



Photo by Amy Garlett

Municipal Early Years Plan 2020-2025



Mildura Rural City Council



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ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

Mildura Rural City Council acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land which now comprise the Mildura Rural City municipality. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate and respect their continuing culture and acknowledge the memories of their ancestors.

MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

There are almost 7,000 children aged 0-9 years in the Mildura Rural City Council local government area. Unlike many other regional communities, our population of young people and young families is growing, with over 700 babies born every year.



Our municipality has a proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and a rich association to the culture and heritage of the First Peoples. It is a vibrant multicultural community with 79 different nationalities officially recognised. It is also blessed with many community groups who work together to make sure all our children and families are supported to have the best start in life.

Our community's future lies with our children. More than any other time, early childhood shapes who our children will become and what kind of life they will lead. During the early years, a child's brain is developing faster than at any other time of life. The foundations are being laid for children's optimal development. This starts in early childhood and then influences how children perform at school, as young people, as adults and as future leaders and active citizens.

The Municipal Early Years Plan 2020 – 2025 is a guide for Council to work with its community partners for, and with, children and families from birth through to eight years. It places a focus on strengthening families and on creating a community in which children and their families can thrive.

All parents want to give their children the best start in life. We know that our families want their children to be happy and healthy. They want them to learn and grow so they can live fulfilling and productive lives.








We want this for Mildura's children too and hope that this Municipal Early Years Plan helps to achieve this.

I would like to thank our community partners, children, families and staff who worked collaboratively together to develop our Municipal Early Years Plan 2020-2025.

Sarah Philpott
Chief Executive Officer

MILDURA RURAL CITY COUNCIL MUNICIPAL EARLY YEARS PLAN: ENDORSEMENT BY PARTNERS

We, the undersigned, on behalf of our respective departments and organisations, endorse the Mildura Rural City Council Municipal Early Years Plan, 2020-2025. We endorse the Vision, Operating Principles, Priorities, Goals and Strategies outlined in the Plan. The Municipal Early Years Plan will profile, and progress agreed key partnership work to improve outcomes for children and families and will be implemented through ongoing two year partnership Action Plans.

Name	Position	Organisation	Logo
Jane Maine	Area Executive Director Mallee	Department of Education and Training	
John Bridgfoot	Executive Director, Mallee Area	Department of Health and Human Services	
Jane McCracken	Executive Officer	Hands Up Mallee	
Christine Cottrell	Director	Little People Big Futures	
Rhonda Smith	Manager Early Years	Mallee Family Care	
Lyndal Munro	Director of Community Services	Mallee Track Health and Community Services	
Gary Simpson	Chief Executive Officer	MASP	
Jacquelyn Turfrey	Acting Chief Executive Officer	MDAS	
Alisi Fangaloka	Executive Officer	SMECC	
Simone Heald	Chief Executive Officer	Sunraysia Community Health Services	
Merinda Robertson	Manager	Zoe Support Australia	

OUR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT A GLANCE



**6,860
CHILDREN AGED 0-9**



**OVER 700 BABIES
BORN EVERY YEAR**



**600 ATTENDING
KINDERGARTEN**



**2,461 ONE PARENT
FAMILIES**



**5,432 COUPLES
WITH CHILDREN**



**SECOND LARGEST
POPULATION OF
ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER PEOPLE
IN REGIONAL
VICTORIA**



**OVER 79
DIFFERENT
NATIONALITIES**

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Local Government Act 2020 aims to improve local government democracy, accountability and service delivery for all Victorians. It has at its core, the aim of ensuring that all Victorians can engage with their local council on local priorities and the future of their community. It is designed to support strategic planning, public transparency, service performance and financial management.

Mildura Rural City Council is legally required to develop a Community and Council Plan and a Community Health and Well-being Plan, which are aligned with but not duplicated by the Municipal Early Years Plan. Whilst municipal early years planning is not a requirement of councils, Mildura Rural City Council has undertaken planning for its children and families over many years. This Municipal Early Years Plan aligns with the Community and Council Plan 2017-2021 and its vision: "We will create a safe, supportive place to live, where diversity and lifestyle opportunities are enhanced". It is consistent with the Community Health and Well-being Plan 2017-2021 as well as the principles outlined in the Local Government Act 2020.

This Municipal Early Years Plan outlines a framework and strategies to guide Council, in working with its community partners for, and with children and families from birth through to 8 years. It is mindful of the changing needs of children and their families along the life course, beginning with antenatal care, infancy through early childhood, the middle years, adolescence and young adulthood. It also recognises that the well-being of children is influenced by their family and community context. By taking an ecological approach, the Plan places a focus on strengthening families and on creating a community in which children and their families can thrive.

