



Upper Yarra Partnership

2023 Year in Review



The Upper Yarra Partnership acknowledges the Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nations as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of these lands.

We pay our respects to all Elders, past, present, and emerging, who have been, and always will be, integral to the story of our region.

We proudly share custodianship to care for Country together.

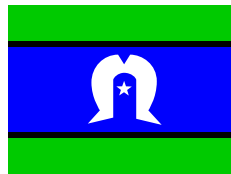


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Acknowledgements

The Yarra Ranges Council backbone team expresses their deepfelt thanks to the partners who have contributed their invaluable time, expertise and insights to the Partnership in 2023.

- Yarra Ranges Council
- Department of Education
- Department Families, Fairness & Housing
- Orange Door
- Eastern Health
- Inspiro
- NDIS/Link
- Oonah
- FVREE
- Eastern Community Legal Centre
- CIRE Services
- Yarra Ranges Kindergartens
- Woori Yallock Primary School
- Warburton Primary School
- Wesburn Primary School
- Yarra Junction Primary School
- Uniting
- Anglicare
- Anchor

Who are we?

The Upper Yarra Partnership ('Partnership') is a cross-sector collaboration between schools, kindergartens, health and community services, and local and State government agencies working together to improve wellbeing outcomes for early and middle years children (0-14 years) in the Upper Yarra region of Yarra Ranges.

What's our goal?

Our Partnership strives to see children in the Upper Yarra thriving and able to reach their full potential. Research shows that social and emotional development is critical for children to thrive and achieve their potential and we know this is an area of pressure for children in the Upper Yarra¹. Working together across sectors and alongside families and community, we aim to see children with improved social and emotional skills, enabling them to grow up emotionally resilient, with strong relationships, and engaged in learning.

Our Approach

We utilise a place-based approach, which is defined as "a collaborative, long-term approach to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts."² Place-based approaches typically respond to complex and longstanding social issues and focus on system change to shift the problem in a given area. These approaches are recognised as important ways of addressing increasingly complex social challenges and the Victorian Government is investing in such approaches³.

Backbone Agency

Yarra Ranges Council provides backbone support to our Partnership through the Early & Middle Years Partnerships Team in the Community Support Department. This includes guiding overarching vision and strategy, supporting collaboration and implementation of agreed actions, facilitating monitoring, evaluation and learning, and managing the logistical aspects of the Partnership.

Background

The Partnership was formed in 2017 with the shared vision of a strengthened Upper Yarra community where all children thrive and reach their full potential. After many years of collaborative work and following the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Partnership underwent a significant review in 2022 to evaluate progress and clarify the future direction.

The review affirmed our commitment to collaboration and shared values and goals, but it also identified that our priority areas and projects were overly ambitious and beyond the scope and influence of the partners. While the Partnership undertook some commendable efforts, there was limited monitoring and evaluation conducted to demonstrate our outcomes and impact. The review therefore demonstrated the need to reform our Partnership, including setting more achievable priorities and goals and establishing more robust monitoring, evaluation and learning practices to demonstrate our impact. In 2023, we undertook these significant foundational pieces of work to re-establish ways of working, reset strategic focus, and embed learning in all aspects of our work.

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- 1** AEDC, 2021. Over time, there is a consistently lower percentage of children in the Upper Yarra on track in social competence and emotional maturity domains.
 - 2** Dart, 2019.
 - 3** Victorian Government, 2023. See more: <https://www.vic.gov.au/place-based-approaches>

2023 Key highlights

How we work together

A critical piece of work in 2023 was refreshing how we work together. Working with multiple organisations across many sectors requires a strong common purpose and shared values. These values and ways of working are essential for building trust, setting a strong foundation for collaborative work, and keeping members accountable to how they have agreed to work. During 2023, we:

