences of young people need to be central to any thinking, planning and action.^x

Mentoring programs are a strategy that can potentially support middle years children and young people. A review found that there is a shift from traditional mentoring models that target 'at risk' young people to a focus on the overall development of the young person, with mentoring being one aspect of a youth development strategy. While mentoring can positively impact a young person's behaviour, it alone is unlikely to alleviate all negative influences hence the need for collaborative approaches and strategies across all services and government departments.



The Middle Years: Context for Yarra Ranges

Demographics and Indicators of Wellbeing

In 2016, the Yarra Ranges was home to 13,525 children and young people aged 8-14. The overall proportion of young people in the middle years is projected to remain relatively stable, with the biggest growth in the Urban area. Yarra Ranges main household types are currently families with school-aged children and the Region has an above average level of young people aged 5-19.

8-14 Population and Forecasts.

Age	2016	2036
8	1966	2155
9	1992	2170
10	1928	2172
11	1925	2166
12	1935	2153
13	1902	2138
14	1877	2140
Total	13,525	15,094

2016 Yarra Ranges 8-14 population by area

Urban	6488
Hills	3237
Valley	3663
Total	13,388¹




Similar to the general population, the **Urban** area houses a higher population of middle years children overall. There is a fifteen percent projected increase (to 2036) in the number of young people aged between 8 and 14. With better transport options, middle years children in the urban area tend to have better access to local services and programs than their counterparts in the Hills and especially the Valley.

The number of middle years children in the **Hills** is projected to decrease over the longer term (to 2036). In 2015, the Australian Early Development Census identified some children (now aged 8) from Olinda, Mount Dandenong, Kalorama and Tecoma who were either not developmentally 'on track' or were developmentally at risk on school entry.

The **Valley** is home to young people who face significant challenges from limited access to transport, fewer locally available services and, for some, living in families under significant financial stress. The Valley is the most disadvantaged area in Yarra Ranges with high unemployment rates, highest level of Centrelink recipients and highest number of people experiencing mortgage stress. In 2015, the Australian Early Development Census identified a significant percentage of children (now aged 8) from Healesville, Millgrove and Yarra Junction who were either developmentally vulnerable or were developmentally at risk on school entry.

In 2014/15, Yarra Ranges had a high rate of emergency department presentations for dental abscesses, toothache and other dental issues; A high number of children and teenagers have dental decay. Children aged 5-14 had an above average admission rate for: diseases and disorders of the circulatory system; diseases and disorders of the digestive system; diseases and disorders of the kidney and urinary tract; and injuries, poisonings and toxic effects of drugs. Mental health issues for young people are significant for townships where there are higher levels of disadvantage.

1. Area based population data shows inconsistency compared with overall Yarra Ranges 8-14 yrs. population, due to postcode / LGA boundary collection discrepancies



In 2015, Yarra Ranges had the highest proportion of children reporting high-levels of family stress in the past month, out of any metropolitan LGA. The percentage of family violence incidents where children and young people were involved was higher in Yarra Ranges at 35% compared with the Vic rate of 34.3% in 2013/14. In 2014/15 this rate increased to 36.1% in Yarra Ranges compared to 34.5% in Victoria. Some suburbs in Yarra Ranges had up to double the Victorian referral rate to domestic violence services and more than double the average of the Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Education and School

There is a total of ninety-six schools across the Yarra Ranges; seventy primary schools, thirteen secondary schools, ten Primary to Year 12 Schools and three specialist schools (includes Catholic, Government and Independent schools).

Of children attending secondary school – the stage where some children may move from government to private schools - Yarra Ranges has a relatively high proportion attending government schools, a low level attending Catholic schools and an average level attending independent schools. The same pattern applies to primary school students. Twenty-five percent of Yarra Ranges primary school students and forty-one percent of secondary school students attend Catholic or independent schools.

Yarra Ranges students in Years 5, 7 & 9 achieved better than the national benchmark in literacy and numeracy across 2013, 2014 and 2015. The literacy and numeracy skills of students improved across the three years, from a reasonably high base in 2013; the exception being Year 5 literacy which decreased marginally.


