



Early Years

STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN 2019 – 2021

Acknowledgement to the First Australians

Yarra Ranges Council proudly acknowledges Aboriginal communities and pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia's first peoples and custodians of the lands and waterways which sustain us.

We acknowledge the resilience of Aboriginal people – who have belonged to and cared for country for 65,000 years. While the impacts of colonisation and more locally the history of Coranderrk have had profound effects on traditional life, Aboriginal language, lore and cultural knowledge remains strong and continues to grow.

Local Aboriginal communities have always understood the importance of raising children who are healthy, proud and connected to family, country and community, and who in turn will grow up to be respectful, caring and strong elders, to guide future generations.

These messages of strength and resilience, and the importance of connection to place and community, provide important lessons for us all about how to best support children and families to thrive. They are also messages Yarra Ranges children have themselves clearly communicated, through consultations with Council.

Children like the natural environment such as mountains, waterfalls, creeks, bush tracks, lakes, rivers, dams, trees and wild animals.

(Riding Home: Yarra Ranges. A consultation project with young children in Yarra Ranges 2014)

Understanding the rich and varied histories of the Yarra Ranges, the way in which children have been raised here for centuries and the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal people and communities enriches us all more broadly.

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

The broad vision and goals that Council, its partners and the community have for Yarra Ranges children, young people and their families are outlined in the Child and Youth Strategy 2014-2024, the Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017-2021 and Council Plan 2017-2021.

Council's overall vision for Yarra Ranges as a municipality is that "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 makes this the best place in the world" (Working Together to Shape the Future: Council Plan 2017-2021), while its vision for children and young people is that "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). A further relevant strategic objective through which Council will achieve its municipal vision is that "Communities are safe, resilient, healthy, inclusive and socially well connected. Quality services are accessible to everyone". This Early Years Plan also directly delivers on Goal 12 of the Health & Wellbeing Strategy which states "Every child and young person can thrive and reach their potential"



The intent of this Early Years Strategic Action Plan 2019-2021 is to detail the actions Council will undertake to improve outcomes for children aged 0-8 years growing up in Yarra Ranges. This Early Years Strategic Action Plan is one of three plans that outline the way Council will work, alongside community partners, to achieve the visions articulated above.

The other two plans are:

- The Middle Years Strategic Action Plan 2017-21 which addresses 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 2019-2021 which will outline the priority activities and intended outcomes for young people aged 12-25 years.

Both the Early Years Strategic Action Plan and Youth Strategic Action Plan cover just a two year period from 2019 -2021 so as to align the end dates for all three plans. This will allow for more streamlined assessment of impact and a future option to undertake combined planning across cohorts in line with the changing needs of families and the nature of childhood and adolescence.

A comprehensive Implementation Plan has been developed that outlines clearly how the priorities identified in this Strategic Action Plan will be achieved.

Priority area	Council actions:
<p>Create healthy and connected communities in which all families and children can participate</p>	<p>Key Action: Ensure adequate and accessible infrastructure that promotes engagement in family and children's services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Deliver and support a range of services and initiatives which improve the health and wellbeing of families and children › Support or facilitate collaborative impact partnerships to plan and achieve shared goals to improve broad outcomes for children and their families › Partner with others to deliver initiatives that increase community engagement and social networks for families, including fostering intergenerational connections › Engage with other organisations and/or volunteers to develop support services/groups with a specific focus on fathers, young parents and single parents › Promote positive early home learning and parenting support across targeted communities › Provide a range of community-based play and development opportunities for targeted communities and cohorts › Ensure adequate and accessible infrastructure that promotes engagement in family and children's services
<p>Build a connected reflective service system that enables children in their early years to thrive</p>	<p>Key Action: Implement, promote and evaluate the Upper Yarra Linking Families Service and advocate for further resources as recommended and required</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Enable all eligible families and children to engage in Maternal and Child Health and early years services through identifying and addressing barriers to participation › Implement and promote approaches to all early years services that enhance inclusion and celebrate diversity › Create smoother referral pathways and enhance planning between universal and other services › Develop or facilitate targeted programs to engage and support children and caregivers during key transition times, such as entering child care or preschool and beginning school › Plan, support and deliver joint service and community initiatives that will reduce the occurrence or impact of family violence, particularly using a gender equity lens
<p>Ensure all children and their families are safe, and can participate in and influence planning and service delivery</p>	<p>Key Action: Develop mechanisms to enable children and families to influence planning and service delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Continue to plan and implement strategies that ensure Yarra Ranges Council is a Child Safe Organisation › Inspire the Yarra Ranges community to become a more child friendly municipality › Encourage more organisations in Yarra Ranges to become Child Safe Organisations by offering training, resources and other supports › Provide a planned and systematic response to the built environment (parks, playgrounds, footpaths) to ensure the best interests and voices of children are included › Ensure all family and children's services delivered by council are culturally safe

Yarra Ranges Council Role in the Early Years

Yarra Ranges Council plays an active role in both the planning and delivery of high quality early years services, and leading projects and partnerships which respond to the changing needs of families and our community, to ensure all children under eight years can thrive.

Council directly delivers a number of services and programs that target families and children with specific needs, primarily through funding agreements with the Department of Education and Training (DET), Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) or other State and Commonwealth Departments. These include Supported Playgroups, Preschool Field Officers, the Universal and Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service, Immunisation Services and Sherbrooke Family and Children's Centre.

In 2016 Council funded an Early Years Community Support program that provides parent education and community family and children's' events. Also, the Linking Families Service in the Upper Yarra area works alongside universal services to provide families experiencing vulnerability or additional barriers, with early help to meet their children's needs and prepare them for starting school.

Council also leads or is a key partner in a number of placed based planning initiatives that aim to improve outcomes for children and families living in targeted areas of Yarra Ranges or who are facing specific challenges. The DET funded Best Start program has been operating for over 16 years in the municipality and has a focus on improving participation rates of children in Maternal and Child Health and preschool services. Between 2015 and 2016, the Let's Talk about Warby project in the Warburton area sought to identify local families with 0-5 year old children experiencing vulnerability who were not accessing services. Consultations with the community and individuals informed the best way to connect with and support these families to access services.