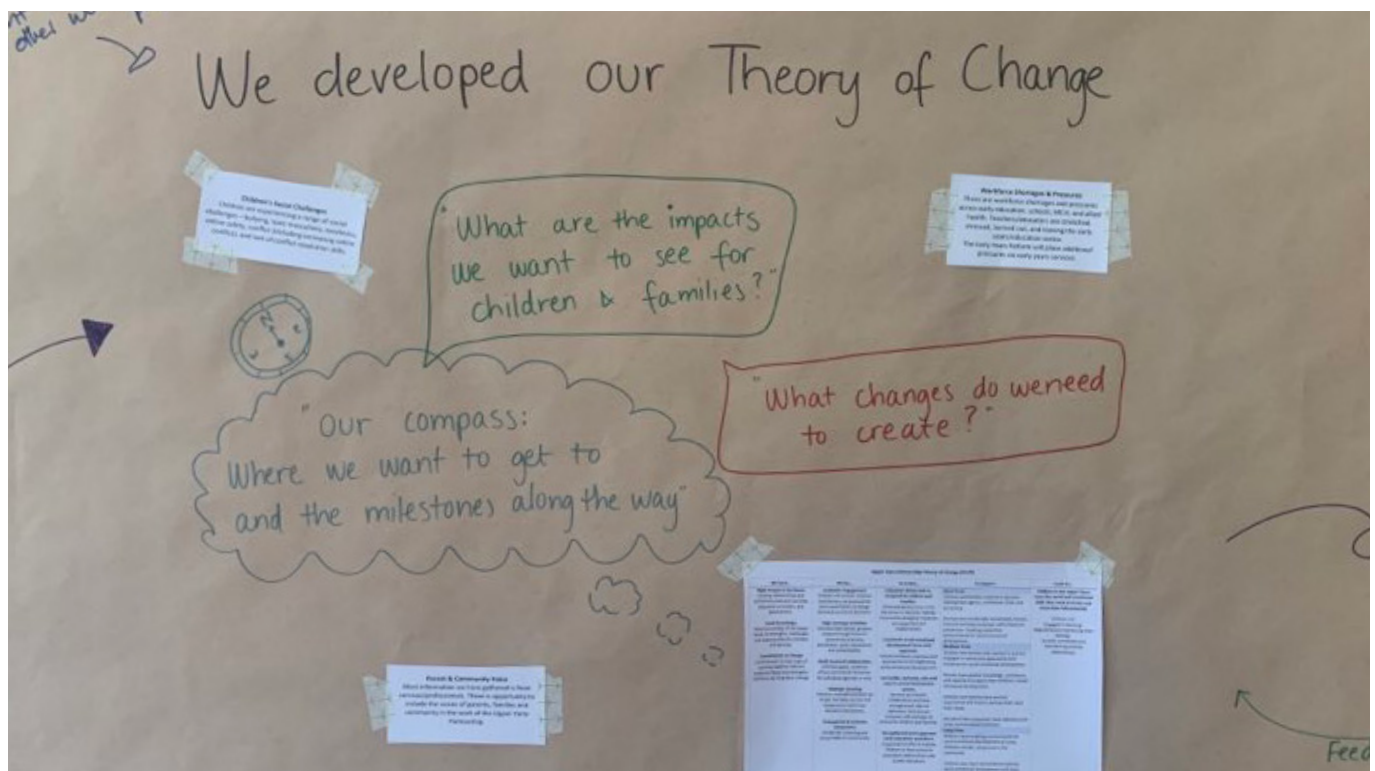
- ✓ Held five face-to-face partnership meetings and one online catch-up meeting. These meetings were intentionally designed to be interactive, engaging, and allow for all partners to contribute to strategy. Meetings included a small component of information sharing followed by workshops, small group work activities, and larger group discussions.
- ✓ Welcomed three new partners: Oonah, Eastern Community Legal Centre and Anchor. This brought the total number of partners to nineteen.
- ✓ Developed a new set of Working Together Principles, highlighting commitments to child and family voice, trust, shared contributions, innovation and learning. This workshop was initially facilitated by external consultants and finalised with partners over the following meetings.
- ✓ Updated our Terms of Reference incorporating the new principles.
- ✓ Reflected at the end of the year on how well we were upholding our Working Together Principles. We reflected individually against each of the four principles and then discussed our responses as a larger group, with overall ratings between good and very good.

Principle	Overall Rating	Comments
Putting child and family voices at the centre	Good (92%, n=11)	We identified that while this has not been implemented yet, we have a strong commitment to this, and voice has been discussed at every meeting.
Creating safe spaces for honesty and transparency	Very good (75%, n=9)	We reflected that there is representation of diverse sectors, and we create a safe, inclusive and welcoming space.
Actively contributing to the partnership towards shared success	Very good (50%, n=6), good (42%, n=5)	We recognised that Council has led a lot of the work this year, and while this was necessary, there is commitment to a genuine collaborative approach.
Embracing change, innovation and learning	Very good (33%, n=4), good (58%, n=7)	Like the first value, this has not been implemented widely but there is genuine openness to change, hence the significant progress we have made over the year.