In 2015, 5,605 children and young people were surveyed from schools in the Yarra Ranges. Of these, 2,635 were from Years 5/6 and 2,970 were in Years 7-9. The survey included questions about connection to school and peers and experience of bullying. Children and young people in the Yarra Ranges reported slightly less connection to school and peers than the Victorian average. They also reported being bullied more than the state average.

Resilience

In November 2015, the Yarra Ranges Resilience Survey was completed by school students across the Yarra Ranges. The survey questioned young people about 44 indicators of resilience. Of note in the survey findings:

9 Nine indicators showed a **large decline in Years 7 and 8** from higher levels in Years 5 and 6, across the transition period from primary to secondary school. These were: Developmental assets, Boundaries and expectations, Motivation to learn, School belonging, Feel the school gives clear rules, Eat well to stay well, Get 8 hours sleep, Don't view inappropriate images on web, Make good decisions.

8 Eight indicators improved significantly in Year 6 from a lower base in Year 5, only to drop off again significantly in Year 7, again after starting high school. These were: Empowerment, Positive relationships, Hope, Educational engagement, Positive identity, Social Skills, Positive Values, Positive attitude towards violence.



Consultation: Young People, Parents and Service Providers

Middle years children and young people, parents and service providers who have a role with middle years young people, were consulted to inform the development of the Plan.

Six focus groups were held in primary and secondary schools across the Yarra Ranges. These were attended by a total of fifty-two middle years children and young people. Two focus groups were held with a total of thirteen parents of children in Years 5 and 6.

Yarra Ranges service providers who work with children in the middle years were invited to provide input to the development of the Plan through attending a discussion group, taking part in an interview or by completing an on-line survey. A total of one hundred service providers contributed their views and ideas

Middle Years Children in Primary School

Children by and large like living in the Yarra Ranges and appreciate the nature and their surrounds. The children who lived in smaller communities spoke of feeling safe and well connected.

The children were very open and frank about the things that impacted on their own health and well-being and that of their friends, family and other children they knew. Family stress and family breakdown were issues for some of the children and others cited examples of children they knew who were experiencing stressful situations, children who were angry or upset or having difficulty getting to school or getting on with their peers. They spoke favourably about the initiatives facilitated within their schools to help them manage stress and develop positive relationships with each other. There were different strategies in each school however all had similar objectives. Some of the children had experienced bullying and spoke about how they had managed what had happened to them; some were fearful about being bullied when they start high school.

These children understood health and what it means to be healthy and the importance of exercise. A few children also made the connection between stress and eating well and some gave examples of where their family was under financial stress and how this impacted on the capacity of the family to buy healthy food. Most of their ideas relating to improving and maintaining good health were around access to the outdoors, being connected to others and being active. Some children were frustrated they could not ride their bikes and skateboards freely. This was largely due to the safety concerns of parents; in some areas, there are no footpaths and in other areas there are no local skate parks or bike paths.

The idea of including children with disabilities was also raised. Children in two focus groups were in contact with children who had autism and they wanted to see these children offered the same opportunities they had.

The issue of 'screen time' was also something they were very aware of; they understood the need to balance screen time with other activities like exercise and family time. Parents had an active role with most children in setting limits on screen time including use of iPads, computers and television.

"It would be good to have a space which is ours, where we could meet up, be dropped off by our parents, we could discuss stuff and even help each other with homework."

"A 'chill out' spot for kids where they have problems and where they could hang out with other kids who are also having problems."

Children in all focus groups were aligned and consistent in their view on the key thing they thought could assist their wellbeing – a space outside of school that they could call their own where they could meet up and support each other. The children were appreciative and understood that the school does much to support them and they recognise that they are given the opportunity to connect positively in school. They felt however, that some children would benefit from more connection outside of school; particularly those children not engaged in organised sport.

Middle Years Young People in Secondary School

Most of the young people participated in some form of organised sport outside of school; mainly football, netball and basketball. They recognised that these traditional sporting activities may not suit all young people in their age group and commented that options outside of sport are limited.

These young people expressed a general view that young people their age eat poorly; some of this was due to personal choice and some to circumstance. They believe that young people their age have enough information about healthy eating.

“Lots just want to eat McDonald’s and do it all the time.”

“It’s so much cheaper to buy unhealthy food.” “You can go to the supermarket and get a 2-litre bottle of lemonade for 75c.”