Furthermore, Council has core responsibility for planning and development around the built environment, and providing direct infrastructure assistance to community services that use council buildings to support families with young children. This includes 41 preschool buildings in Yarra Ranges (that are owned by Council) as well as the Rolling Hills community facility in Mooroolbark.

Finally, with its close links to services, strong local partnerships and community knowledge, Council has an important role to play at times in advocating to state and federal government for policy decisions or allocation of resources which prioritise the best interests and concerns of Yarra Ranges children and families.

Please refer to page 30 for a full list of the services and programs provided by Council to support families and children in the Yarra Ranges.

Partnership Initiatives

Council has been strategically active and responsive in its work with children, families and their communities, especially families experiencing vulnerability. The Linking Learning project, developed in Woori Yallock and Warburton between 2014 and 2017, brought together schools, early years professionals and parents with the aim of improving the language outcomes for children in the Upper Yarra. Key activities and strategies around engaging parents, improving service quality and encouraging services to collaborate were successfully designed and implemented.

In 2017 a newly formed collaboration called the Upper Yarra Partnership brought together services and local and state government representatives to identify and achieve shared goals around important outcomes for children 0-14 years. The Upper Yarra is an area of natural beauty and community resilience; however the impact of challenging social and economic circumstances can be seen in children's outcomes, which are well below average. The collective knowledge and wisdom of people who live in the community, professionals and policy makers is needed to develop solutions that will achieve long-lasting change.

Wurun Child and Family Place (WCFP) offers a co-located partnership of family, early childhood, health and Aboriginal services in Healesville. After five years of operation the initiative was evaluated. Key findings show the initiative successfully: brought partners and agencies together who worked collaboratively on early years services in Healesville; provided a culturally safe service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and; enabled their Reconciliation model to be implemented.

The First 1000 Days is a comprehensive collective impact approach¹ to improving the health and wellbeing outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. It brings together a diverse range of community stakeholders, to set aspirations for their children and families, which promote the best possible development for all local Indigenous children, from conception right through to the age of 2. An Eastern Metropolitan First 1000 Days Regional Implementation Group has been established by the Healesville Indigenous Services Association and involves staff from Council who are supporting the planning and delivery of a range of interventions and supports. This project links closely with Goal 17 of Council's Health and Wellbeing Plan that states that "Indigenous residents are supported to have healthy pregnancies and thrive in early childhood".

1. A collective impact approach involves an innovative and structured approach to making collaboration work across government, business, philanthropy, non-profit organisations and citizens to achieve significant and lasting social change



Early Years Plan – Overarching Focus

Remarkable developments take place in the early years of a child's life but especially in the first five years. A child's brain develops more and faster than any other time in their life. It is during these early years that the very foundations for learning, health and behaviour throughout the whole of life, are laid down.² There is evidence that shows how the early years are crucial in influencing later life stages and also that a targeted approach to intervention best addresses the cycle of disadvantage, promotes healthy development and longer term wellbeing.

Yarra Ranges Council is committed to promoting and ensuring the health and wellbeing of children and young people who live in the Yarra Ranges.

The Early Years Strategic Action Plan recognises the significance of the early years, the importance of optimising opportunities for children's growth learning and development as well as addressing diversity and inclusion, vulnerability and safety. The Plan is underpinned by overarching focus areas that include:

Recognising the key role of parents/caregivers as a child's first educator

From the moment children are born, parents and caregivers are responsible for providing them with rich and essential learning experiences, through both their interactions, and the home environment they create. Building family capability and resilience, and providing caregivers with comprehensive supports early in their child's life, is therefore critical to enhancing their development, preparing them for school and promoting lifelong learning.

High quality services

Research has shown access to high quality early childhood and care services is a crucial element in improving long term outcomes for children.

Particularly highlighted is the contribution made by the early years' service environment (such as staff training and qualifications, staff-child ratios and group size) and dynamics (for example child-carer relationships, communication between carer and parents, staff stability). In addition to this, research also shows the critical role that early childhood services play in developing more effective and efficient identification and referral pathways for children and families, who need more specialised assistance.

Diversity and inclusion

Yarra Ranges is a large, varied geographic area with urban, semi urban and rural communities. There are also growing numbers of families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, families with children with a disability and children in out of home care; who all occupy a particular focus throughout this plan and in all the work that Council does to enable children and families to thrive. It is recognised that improving outcomes for all groups in our community relies on approaches to planning and service delivery which are inclusive and can respond flexibly to the unique needs of every child and their family. This includes acknowledging some families' experience of intersectionality - or the outcome of different interconnected identities and backgrounds.

A focus on vulnerability

It is well understood that children raised in families with multiple and complex needs or who have experienced trauma often have poorer developmental outcomes, and improving the health and wellbeing of these children requires an approach which understands and directly addresses the range of factors at play. These include access to resources, adverse family experiences or mental health issues which may impact on the parent/child relationship, feelings of community connectedness and belonging, or geographic isolation.



Safety, non- violence and gender equity

Freedom from violence, feeling safe and respected at home and in the community, is fundamental to children's healthy development and enabling caregivers, particularly mother's, to be the best they can be. It is now well established that the most effective method to reduce the long-term impacts of family violence, are community and societal attitudes and cultures which promote gender equity.

Yarra Ranges Council Approach to the Early Years

The Early Years Strategic Action Plan 2019-2021, builds on initiatives that Council has developed and responds to the key findings from consultation with service providers and parents/caregivers.

It is of key importance when implementing the strategic priorities and addressing the challenges identified, that Council engage and work together with partners to build greater child, family and community capacity, taking a lead role on some matters, and providing advocacy, advice, information or funding for others. Learning's from past experience and from the work in developing this plan, tells Council that the diversity of issues across the municipality requires partnership and shared approaches with other organisations, which are based around the unique characteristics of local people and places. Council's approach, in this and the other plans, is also underpinned by the concepts and theories of Progressive Universalism and the Socio-ecological Framework with a commitment to evidence-informed reflective practice.