Our strategic focus

Our major achievement for 2023 was determining a narrower focus area. This focus was necessary for setting new strategic goals and planning activities, as well as keeping us focused on issues within our sphere of influence. Towards this, we:

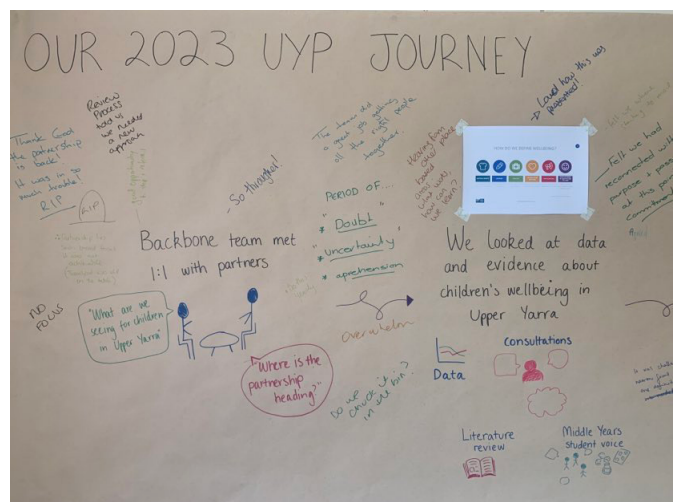
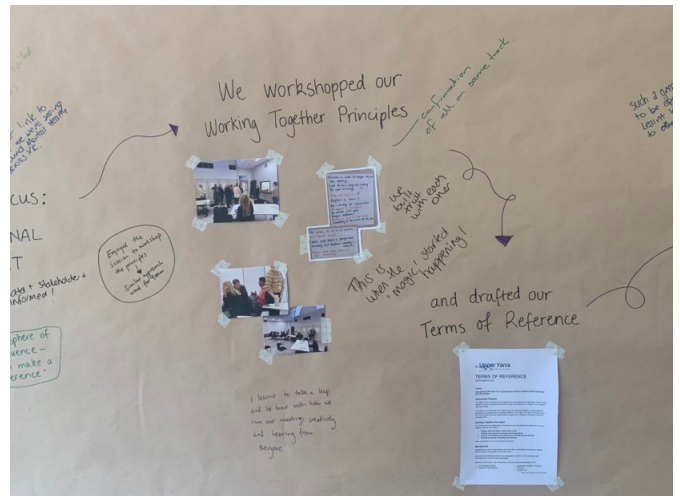
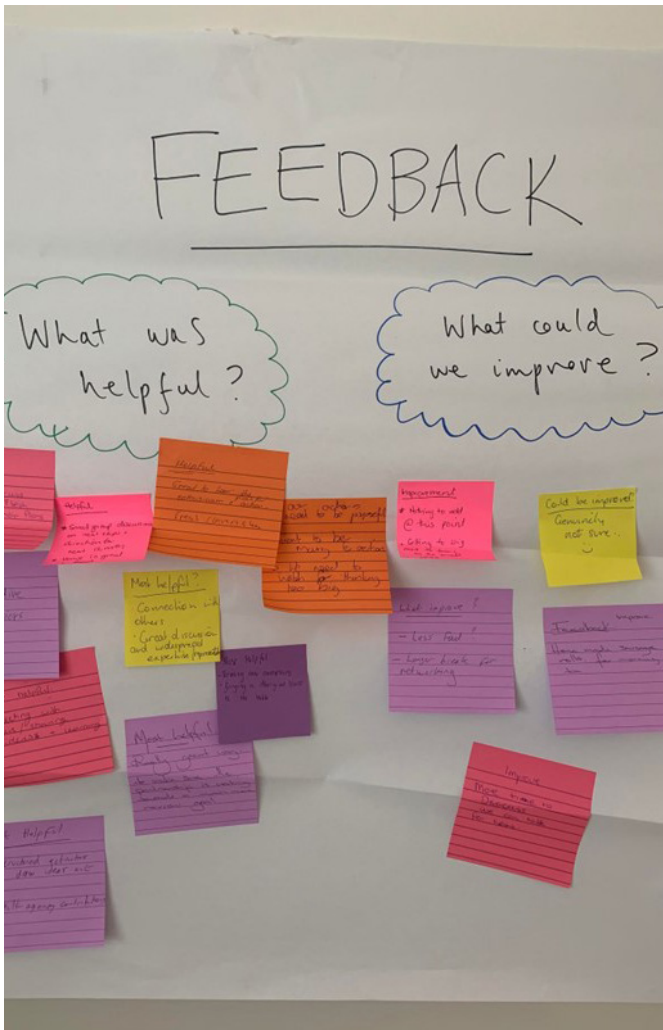
- ➔ Developed a wellbeing data profile identifying key priority areas for children in the Upper Yarra. The profile was based on available data, consultation with twenty-four stakeholders, and feedback from middle years students through the MY Conversations project. A strength of this process was bringing together a diverse range of data and voices, which set us up well to select a focus area that was relevant across our various sectors.
- ➔ Agreed to focus our efforts on children's social-emotional development (SED), which was a key priority identified in the data profile and an issue impacting all partners, especially in the wake of Covid-19 and disruptions to children's learning and development. We agreed the issue was strategically aligned and within our sphere of influence. Landing this focus area was a significant highlight, enabling us to move forward with renewed energy and a clearer sense of direction.
- ➔ Completed a literature review on SED to understand how it is defined, what influences it, and evidence-based strategies for supporting SED.
- ➔ Workshopped and collaboratively developed our Theory of Change (Appendix 1). This outlines the key outcomes and overall impact we are seeking, along with how we theorise change will occur in our context. A strength of this process was utilising existing evidence that had been gathered around SED as the 'prompts' for articulating our desired changes. This built on our earlier workshops and leveraged our collective experience and knowledge to articulate a shared vision for change.
- ➔ Commenced planning activities towards improving children's SED outcomes, starting with listening to the voices of children and families to inform and co-design efforts.