“My mum won’t let me use public transport as it’s not safe so she has to drive me everywhere. I’m 14 and I have only caught public transport once.”

Safety was an issue that was raised in several contexts; both physical safety and cyber-safety. A number (girls in particular) cited instances of their friends being ‘attacked’ by cyber-bullies (“It’s easier for them to attack on line rather than doing it face-to-face”). Physical safety was highlighted in regard to accessing public transport options and using local facilities like bike/walking tracks and the skate park.

Lack of transport resonated with these young people. Some live in areas with infrequent bus services as the only transport option. This impacts on their capacity to get around their local area and potentially take up other activities; including getting a part time job in future.

Some young people had personal experience of being bullied in and outside of school. They did not tend to discuss these issues with parents, teachers or even peers. They said they felt it was up to them to manage the situation and that talking about it did not really help. They suggested that ‘safe spaces’ where they could discuss things like this could be of value.



Parents of Middle Years Children and Young People

Parents are conscious of rising rates of obesity and diabetes and encourage their children as much as possible to lead active lives and eat well.

They indicated that there is a need for a greater variety of accessible and inexpensive sports and activities.

- “There are very few other opportunities outside traditional Aussie football and netball – a real gap for non-sporty kids in this area. The school tries hard to provide things but it shouldn’t just be the school’s responsibility”
- “There aren’t many facilities locally; the kids could do with something like a skate park”
- “Activities are so costly; you can’t afford for your child to be involved in more than one thing; we can’t afford the school holiday program”
- “It’s hard when we are working to get our children places after school; public transport from here isn’t safe”

Parents are fearful that their children will be bullied and cyber bullying is a key concern. Overall, parents indicated they have the capacity to support their own child going through an experience of bullying however they are not sure of where to turn if they or their child require further support. More and more children are experiencing anxiety and mental health issues and there is a general perception that this is due, in part, to poor family situations or bullying. Common to all parents is the concern that mental health issues are becoming more evident in younger children rather than it being an issue for ‘troubled teens.’

- “The kids in this area could really benefit from self-esteem programs that help them develop social skills, give them coping strategies and help them manage their anxiety”
- “The school does what it can but would be good if there was a more consistent availability of workers from services outside to support families that need it.”
- “It would be good if the children had access to mentors more regularly.”
- “The school got a Council grant for theatre program which was hugely beneficial but the funding was only for a year.”
- “Would be good to have group programs that are not sport related.”



Service Providers

One hundred service providers and other stakeholders from schools, community services, health services and local government, provided input into the development of this Plan. Sixty-five people completed an on-line survey; a discussion group was held with eighteen members of the school student wellbeing network and seventeen consultations were held with youth, health, community and local government workers.

Surveyed service providers were asked to rank their current key issues of concern with regards to middle years children and young people. They were then invited to comment if they felt these issues had worsened, stayed the same or improved over the past two years. The following table summarises the top ten issues highlighted.

Current issue/area of concern	Issue compared to two years ago
1. Socio-economic disadvantage	Most survey respondents noted that socio-economic disadvantage has changed little over the past two years – that there were significant numbers of middle years children and young people affected by this issue two years ago and this remains an issue today.
2. High level of screen time (no boundaries to access)	High levels of screen time ranked number one as the key issue that is much worse than two years ago.
3. Behavioural issues	Behavioural issues remained the third most concerning issue; children and young people facing these issues were as prevalent two years ago as now.
4. High consumption of sugar laden foods	This issue is largely unchanged; it was as much a concern two years ago as it is now, but it has not progressed to being significantly worse.
5. Family stress/breakdown	Nineteen respondents noted this issue as significantly or somewhat worse than two years ago. Family violence rated fifteenth in current issues; however, in issues that had worsened over past two years it rated as seventh which indicates that providers feel this is becoming more of a problem.
6. Mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, depression)	A key area of concern; poor mental health was the second highest issue noted as being worse than two years ago.
7. Experience of bullying/poor peer relationships	This issue is still as much a concern two years ago as it is now; fifteen respondents noted this issue as significantly or somewhat worse while twenty-seven said it was much the same.
8. Low level of physical activity (other than school physical education)	Low level of physical activity remains much the same as two years ago.
9. School refusal/poor engagement in school	Another key area of concern; this issue climbed to the fourth highest issue that is worse than two years ago.
10. Lack of after school programs/supports	While this issue has not worsened; there remains a gap in these types of activities for middle years children and young people.