Evidenced Informed

In the planning, design and implementation of services and interventions, council will utilise the best available evidence about what works in improving the outcomes of young children and their families, to strive for the greatest possible impact. An evidence-informed approach aims to increase the benefits obtained from effort for council staff and partners, provide greater transparency, and encourage a culture of ongoing learning and improvement. At the same time, there is a recognition that evidence comes in many forms, with the voices and experiences of Yarra Ranges children and their families being a critical source of information to guide our work.

Progressive Universalism

Council recognises that not all pathways to support, care and healthy 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, with an underlying assumption that services and supports which take extra care to provide for the needs of people from diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds will also meet the needs of the mainstream.

Socio-ecological Framework

This aspect is based on evidence that no single factor can explain why some people or groups are at higher risk of poorer social and health outcomes, while others develop more resilience and/or protective factors. This framework identifies four factors that have multi-level interactions on a child's developmental outcomes: 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.



Place Based

A place-based approach seeks to understand the experience of families and children in the context of the areas where they live, work, play and learn. It takes a whole of community view to issues facing families, with a focus on enhancing the social and physical environment of local communities, and building an integrated and accessible service system. It is underpinned by a community development approach which aims to also ensure families are more engaged and connected, and can rely on both formal and informal networks of support at times of need.

Working in Partnerships – Collective Impact

Council understands that better outcomes can be achieved when a range of agencies and stakeholders work together to achieve solutions for families. Council is committed to using a collective impact framework to guide the way we come together with organisations and community members to identify and define concerns, develop a shared agenda and ensure activities are aligned. This also includes deliberate effort to ensure the priorities and actions of all different areas of council complement and reinforce one another (e.g. building public spaces which are both child friendly and support active ageing).

Measuring success- Yarra Ranges Child and Family Outcomes Framework

This Early Years Strategic Action Plan and the Middle Years Strategic Action Plan 2017-2021, outline what Yarra Ranges Council and its partners will deliver for children aged 0-14, in line with the objectives of the child and youth strategy 2014-2024. Whereas the Yarra Ranges Child and Family Outcomes Framework (excerpt below), describes the key areas that this work seeks to influence and provides targeted indicators through which to monitor progress (with the most recent results on some of these indicators described in the summary profile at page 16). This overarching framework is underpinned by an understanding that these outcome areas are usually influenced by the combined activities of multiple programs, organisations and sectors, and that some headline indicators will take a longer period of time for change to be seen.

Key Outcomes: It is our aim that all Yarra Ranges children:

1. Have a safe, secure and nurturing home environment	2. Experience good physical health and are achieving optimal development	3. Have good mental health and positive connections to their culture and community	4. Are engaged with and achieving in education	5. Are able to access high quality, inclusive services
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Headline Indicators: How will we know if we're on track

1. Children being read to at home Frequency: Annual Source: Yarra Ranges Family Survey	4. Children in prep who are developmentally vulnerable on 2 or more domains Frequency: 3 yearly Source: AEDC	8. Families reporting strong connection to their community Frequency: Annual Source: Yarra Ranges Family Survey	12. Four year old children participating in kindergarten Frequency: Annual Source: DET	16. Families reporting no barriers to accessing services Frequency: Annual Source: Yarra Ranges Family Survey
2. Family violence incidents where children are present Frequency: Annual Source: Crime Statistics Agency	5. Families participating in the 2 year old Maternal and Child Health KAS visit Frequency: Annual Source: Own data	9. Children in grade 4/5 reporting 'assets' related to peer relationships Frequency: Two-yearly Source: MDI	13. Primary school children attending >90% of the time Frequency: Bi-annual Source: ACARA	17. Families reporting feeling safe, welcome and included in services they access Frequency: Annual Source: Yarra Ranges Family Survey
3. Children in prep, living in families with high levels of stress Frequency: Annual Source: School entrant health questionnaire (DET)	6. Children who are fully immunised at 2 years of age Frequency: As required Source: Own data	10. Children in grade 4/5 reporting they are bullied Frequency: Annual Source: Attitudes to School Survey (DET)	14. Average grade 3 NAPLAN result for reading Frequency: Bi-annual Source: ACARA	18. Grade 4/5 children who report feeling listened to by adults Frequency: Annual Source: MDI
	7. Children in grade 5 reporting 'assets' related to nutrition and sleep Frequency: Two-yearly Source: MDI	11. Children in grade 4/5 reporting high wellbeing in relation 'happiness' Frequency: Two-yearly Source: MDI	15. Average grade 3 NAPLAN result for numeracy Frequency: Bi-annual Source: ACARA	

State and National Policy Context

The **Victorian Early Childhood Reform Plan**³ seeks to make Maternal and Child Health and preschool services more accessible, more inclusive and higher quality, with extra services and support for struggling families and educationally disadvantaged children. The reform plan has a particular focus on ensuring children are 'school ready' and additional Maternal and Child Health outreach support is available where concerns about family violence or other significant challenges are identified.

A **Compact**⁴ struck between DET, DHHS and the MAV is about working together more collaboratively and in new ways to ensure:

- Children are engaged in learning and feel safe and cared for
- That vulnerability and disadvantage does not determine outcomes for children
- That families feel well supported by quality inclusive services
- That families are connected and participate in community life and can access help when they need it.

The Compact priorities in 2017 were: Child and family health and development; Early childhood education and care; Connected care and; Place based planning. The overall strategic priorities of the Compact are: Driving better outcomes; A more coherent and empowering early years system; Stronger place-based governance and planning; Promoting early childhood; Supporting service quality and; More inclusive services.


Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change⁵, is the Victorian government's response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, and sets out a long-term vision for addressing the significant impact that family violence has on the Victorian community, in particular women and children. Reforms as part of the plan range from legislative changes and new government agencies to increased investment in and new avenues to accessing services for affected families. The plan is a key instigator for child and family services system changes outlined in the Roadmap for Reform.

The Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children⁶ outlines the vision for changing the Victorian child and family services system so that it provides earlier, more connected supports to those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, through a greater focus on the needs of individual families and tailored approaches to delivering services. Its three key reform directions are:

- Building supportive and culturally strong communities and improving access to universal services
- Supporting children, young people and families in need with integrated wraparound supports and targeted early interventions
- Strengthening home-based care and improving outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care

Roadmap for Reform: Progress and Directions released in 2018, provides the platform for implementing the roadmap for reform vision over the coming years, through three new strategic priorities of:

- Building family capability and child development, by strengthening early intervention, better identifying and supporting victim-survivors of family violence, and progressing Aboriginal self-determination
- A pathways approach to organising the service system around the need of children and families, instead of rigid program and service criteria. The three identified needs groups or pathways are (a) early help, (b) targeted and specialist support and (c) continuing care.
- Shared accountability for outcomes which are embedded in the system and supported by an evidence-informed approach to continuous learning, a new funding model, and improved mechanisms for ensuring quality and safety



Maternal and Child Health & preschool services need to be more accessible & inclusive especially for families experiencing vulnerability

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia⁷ describes the principles, practice and learning outcomes that optimise a child's learning from birth to age five years including their transition to school. These are echoed in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. The Framework is to be used by early childhood services to develop their own policies, practices and strategies.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework⁸ sets out an approach for professionals to work together to achieve the best outcomes for young children from birth. The Framework is about supporting children in a collective effort with families, to progress five nationally agreed Early Years Learning Outcomes, that children: Have a strong sense of identity; Are connected with and contribute to their world; Have a strong sense of wellbeing; Are confident and involved learners and; Are effective communicators.

The ***Framework*** identifies eight Practice Principles for effective ways of working with children and families to facilitate learning and development. In addition, the Framework covers the importance of supporting children's and families' transitions as they use and move within and across services.

The Victorian government released mandatory ***Child Safe Standards***⁹ for Child Safe Organisations in 2016 to 'ensure all organisations dealing with children have appropriate responses in place for allegations of child abuse and misconduct.' The Standards form part of the Government's commitment to implement the recommendations of the Betrayal of Trust inquiry to better respond to allegations of abuse and misconduct. The Standards apply to government funded organisations if they provide services to children and to organisations providing services to children but not funded by government, like sports clubs, and child entertainment providers.

Training, information sessions and tools to help organisations create and maintain child safe environments under the Standards, are provided by the Government. *'The Standards are designed to drive cultural change in organisations, so that protecting children from abuse is embedded in the everyday thinking and practice of leaders, staff and volunteers.'*¹⁰

In applying each Standard, organisations must reflect and embed the following three key principles: Cultural safety of Aboriginal children; Cultural safety of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and; Safety of children with disabilities. By implementing the seven Standards, this will help organisations to: Promote the safety of children; Prevent child abuse; Ensure effective processes are in place to respond to and report allegations of child abuse and; Encourage children to 'have a say', especially on issues that are important to them or about decisions that affect their lives.

The Municipal Early Years Planning Framework and Practical Resource Guide¹¹ provides information and direction on developing municipal early years plans. The role of local government in the coordination and strategic planning of government services at the local level is acknowledged, especially the leadership role in early years program planning, development and provision. The Framework notes the growing awareness of the value of including the 'voices' of children when consulting with the local community. This approach is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by Australia in 1989. The Convention is also central to the Child Friendly Cities concept promoted by UNICEF under which councils can become recognised.

Hearing the Voices of Children in the Yarra Ranges

This Early Years Strategic Action Plan marks an important milestone in being Yarra Ranges Council's strongest commitment yet that children will be engaged in planning processes and decisions that affect them.

Several key International, National and State level legal and regulatory frameworks accentuate the importance of working in partnership with children and their families about the services provided to them and the community in which they live.

These frameworks include the:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12, 13 and 16,
- Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Article 16,
- National Principles for Child Safe Organisations Principal 2,
- Victorian Child Safe Standards, Standard 7, and
- Victorian Learning and Development Framework.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) states that children everywhere have the equal right to be citizens, along with the right to survive; develop; be protected from harm and abuse; participate in family, cultural and social life. Article 12 of UNCROC specifically advocates that all children have the right to say what they think on all matters affecting them and to have their views taken seriously.

Council's work to become a Child Safe organisation has involved the introduction of a number of critical measures aligning with legislative changes, following the Betrayal of Trust Inquiry. For the first time in Council a Children's Participation Guide will be developed. Driving this is the belief that *"Children are more likely to speak up about their concerns about feeling unsafe or make a complaint, if they feel their views are valued and welcomed"*¹²

Giving children the opportunity to authentically engage in planning also aligns with Council's values of trust, empowerment and innovation. Evidence shows that children's voices can play a role in driving positive change in adult behaviour, community outcomes and subsequently have a critical place in helping Council and the community achieve the vision for the Yarra Ranges to be "the best place in the world" (Council Vision 2036).

Riding Home – An Example of Engaging Children

In 2014, the Council commissioned the 'Riding Home' project which undertook direct consultation and communication with 150 preschool and primary school aged children on "what they value about growing up in the Yarra Ranges and what they would like to change".

The project found that preschool and primary school children like living in the Yarra Ranges. They feel safe and like the natural environment (mountains, creeks, bush tracks, lakes, trees, views and wild animals); activities like walking, riding their bikes, playing in the open spaces, playgrounds, playing sport and; having pets. A few children were concerned about family financial stress, commenting on the rising cost of food and some younger children said they feel unsafe and unwelcome at skate-parks in the area and they do not like the rare times when there is violence and abuse in public places.

"lots of kids play sport in our town. You can play netball, basketball, tennis, soccer and cricket if you want to."

"We love playing in the area behind the school, which we call the Pines. We dig holes, make tracks and trade pine cones and other treasures."

"We stop at the skate park but only for a little while. There's some broken glass around it. I don't always feel comfortable there."