Mildura Rural City Council, as the tier of government that is closest to its people, is well positioned to work with the community and other levels of government to enhance liveability of the municipality for children and their families.



OUR STRATEGIC APPROACH

Mildura Rural City Council plays a range of roles, and works alongside many local partners and government departments, to create a community context in which children and their families can reach their full potential and actively participate in community life.

Council provides early childhood health and learning services such as Maternal and Child Health, Kindergarten Central Enrolment, Childcare, Supported Playgroups, Best Start, Libraries, Playgrounds and open spaces where children and their families can play, learn and connect with community and each other. Council plans and provides early childhood facilities, arts, cultural and recreation centres, swimming pools and sporting facilities.

Council builds community capacity through supporting voluntary organisations working with children and families and leading on issues impacting on them such as gender equity and preventing family violence. Council undertakes precinct planning and local area planning for the benefit of children and families. It advocates to governments on behalf of its residents on issues directly related to children. It participates at a regional level on "The Compact - Supporting Children and Families in the Early Years – A Compact between Department of Education and Training (DET), Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Local Government (represented by the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV))" 2017 – 2027 to work strategically at a high level on agreed state wide and regional priorities.

Council upholds and advocates for the rights of children as they are outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and for Indigenous Peoples, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

This Municipal Early Years Plan outlines principles, priorities, goals and strategies to support joint decision making around key community partnership work, program development and delivery, planning, partnerships and advocacy. It provides an overarching framework from which the Council Maternal and Child Health and Early Years teams can develop their action plans.

OUR PARTNERS IN EARLY YEARS PLANNING

Council recognises that there are many well developed partnerships in place across the municipality which influence a range of early years health and learning outcomes. This Municipal Early Years Plan provides an overarching Council framework to profile and progress agreed key partnership work to improve outcomes for children and families. It has been prepared in collaboration with our external partners. It could not have been developed without them and it can only be delivered with them. Our partnerships will inform, enrich and share effort to make the Plan outstanding and successful.

Council also recognises our children and families as key partners in this process. Two years of extensive consultation, through Hands Up Mallee, has enabled the voices of children and families to be clearly heard throughout this Municipal Early Years Plan.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND SYSTEMS APPROACH

An increasing emphasis is being placed on collective impact and systems approaches. A collective impact approach commits to a Common Agenda, established shared goals and measures of success, undertakes mutually reinforcing activities, ensures effective community participation and commits to ongoing communication between partners.

A systems approach offers the ability to think big about early years issues at a population level and by considering the various elements of the system, how they interact and the opportunities to influence and change the way the system operates.

HANDS UP MALLEE

The local Collective Impact initiative, Hands Up Mallee (HUM), aims to make long term social change that will improve the quality of people's lives and overall well-being of our community.

The initiative brings together diverse views and ideas from our community to identify the social issues that have the greatest impact on our long-term well-being and determine how best to address them.

It coordinates effort and resources across all sectors including non-profits, social services, business, communities, philanthropic and governments to improve the systems that serve us.

After two years of extensive research and consultation, in 2017, Hands Up Mallee announced our community's Common Agenda/Community Aspiration, to create long term change, with a vision of: "A connected community where families matter, and children thrive" and a focus on four key age groups:

- The First 1000 days (Pre-conception – 2 years of age);
- Best Start to Life (3-8 years of age);
- Young People Matter (9-14 years of age); and
- Tread your own path (15-25 years of age)

Our community identified that priority should be given to investing in our residents' early years. Prevention and intervention are critical to breaking existing cycles of social and economic disadvantage, and ultimately creating long term change. Parenting, play and home environments are critical elements to achieve this, directly influencing a child's development and health and well-being. Therefore, strengthening families is a focus of the Common Agenda.

People helping people is also to be a focus, where we aim to foster support for one another and look out for others around us.

The Municipal Early Years Plan has been developed to align with the collective impact work being undertaken by Hands Up Mallee. It commits to the same vision, focuses on the two first age groups – pre-conception to 8 years of age and places children and families firmly at the centre of its principles, priorities, strategies and goals.

In particular, Hands Up Mallee's role in supporting the implementation of the Municipal Early Years Plan will include working with community, services and 3 levels of government to strengthen place-based efforts to:

- Place the child and family at the centre and support the Rights of the Child;
- Support parents as first providers and teachers of their child;
- Use a systems approach to promote and direct change to improve prevention and early intervention;
- Improve service alignment and build a shared outcomes focus;
- Promote more strategic and aligned use of available funds to increase service access and availability;
- Improve service models and service collaboration to strengthen client-centred practice, and improve service access and availability; and
- Promote shared reflective practices to promote systemic change and strengthen the early years workforce.