How we learn together

Our partnership has a deep commitment to learning and planning for this was a key priority for the year. Efficient monitoring, evaluation and learning is critical for demonstrating impact, learning from efforts (including failures), and improving quality of work. Evaluation and effective planning for this are critical in place-based work given the complexity of the work and that impacts in community can be difficult to attribute to place-based efforts. During 2023, we:

- ✓ Established a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Working Group with representatives from five partner organisations to lead the overall development and implementation of MEL.
- ✓ Workshopped and developed our MEL Approach with the working group to guide all future MEL efforts.
- ✓ Reflected on the Working Together Principles at the end of the year to identify progress, which was planned and facilitated with members of the working group.
- ✓ Had members of the backbone team participate in Clear Horizon's Evaluating Systems Change & Place-Based Approaches course to strengthen our internal capacity.



2023 Key learnings

Place-based collaborative work is inherently complex! Working together with many stakeholders across multiple sectors towards a shared goal is challenging. Systems change work requires a flexible approach as it takes time – and trial and testing – to understand and get to the root causes of issues in communities. As we progressed place-based work in 2023, we learnt:

- ✚ The backbone role is critical in guiding the Partnership and doing a lot of backend work to bring data, information, partners and ideas together. Having a backbone team, rather than relying on one person, is crucial for this.
- ✚ It takes time to reset foundations, sharpen focus and establish plans. These pieces of work are critical for setting a strategic approach and to avoid reactivity. This internal work should be celebrated as a key achievement, as this lays the groundwork for community-facing activities.
- ✚ Systems change work can feel uncomfortable and overwhelming but keeping a clear goal and approaching work in smaller phases helped us move things forward.
- ✚ It can be difficult to communicate place-based work in the early phases given its complexity and the many 'unknown' parts. We recognise more work is needed to develop and simplify our Partnership communications and it is anticipated that it will be easier to communicate more concrete community-facing activities.