Summary Profile of Early Years Children in the Yarra Ranges

Demographics

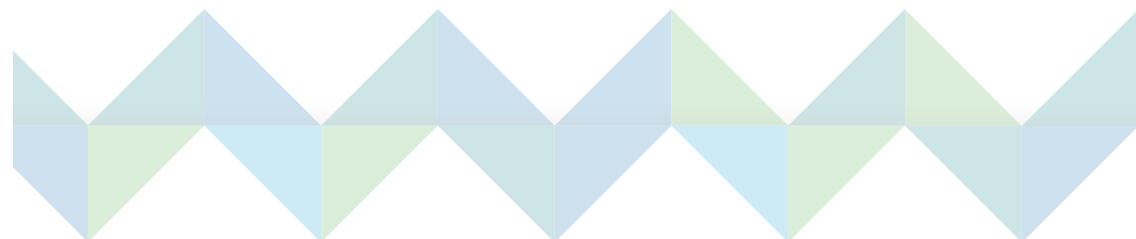
The Yarra Ranges is currently home to an estimated 20,392 children aged between 0 and 9 years¹³



- ▶ Children aged 0-4 comprise 6.2% of the Yarra Ranges population; a greater percentage than the Eastern Metropolitan Region which is 5.5%¹⁴
- ▶ Children aged 5-9 comprise 6.6% of the Yarra Ranges population; again, a greater percentage than the Eastern Metropolitan Region which is 5.9%.
- ▶ The population is projected to remain relatively stable with an estimated 20,947 children 0-9 residing in the Yarra Ranges by 2026. Of the estimated increase in the number of children, most will be in the urban area, with a relatively even spread across the 0-4 and 5-9 age groups¹³
- ▶ At the time of the 2016 Census, it was reported that 120 (1.3%) children aged 0-4 and 155 (1.6%) aged 5-9 in Yarra Ranges were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, with most living in Healesville or Mooroolbark. This compares with a percentage across the whole Eastern Metropolitan Region of just 0.6% for both age groups.
- ▶ In 2016 Yarra Ranges was home to 121 (1.3%) children aged 0-4 years and 357 (3.7%) children aged 5-9 years who had a disability¹⁵. Both these proportions are higher than Greater Melbourne, at 1.1% and 3.0% respectively
- ▶ Eight percent of people in Yarra Ranges have migrated from countries where English was not their first language. Emerging communities exist from Myanmar (482 additional people since 2011 and 716 in total), China (309 additional people since 2011 and 681 in total) and India (277 additional people since 2011 and 761 in total). 504 (6.8%) children aged 0-4 and 470 (6.3%) children aged 5-9 have a parent who speaks a language other than English.

Indicators of wellbeing

- ▶ In 2016/17 participation rates for the 3.5 year Maternal and Child Health key age and stage visit was 52%, whilst this is substantially lower than the state and North Eastern Region rates of 62.9% and 59.2% respectively, Yarra Ranges participation increased to 60% in 2017/18.
- ▶ In 2016/17 the overall Yarra Ranges immunisation rate was 93.7% for 1 year olds and 93.9% for 5 year olds, both slightly below the Victorian target of 95%.
- ▶ In the 2014-16 reporting period Yarra Ranges rates for antenatal attendance in trimester 1 (70.6%) and the proportion of children with a low birth weight (4%) were better than both the Eastern Melbourne PHN (Primary Health Network) region and Australian averages. However, under 5 child mortality (3.7 per 1000 live births) and smoking during pregnancy (11.5%) were the highest in the Eastern Melbourne PHN.
- ▶ Overall children in Yarra Ranges (83.4%) have highly or well-developed strengths, based on the 2018 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) multiple strength indicator; however in some pockets children have significant challenges in the years prior to school.
 - Across Yarra Ranges 19.5% of children in prep were vulnerable on one or more domain and 9.4% were vulnerable on two or more domains in 2018. Whilst these are both slightly lower than the state average of 19.9% and 10.1% respectively, there are some townships where developmental vulnerability is significantly higher.



¹³. Idcommunity- 2018 population forecasts for Yarra Ranges Council ¹⁴. Australian Bureau of Statistics- Estimated resident population 2017 ¹⁵. Reported on the 2016 census as 'requiring assistance with core activities'.

➤ In 2017, the school entrant health questionnaire, a self-report survey of parents and caregivers, showed Yarra Ranges children are faring better than across Metropolitan Melbourne, in the areas of:

- Overall health being reported as excellent or very good (88.8% compared with 84.6%)
- Concerns for their oral health (12.7% compared with 14%)

And experience greater concerns or issues on average in relation to:

- Being diagnosed with asthma (13.5% compared with 11.5% for metropolitan Melbourne),
- Difficulty with speech and/or language (15.7% compared with 12.7% metro),
- Caregiver concern about the behaviour of their child (15.0% compared with 11.8% metro),
- Families experiencing stress related to a parental mental illness (10% compared with 5.6% metro) or alcohol and drug problems (3.7% compared with 2.5%)

➤ In 2017/18 children aged 0-9 were admitted to hospital at a higher rate than average for ear nose and throat infections, pneumonia and influenza but a lower rate for injuries, poisoning and toxic drug effects.