Service providers suggested the following priorities for action:

- › Greater **collaboration, communication and partnerships** between schools and community services and health (*"Each area might be doing good work but not together which is not working for the child or the family or the teachers"*).
- › Integrated **models/hub approach** - a place based response where community is informed and services available locally/after hours to promote engagement, build trust and early intervention.
- › More **programs in schools** e.g. resilience programs for middle years children (*"Build capacity of these children to respond to bullying; have better peer relationships"*).
- › More and better access to **afterhour's programs and activities** including groups and low-cost recreation options. Examples of groups include: youth groups for this age group, engagement in team/group activities, different events targeted to this cohort, program for body safety (sexting etc.), community safety, resilience and self-worth.
- › More **mentors** available for middle years children and young people (*"Well trained mentors can be very effective and part of early intervention approach in working with children who have experienced trauma, complex family issues"*).
- › **Family support** starting early in schools working with emerging truancy, develop connections to families and intervene early. Provide parent support and education including community learning support programs and seminars available to parents.
- › **Upskill and coach the teachers** to be the key 'touch point' for a student and case manager who can then collaborate with families (*"Some issues, to unskilled teachers, can appear like a crisis but they could be managed differently teachers are skilled and confident"*).



Summary and Next Steps

Key points of note from each sub-region

The following table summarises the key points of note, regarding the health and wellbeing of middle years children and young people, per sub-region. These are drawn from the profile of middle years young people, consultation with middle years young people, parents and service providers and the service provider survey.

	Urban	Hills	Valley
Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › 6,488 young people aged 8-14 in 2016 › Highest number of middle years young people in Yarra Ranges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › 3,237 young people aged 8-14 in 2016 › Lowest number of middle years young people in Yarra Ranges and the number of aged less than 15 is expected to decline › Sizable percentage not developmentally 'on track' or developmentally at risk on school entry. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › 3,663 young people aged 8-14 in 2016 › Most disadvantaged area in Yarra Ranges › Significant percentage of children who were developmentally vulnerable or at risk on school entry.
The 'good things'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › More transport options and better access to services than other areas. › Talk about feelings and 'share' at school › Want to support other kids outside school › Want to be consulted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Like living in the Hills (the nature and trees) › The area has good sporting facilities (but needs more skate parks!). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Like discussing issues and want to be consulted › Were articulate and advocated for their needs in the consultation.
Needs and issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Targeted information about health and other issues › Low level of physical activity › Better access to sporting facilities › Cost a barrier to participation in activities › Cost a barrier to healthy eating › School refusal/poor engagement › Self-harm › Sexualised behaviours › Bullying/poor peer relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Local festivals do not cater for them › Space that is 'theirs' outside school › Include children with disabilities › Bullying › High consumption of sugar › Poor nutrition › High levels of screen time › Lack of paediatricians › Lack of role models/mentors › Need for family support services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Socio-economic disadvantage › Bullying/cyber bullying › Stress/Family breakdown › Family violence › Financial stress; Healthy food expensive › Safe space outside of school › Limited public transport › Safety of public transport › Low Self-esteem; Anxiety issues; Self-harm › Social skill development › Cost and transport barriers to participation



The Next Steps – Our Approach

The Middle Years Strategic Action Plan 2017-2021 and our Strategic Priorities, outlined in the following section, are informed by a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data regarding middle years' children and young people. Demographic and education data developed a profile of middle years children and young people who reside in the Yarra Ranges while the literature review looked more broadly at research and findings from studies on the middle years in Australia as well as overseas. Service mapping set out the spread of services across the Yarra Ranges catchment, assisting in guiding discussion around service gaps and service access and how to remedy concerns in this area. The information gathered from consultations with children and young people and their parents provided a vital picture of key issues and their suggestions on how these can be addressed.

We will continue to work collaboratively with our partners in already established and new working groups that will oversee the development and delivery of the Strategic Priorities and Actions. Our approach is underpinned by the concepts and theories of progressive universalism and the socio-ecological framework.