Finding common values, new focus and shared goals helped revitalise our Partnership. At the beginning of 2023 we were lacking purpose, the focus was too broad and unachievable, and as one partner put it, “the Partnership was in trouble”. Significant investment throughout the year helped shift this and partners reflected at the end of the year that our Partnership was “back on track”, with renewed energy, commitment and focus. Through this process, we learnt:

- ✚ The importance of taking time to re-establish values, achieved through the Working Together Principles, and collaboratively developing these. Partners reflected that this process established trust and confirmed a shared alignment, with one partner sharing, “this is where the ‘magic’ started to happen”. Setting these principles also allowed us to elevate child and family voice as a core commitment, which is now embedded in our principles and Theory of Change and is the starting point for 2024 activities.
- ✚ It was critical to have a narrower focus area that resonated for all partners. Further work is required to clarify what parts of SED is targeted, such as defined target groups or age range, however, SED has provided an initial level of clarity and shared enthusiasm that has enabled us to move forward.
- ✚ Enabling all partners to have a voice and actively contribute to strategy helped us progress towards a genuinely shared partnership approach. The design of meetings allowed space for input, feedback, and collaborative design, especially in the development of our Theory of Change and activity planning. Partners frequently reflected in feedback gathered at each meeting that they found the workshops, discussions and ideas sharing the most helpful parts of meetings; “great discussions and widespread expertise/representation”, “structured activities to draw ideas out” and “collaborative conversations”.

One of the strengths of our Partnership has been the representation and commitment of our partners. Members have commented about the Partnership now having “the right people in the room”, which is an essential foundation articulated in our Theory of Change. During 2023, we learnt:

- ✚ We have good representation across sectors that gives us breadth of insight into Upper Yarra communities and helps inform our strategy and efforts. The addition of Oonah as a new partner has also been valuable for bringing greater Indigenous representation. It is clear that there is potential for significant collective influence and impact for communities with everyone that is engaged.
- ✚ That management support and participation has been crucial for the progress we made in 2023. The backbone team spent time meeting with managers of all partners early in the year and this helped re-establish relationships and confirm organisational commitment.

2024 Plans

Our Partnership will focus on planning and delivering activities related to listening to children and families and engaging their voices in efforts to improve SED outcomes, alongside continued Partnership building. In 2024, we aim to:

- ➔ Facilitate an “Upper Yarra Sharing Day” in March to unpack what partners and local professionals are prioritising or wanting to change around SED and engaging with families, which will enable targeted SED responses.
- ➔ Plan and deliver engagement with Upper Yarra children and families around the prioritised SED areas, to better understand their challenges and aspirations. With this greater insight, we intend to work with a smaller cohort of families to co-design a SED initiative. A key consideration of this work will be starting small, testing and trialling, and building on small wins.
- ➔ Refine and test our Theory of Change with families and/or develop accessible communications that explain the work and aspirations of our Partnership.
- ➔ Develop an overarching Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) Framework and deliver smaller evaluations on key initiatives, led by the MEL Working Group.
- ➔ Continue to meet together bi-monthly, explore and pursue collaboration opportunities, and engage in capacity building activities, with a deep commitment to learning and innovation in all that we do.

Appendix 1: Upper Yarra Partnership Theory of Change

<i>Foundations of change</i>	<i>Enablers for change</i>	<i>Changes in how we work</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Major goal</i>
We have...	We do...	To create...	To impact...	Leads to...
Right People in the Room Partnership between services, education providers and government. Local Knowledge Deep knowledge of the Upper Yarra. Commitment to Change New ways of working to see long-term change.	Authentic Engagement Children and families are central and influence decision-making. High Leverage Activities Focus on community priorities, prevention, early intervention and sustainability. Multi-Sectoral Collaboration Common goals, collective efforts and shared resources. Strategic Learning Monitor, evaluate and learn as we go. Data, stories and evidence inform decision-making. Transparent & Inclusive Governance Locally led. Listening and accountable to community.	Initiatives driven and co-designed by children and families. Consistent social-emotional development focus and approach. Accessible, inclusive, safe and easy to access local service system. Strengthened and supported early education workforce.	Short-Term Children and families are empowered in decision-making. Services are increasingly coordinated and easy to access. Medium-Term Children and families are engaged in social-emotional development initiatives. Parents have greater capacity to support their children's social-emotional development. Children and families have positive experiences with services. Educators feel supported and there is increased retention. Long-Term Children have enabling environments for social-emotional development. Children play, learn and practice social-emotional skills. Strong service system and initiatives supporting social-emotional development.	Children in the Upper Yarra have the social and emotional skills they need to thrive and reach their full potential.

**This is a high-level summary of the Theory of Change.*



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