Urban	Hills	Valley
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › There are currently an estimated 10,419 early years children living in the urban area › The net number of children is predicted to grow the most in the urban area to 2026 (+788); with most of the increase in Lilydale (+376), Chirnside Park (+267) and Mooroolbark (+101). Only Montrose (-3) and Mount Evelyn (-42) are expected to have fewer children › Between 2012 and 2018, there was a significant decrease in vulnerability on the emotional domain of the AEDC in Mooroolbark and Kilsyth. However vulnerability on one or more domains is significantly higher in Montrose (26.1%) and Mount Evelyn (23.4%), and in Montrose particularly relating to language and emotional maturity › High numbers of families utilise Enhanced Maternal and Child Health services in Lilydale, Mooroolbark and Mt Evelyn › The proportion of children exposed to reported incidents of family violence has reduced over the past 3 years, however there has been growth in the number of incidents in Lilydale over the past 4 years › On measures of socioeconomic position such as income, employment status and access to the internet, urban households are on par or slightly above the average across both the Yarra Ranges and the Eastern Metropolitan region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › There are currently an estimated 4,535 early years children living in the hills › The net number of children is projected to decline slightly (-115) by 2026 with the only significant changes being a predicted 70 fewer children in Belgrave-Selby and 73 in Upwey and surrounds › The lowest level of developmental vulnerability on two or more domains is in Upwey (5.7%) and the highest being Olinda/Mount Dandenong/Kalorama (25%); the most pronounced differences being on the social and emotional domains. Overall there have been significant increases in vulnerability across the Hills since 2012 › High numbers of families utilise Enhanced Maternal and Child Health services in Upwey › Whilst overall, the proportion of children exposed to family violence incidents is below the state and Yarra Ranges average, there has been an increase in reported incidents in Kallista and Belgrave over the past 4 years › The percentage of Hills households in the bottom income quartile (17.1%) is substantially lower than across the Yarra Ranges (21.7%) and Eastern Metropolitan Region (22%). The percentage of people experiencing unemployment (4.5%) and households who don't have home internet access (7.3%) are also both lower than the Eastern Metropolitan Region, at 6.1% and 9.9% respectively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › There are currently an estimated 5,438 early years children in the valley › The net number of children is projected to decrease slightly (-116) to 2026, with most of the reduction coming from the Healesville (-126) and Warburton (-51) areas. The only large increases are expected in Yarra Junction-Wesburn-Millgrove (+47) and Gruyere-Coldstream-Yering (+38) › Developmental vulnerability on two or more domains is well above the average in Woori Yallock, Hoddles Creek, Millgrove, Warburton and McMahon's Creek with higher rates of concern for the physical and communication domains in Millgrove, and for the physical and language domains in Warburton and McMaho's Creek › A significant decrease in developmental vulnerability across the Valley occurred between 2015 and 2018, with low levels now seen in Yarra Junction, Millgrove, Launching Place, Don Valley and Healesville › High numbers of families utilise Enhanced Maternal and Child Health services in Coldstream, Healesville and Woori Yallock › There has been growth in reported family violence incidents in Healesville over the past 4 years and an above average rate of incidents in Big Pats Creek, McMaho's Creek, Millgrove and Reefton › In 2016 The Valley had the highest proportion of families receiving income support or headed by a single parent, in the Yarra Ranges. Reduced access to transport and a substantially higher number of households in the bottom income quartile means that families in the Valley can find it difficult to access services

Developing the Early Years Strategic Action Plan 2019-2021

Priority areas for the early years were developed as part of the Council Family and Children's Services Business Planning in 2017. A key focus in developing the Early Years Strategic Action Plan was to test these priorities with service providers and other stakeholders to ensure Council was on the right track.

- › A workshop and survey of service providers gathered feedback regarding the priorities and built the engagement of key stakeholders in the development and delivery of actions.
- › A review of available data provided the Plan with current health, development and educational data related to the early years.
- › A review of relevant local, state and national government policy directions informed the context of the Plan.
- › The mapping of current services available for early years children and their families set out the spread of services across the Yarra Ranges catchment and assisted in identifying key service gaps, issues with service access and strategies for action.
- › A municipal-wide survey of parents and caregivers provides the Plan with a rich source of information regarding the experience of parents and caregivers in raising children in the Yarra Ranges, the challenges they face, what works well for them and their families, and the services and amenities they are most aware of and utilise.



Parent and caregiver consultation

Two hundred and sixty-three electronic surveys were completed by parents and caregivers in the Yarra Ranges. Importantly, there was a good distribution of parents and caregivers across the Urban, Hills and Valley areas. This provided Council with both an overview of what parents and caregivers think as a whole and valuable information regarding issues particular to each of the subregions.

Ninety-two percent of surveyed parents and caregivers find raising children in the Yarra Ranges a largely positive experience. Two hundred and forty-two people gave a rating of good or very good. This positivism is due to the range of services available, the parks, playgrounds and open spaces, the sense of community and the natural environment.

The services and amenities that parents and caregivers are **most aware** of, and use the most, include parks and playgrounds, Maternal and Child Health services, Immunisation services, antenatal services, general practitioners and medical services. The areas that rated the least in awareness were Parentzone, financial services, the Early Childhood Intervention Service (ECIS), emergency relief and housing services.

“We love living in the hills and having parks and wildlife at our doorstep. Small village feel connection to our neighbours and community, is what brings us joy.”

“It is great to see the availability of services and improvement of facilities and playgrounds. I am very happy with how the Yarra Ranges is trying to connect families via events and playgroup”.

The main **challenges** faced by parents and caregivers include: access to health services, quality general practitioners, hospitals and services for children with a disability; financial pressures e.g. living on single income, increasing rates, cost of living and the cost of child care, access to sporting and other activities for children; adjusting to parenthood, lack of sleep, work life balance, loss of identity; how to find out about the services available, knowing about the services and; challenges to do with the built environment like lack of footpaths and amenities and limited transport options.

The services and amenities that **work well** for parents and caregivers include Maternal and Child Health services, parks and playgrounds, library and story time, school, sporting activities, child care including occasional care and family day care, kindergarten, medical services including GP's, and immunisation.

“Managing work/life balance and finding time to look after my own mental and physical health without much of a support network”

“Not many free activities; everything always costs so much money”

“Provide parents with knowledge of support services and low-cost activities”

Parks and playgrounds were the **highest priority** overall for parents and caregivers in the Yarra Ranges. They saw a need for equipment updates and upgrades, more toilets, more fences, more shade and overall, for parks and playgrounds to be 'safer,' clean and well-tended.

Priorities that relate to the built environment covered things such as better traffic management and road safety, more transport services and the development of new facilities such as gyms and swimming pools.

Parents and caregivers cited the need for better information and promotion of services and activities coupled with services and activities being low cost and affordable. The need for local health and medical services was most noted in the Valley. Access to a range of, and affordable, child care options is also a defined priority as was the need for more targeted playgroups, support groups and services for parents.

Facebook was the number one information source for parents and caregivers regarding **information about services**, programs and activities to support their children and themselves, followed by word of mouth and the Yarra Ranges Council website.