Progressive Universalism recognises that not all pathways to support, care and health development are equal. At its core, progressive universalism is a determination to ensure that people who are marginalised and from lower socio-economic backgrounds have the same opportunities and access to quality services as others. It is characterised by early intervention and the development and delivery of approaches that are universal (available to all) and importantly non-stigmatising.

The Socio-ecological Framework is based on evidence that no single factor can explain why some people or groups are at higher risk of social, health and other issues, while others are more protected from it. This framework views these issues as the outcome of interaction among many factors at four levels: Individual factors (e.g. genetics, individual behaviours); Interpersonal (social environment) factors (e.g. available health and social supports, family characteristics); Institutional and community (physical) environments (e.g. schools, service systems, transportation) and; Policy/political factors (e.g. government policy, laws, regulations, discrimination).

The framework treats the interaction between the factors at different levels with equal importance to the influence of factors within a single level. It is also useful to identify and cluster intervention strategies based on the level in which they act. For example, early intervention with school parents can act at the individual, interpersonal and community levels to strengthen the bond between parent and child by developing and supporting positive parenting practices.

Strategic Priorities for Action

Strategic Priority 1:

Promote the voice and opinions of middle years young people

Rationale

Young people are best placed to suggest solutions about the issues that affect them and their communities. Young people have a range of experiences, thoughts, ideas and perspectives that can enrich decision making processes and lead to more relevant and whole of community decisions, projects, policies, programs, use of resources and outcomes. Consultation directly with young people is also essential if a genuine and wider understanding of wellbeing among young people is to be reached. Young people's ideas about their wellbeing - what undermines it and what needs to happen to improve it - are vital. The lived experiences of young people need to be central to any thinking, planning and action.

The consultation with young people added the voice and valuable opinions of fifty-two 8-14-year olds to the development of the Middle Years Plan, providing a picture of the issues they face and, importantly, their views on interventions that could improve the health and wellbeing of young people their age. They valued being included in the consultation and would like to continue to have a say in planning and developments for the middle years in the Yarra Ranges. Involvement of 8-14-year olds in this manner is also empowering for young people and builds a greater sense of healthy connection with others and their community.

Actions

- Pilot the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI)² to gain ongoing input from middle years children in priority areas in the Yarra Ranges.
- Yarra Ranges Council will create avenues to involve middle years children and young people in the planning and development of services that affect them.

² The Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) is a self-report questionnaire completed by children. It asks them how they think and feel about their experiences both inside and outside of school. Questions related to the five areas of development that are strongly linked to well-being, health and academic achievement - Physical Health & Well-Being, Connectedness, Social and Emotional Development, School Experiences and Use of After-School Time.

Strategic Priority 2:

Pilot a place-based, comprehensive Middle Years Model

Rationale

The Valley is noted as the most socio-economically disadvantaged area in the Yarra Ranges. The literature review indicates that children from very low socio-economic households are more likely to enter puberty early and be at higher risk of future health, emotional and social problems. Young people in the middle years who are identified as 'marginalised,' e.g. with a disability, young carers, socioeconomically disadvantaged, live in a rural area or in out of home care, have a higher concentration of low wellbeing. NAPLAN data shows that 'disadvantaged' children have a gap in learning outcomes and they do not catch up. In low socio-economic areas, they 'start behind' and make less progress in school. In addition, students of parents with low education can fall very far behind.

A key theme common to the consultations with service providers, parents and middle years young people was the need for localised 'service hubs' to support a coordinated approach to interventions for middle years young people and to build better access to locally available services. Containing the focus to one geographical area enables the testing of flexible, low-resource initiatives that establish an evidence base for adapting the most effective ideas to the wider municipality.



Actions

Yarra Ranges Council will:

- Develop a project group in the Upper Yarra (Woori Yallock to Warburton and surrounding townships) to design and test innovative ideas that improve wellbeing of middle years young people.
- Develop an evaluation framework and tools as part of the pilot planning process and undertake comprehensive (process/impact) evaluation of the strategy over 3 years, including a baseline assessment and outcome measures.
- Seek to promote the relevant beneficial findings in other geographical areas/project groups in the Yarra Ranges.
- Explore a range of additional funding sources to support the pilot and compliment Council's middle years annual funding.