"Parks and playgrounds, Maternal Health and Early Learning programs work well"

"The libraries - I couldn't afford to keep up with my 4yo's voracious reading appetite"

"The footpath program in Olinda area is great, needs to be extended to other areas to allow kids greater autonomy; more options to walk with prams, ride scooters/bikes with kids"

"More emphasis on joining mother's groups and playgroups for mental health and socialisation"

"Some playgrounds could do with a revamp"

Options to better support **younger parents** include: specific support and social groups, parenting education, providing mentors and promoting access to low cost services and activities. In relation to the needs of **older parents**, parents and caregivers noted a need for advice and support to access services and information and issues pertaining to the built environment like the need for better footpaths

and improvements to parks and playgrounds.

The need for child care and babysitting (low/no cost) rated highly for **single parents**. Financial concerns and access to a range of supports also factored in what would meet their particular challenges. For **fathers**, the need for (father's) social support and networking rated highly; as did father's groups (similar to mother's groups). Parents and caregivers also liked the idea of father/child specific activities to promote a closer bond between fathers and their children.

Some parents and caregivers commented that the needs of **LGBTQI families** were the same as any other family while others defined a need for greater community education and support for the LGBTQI community overall – a role seen by some as one for Council.

Grandparents noted a need for support and education in their role in addition to playgroups and 'grandparent/child' specific activities. Carers defined their key need as being greater support in their role caring for someone who has a disability, for example disability friendly play spaces and counselling and carer support services combined with good access to respite care.

Service provider consultation

Consultation between Council services and other services and stakeholders was another important aspect in developing the Early Year's Plan. This took place through interviews with Preschool Field Officers and Maternal and Child Health Centre staff; a workshop of service providers and a service provider survey which was completed by 23 respondents.

The key aim of the service provider consultation was to validate Council's three priority areas for the Early Years Strategic Action Plan and gain input to the identified actions. All the consulted service providers agreed that the Council priority areas were also key priorities from their perspective. Service providers were also given the opportunity to nominate existing good practice with regards to the priority area and to nominate opportunities, changes and improvements that could improve services and facilities for families and children aged 0 - 8 years in the Yarra Ranges.

The following diagrams summarise the key points from service providers related to each of the priority areas.



Many service providers report that they strive to be inclusive of “*all families and all children*” catering for “all needs and all abilities.” Support for parents and caregivers are provided in various ways including specialist staff and additional resources. The provision of information sessions regarding a wide variety of topics is also a priority. The co-location of some services makes it easier for parents to access what they need all in the one place.

Opportunities, changes and improvements

- Support and drive the provision of more **parent education** opportunities including programs that are locally based in different areas and those specifically for parents caring for children who have behavioural issues.
- Consider ‘how to’ provide additional **support to**: parents on low incomes: single parents: parents (and families) who have experienced trauma: grandparents who are parenting again and; families where a child has a disability.
- Promote better networking between services and schools to underpin the improved access of families experiencing vulnerability to a broader range of services.
- Highlight the need for additional resources in a number of areas including 3-year-old kindergartens, outdoor education/play, more occasional care, and funding for families experiencing vulnerability to attend parenting programs.
- Respond to the needs of service providers for additional education and support. These include: allocating time to reflect on their own practice and how to best support families in need and providing trauma training for staff working with families experiencing vulnerability.

Priority area 2:

Build a connected reflective service system that enables children in their early years to thrive

Service providers cited existing examples of partnerships and collaborative effort designed to maximise the use of resources and promote the access of families to services. *“The collaboration and partnerships we have with other services ensure that the programs offered to families are done so with integrity.”* Partnering and collaborating with parents is seen as a natural extension of this approach, ensuring services and families are aligned and working together to improve outcomes.

Opportunities, changes and improvements

- Promote and support **greater collaboration and partnering** between health and community services and schools, providing an opportunity for better communication and information sharing and enabling greater access of families to services such as speech and occupational therapy.
- Advocate for services to become more **culturally safe and inclusive** and provide more access and support for **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families**.
- Collaboration and partnerships require good quality **information sharing and communication**. Develop opportunities for providers to learn more about what other services do and provide and where **good practice** is evident (that they can learn from).

Priority area 3:

Ensure all children and their families are safe, and can participate in and influence planning and service delivery

Service providers highlighted the importance of effectively involving families and children in service development and delivery. *“We are always trying to engage families and children in the service delivery.” “Children are always invested and influence our planning.” “Families are involved at committee level where decisions about how our service runs are made.”*

Opportunities, changes and improvements

- Ensure that efforts are genuinely made to enable/promote the involvement of **parents in service planning** and **building ownership** of community services and resources
- Advocate for opportunities to **share practice/learnings** on ways to effectively include families and children in service planning and development (e.g. case study examples)
- Explore **various/different options** to hear the voices of parents and children, e.g. public forums, parent groups formed for a specific purpose, ‘advertising’ to parents that their views are sought
- Seek **genuine engagement of children** in the development of parks, play spaces, events.

Early Years Strategic Action Plan Priority Areas

Consultation and research has identified a range of actions which align to each priority area and are most likely to contribute to achieving the significant positive impacts identified in the Yarra Ranges Child and Family Outcomes Framework.

Further detail on these actions are provided in the EYSAP Implementation Plan, but are summarised below. Also identified is a single key action for each area which is seen as central to Council's work .



Priority area 1:

Create healthy and connected communities in which all families and children can participate

Rationale

Research, data, government policies and experience shows that the best outcomes for children occur when they live in communities that facilitate positive community relationships and provide ongoing and regular opportunities for learning and development. This occurs through access to inclusive early childhood education and care services, education and assistance for parents in their parenting role, and a range of formal and informal supports that are safe, welcoming and accessible. Also critical is a built environment that is child friendly and encourages active and healthy living.

Consultation with parents and caregivers highlighted a range of challenges they face in ensuring the best care for their children as they grow and develop. These included access to health services, financial pressures, work-life balance during parenthood or absence of information about supports and activities available in their local area.