Strategic Priority 3:

Develop a response to service gaps and environmental issues that impact on the middle years

Rationale

Despite the growing evidence that the middle years require formal support, there are significant gaps in services for this group. Traditionally, services have focused on addressing the needs of the early years (0 to 8 years) and young people (12-25 years). These traditional categorisations mean that children and young people in their middle years often miss out on support at a critical time in their life. There is a need for age-specific services that focus on prevention and early intervention.

The service mapping for middle years children and young people living in the Yarra Ranges appears reasonably comprehensive as there are many services listed. However, feedback from consultations and anecdotal reports indicates that several services that purport to cover the whole Yarra Ranges do not in reality provide a service in all localities. In addition, many services are more focussed on older teens and not the middle years. Service waiting lists, service access and closure of 'cases' when families do not engage or keep appointments are further evidence that services are not as available as they seem.

Service gaps in mental health services, occupational therapy, speech therapy, parenting programs, family support, family violence, food security, out of school activities, and safe public transport are problematic to varying degrees across the Yarra Ranges. Parents and service providers spoke of a key gap in (and the need for) mentoring programs for middle years children and young people. Consultation and scoping also highlighted several built environment and infrastructure issues which impact on the health and wellbeing of middle years children and young people.

Actions

Yarra Ranges Council will:

- › Work with partner organisations to create options and mechanisms that boost access for middle years children to services that support individual health and wellbeing, and connection with family and the community.
- › Link planning for the middle years between the intersecting Yarra Ranges Council department/s to build and sustain interest and commitment to the middle years plan; particularly in relation to service coordination, infrastructure and the built environment.



Strategic Priority 4:

Strategic Priority 4: Ensure middle years young people benefit from connected and informed services and supports that enhance their health and wellbeing

Rationale

Analysis of the issues arising in the middle years recognises that these are complex and multifaceted and therefore require young person centred and shared approaches across government, the service system and community. The development of 'joined up' holistic responses and interventions to address the complex needs of children and young people, and consider the varied approaches of different services, is broadly recognised as beneficial. Regarding school related problems, evidence suggests that interventions that involve collaboration between the school, home and community are more effective. Collaborative effort also should consider approaches that reduce the 'drop off' in young people's developmental assets, boundaries and expectations, 'hope', motivation to learn, school belonging, eating well, empowerment, positive relationships, positive identity, social skills and positive identity as they transition from primary to secondary school.

Work is needed to develop a common, cross-sectoral approach and evidence base for supporting children and young people in the middle years in Yarra Ranges. This ought to be developed, shared and owned by young people, their families, schools, community, services and local government.

Service providers, families and young people require information and education regarding the range of relevant services available and how to access and engage with them. They also need the most up to date knowledge and understanding of the middle years, why it is a significant and distinctive period in a young person's life, and how best to respond to the young person's changing needs that can arise at home, at school and in the community.



Actions

Yarra Ranges Council will:

- › Lead the development of a middle year's Community of Practice that brings together practitioners, teachers and key stakeholders who share a common agenda, knowledge and passion to foster innovative and new approaches to building the health and wellbeing of middle years children and young people in the Yarra Ranges.
- › Advocate for the development of national and state policy and practice frameworks that specifically address the needs of children and young people in the middle years.
- › Continue to consult with young people and their families, service providers, education departments, researchers and other relevant bodies to understand the emerging issues for children and young people in their middle years.
- › Develop a Middle Years Communication and Information Strategy to ensure people across the community know what services are available and to support a meaningful connection between young people in their middle years and the services they require.

Glossary/Acronyms

AECD	Australian Early Development Census
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
Cohorts	Groups of people with shared characteristics
Cyber-bullying	The use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature
Hills	Sub-region comprising Upwey, Belgrave, Monbulk, Olinda and surrounds
LGA	Local Government Authority
MDI	Middle Years Development Instrument
MRI	Magnetic resonance imaging
NAPLAN Numeracy	The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
Urban	Sub-region comprising Chirnside Park, Lilydale, Mooroolbark and surrounds
Valley	Sub-region comprising Healesville, Yarra Glen, Yarra Junction, Warburton and surrounds

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The Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) is a self-report questionnaire completed by children. It asks them how they think and feel about their experiences both inside and outside of school. Questions related to the five areas of development that are strongly linked to well-being, health and academic achievement - Physical Health & Well-Being, Connectedness, Social and Emotional Development, School Experiences and Use of After-School Time.

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