Council actions

Key Action: Ensure adequate and accessible infrastructure that promotes engagement in Family and Children's services

- › Deliver and support a range of services and initiatives which improve the health and wellbeing of families and children.
- › Support or facilitate collaborative impact partnerships to plan and achieve shared goals to improve broad outcomes for children and their families
- › Partner with others to deliver initiatives that increase community engagement and social networks for families, including fostering intergenerational connections
- › Engage with other organisations and/or volunteers to develop support services/groups with a specific focus on fathers, young parents and single parents
- › Promote positive early home learning and parenting support across targeted communities
- › Provide a range of community-based play and development opportunities for targeted communities and cohorts

Priority area 2:

Create a connected reflective service system that enables children in their early years to thrive

Rationale

Evidence shows that an effective service system is one that provides tiered support catering to diverse individual needs and circumstances, is well connected and easy to navigate. To produce the greatest benefit this system should be focused on outcomes, be streamlined, and well-coordinated. This includes a workforce which readily reflects on their practice, fosters service collaboration and strives for continuous improvement.

A far greater impact can also be achieved when a range of agencies, including Council, work together and focus on a common agenda. Government policy promotes the value of service provider partnerships with a view to addressing service gaps, overcoming duplication, sharing information and understanding each other's roles.

2

Council actions

Key Action: Implement, promote and evaluate the Upper Yarra Linking Families Service and advocate for further resources as recommended and required.

- Enable all eligible families and children to engage in Maternal and Child Health and early years services through identifying and addressing barriers to participation
- Implement and promote approaches to all early years services that enhance inclusion and celebrate diversity
- Create smoother referral pathways and improve planning between universal and other services
- Develop or facilitate targeted programs and approaches to engage and support children and parents/caregivers during key transition times, such as entering child care or preschool and beginning school
- Plan, support and deliver joint service and community initiatives that will reduce the occurrence or impact of family violence, including gender equity initiatives.

Priority area 3:

Ensure all children and their families are safe, and can participate in and influence planning & service delivery

Rationale

Hearing the voices of children and families is crucial in ensuring that services are well-planned and appropriately targeted. As members of the community and users of services, involving children and their families in planning and decision making is crucial to ensure agencies and organisations are relevant to them. Their participation ensures what is provided is what is needed, and children are more likely to support the outcome if they have been involved in developing it.

Victorian government policy on Child Safe Organisations encourages children to have a say, especially on issues that are important to them or about decisions that affect their lives. The Municipal Early Years Planning Framework also notes the growing awareness of the value of including the voices of children when consulting with the local community.

Service providers consulted gave examples where this is already occurring in their organisation and they support more exploration and learning on how this can be further developed. They perceived the inclusion of children and family voices in service planning and delivery as building greater engagement, ownership, pride and empowerment of children, parents/caregivers and the community.



Council actions

Key Action: Develop mechanisms to enable children and families to influence planning and service delivery

- Continue to plan and implement strategies that ensure Yarra Ranges Council is a Child Safe organisation
- Inspire the Yarra Ranges community to become a more child friendly municipality
- Encourage more organisations in Yarra Ranges to become Child Safe organisations by offering training, resources and other supports
- Provide a planned and systematic response to the built environment (Parks, Playgrounds, Footpaths) to ensure the best interests and voices of children are included
- Ensure all Family and Children's Services delivered by council are culturally safe

Glossary/Acronyms

AEDC	Australian Early Development Census
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
C&FS	Child and Family Services
DET	Department of Education and Training
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECIS	Early Childhood Intervention Service
Hills	Sub-region comprising Upwey, Belgrave, Monbulk, Olinda and surrounds
LGA	Local Government Area
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer
MAV	Municipal Association of Victoria
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
OT	Occupational Therapy
PSFO	Preschool Field Officer
SEIFA	Socio Economic Indexes for Areas
Urban	Sub-region comprising Chirnside Park, Lilydale, Mooroolbark and surrounds
Valley	Sub-region comprising Healesville, Yarra Glen, Yarra Junction, Warburton and surrounds
WCFP	Wurun Child and Family Place
YRC	Yarra Ranges Council



Yarra Ranges Council Family and Children's Services

Services and Programs	Details	Catchment	Target Age
Immunisation	Immunisation for children and young people	Yarra Ranges	0-19 years
Maternal and Child Health (MCH)	Health and development assessments for children	Yarra Ranges	0-5 years
Enhanced MCH	Additional support for vulnerable families	Yarra Ranges	0-5 years
Sherbrooke Family and Children's Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Community spaces › Long day care › Integrated preschool 	Hills	0-5 years
Early Years Community Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Parent education › Community / Family events › Professional development › Bookaburra Storytime › Support Community Playgroups › Advocacy, advice & support to Early Childhood Education & Care services 	Yarra Ranges	0-8 years
Supported Playgroups	Nine facilitated Smalltalk Supported Playgroups	Yarra Ranges	0-5 years

Services and Programs	Details	Catchment	Target Age
Preschool Field Officers	Preschools support to ensure inclusion of children with additional needs	Yarra Ranges	4-year olds (3 years in term 4)
Early and Middle Years Planner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Early and Middle Years Strategic Action Plan ➤ Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) ➤ Middle Years Brokerage ➤ Upper Yarra Brighter Futures / Early Help Project 	Yarra Ranges	0-14 years
Best Start	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Yarra Ranges Child and Family Partnership ➤ Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Network ➤ MCH /preschool working groups 	Yarra Ranges	0-8 years
Placed based Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Upper Yarra Partnership ➤ Wurun Child and Family Place 	Yarra Ranges	0-8 years
Linking Families Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Parent engagement activities ➤ Assertive outreach and connecting families with universal (ECEC/MCH) & secondary services. 	Upper Yarra and Healesville (respectively)	0-14 years 0-8 years (WCFP)
Family and Children's Services Buildings	Rolling Hills Centre	Urban	0-5 years

Thank you

Lime Consultation Group

Parents and caregivers, Early Childhood Education and Care services, schools and family and community support services who contributed to the consultation by completing the survey and through individual interviews or focus groups

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