The Municipal Early Years Plan raises the profile of key early years work being done by community partners and by Council across the municipality. It provides every resident and ratepayer with the opportunity to understand this work and to be informed of its progress.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH LOCAL ACTION

The Municipal Early Years Plan is strategically aligned to local action to deliver measurable impacts and change.



MUNICIPAL EARLY YEARS PLANNING

There is significant evidence of the critical importance of the first 1,000 days of a child's development. Environments and experiences from conception to the end of a child's second year are significant for children's development. "Reducing inequities and ensuring the best start to life for everyone, irrespective of socio-economic status, race or gender, must be an ethical and economic imperative for all governments" (Moore et.al, 2017).

Research also tells us that the foundations for a child's long-term development are laid in early childhood. A child's environment and experiences in his or her early years set key pathways for life. Children's learning commences long before they enter school – children are born ready to learn. Each stage of brain development is cumulative and, consequently, children can enter school with clear differences in the cognitive and non-cognitive skills needed for school success.

Early childhood is particularly important for children who start from a position of disadvantage. If children start behind, they often stay behind. Currently, children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those from the most advantaged areas, and this gap is widening over time.

Parents play a critical role in shaping the future of their children and parenting factors have been linked to a wide range of child outcomes. Parenting helps to determine how the broader social environment influences a child's healthy development. Thus, supporting parents in their parenting role is being recognised as a powerful way of improving childhood well-being, health and educational outcomes, and ultimately reducing social disadvantage.

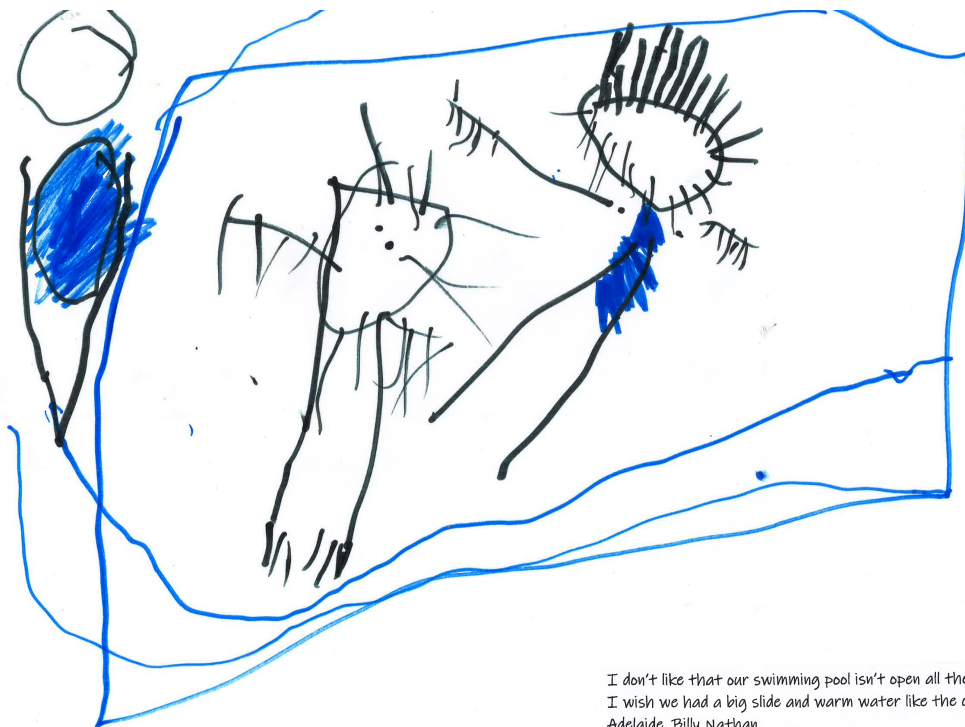
Municipal Early Years Planning fosters a whole-of-community, whole-of-system approach to building community strength and addressing the underlying causes of inequity and vulnerability of children and families. Municipal Early Years Plans are place-based with a focus on prevention, equity, health and long-term social and educational outcomes for children. Although they are not statutorily required, local government understands the importance of the early years and continues to formally embrace this through these plans.

Childhood is a stage of life where investment has the greatest return and opportunities to intervene have the greatest impacts. A municipality that has a focus on children is one that benefits all members of the community. Local, Commonwealth and State Government policy has increasingly recognised the importance of investing in the early years from birth to school entry. The importance of local government in leading local policies, developing and delivering programs and providing infrastructure that can influence the health, education and well-being of its younger population is also well recognised. In the early years local government continues to take a leadership role. This role is supported by strong community engagement and partnerships, which can create an effective local delivery system to improve the outcomes for children, whilst also delivering improved social and economic outcomes for the community. This partnership approach is supported by The Compact - Supporting Children and Families in the Early Years.

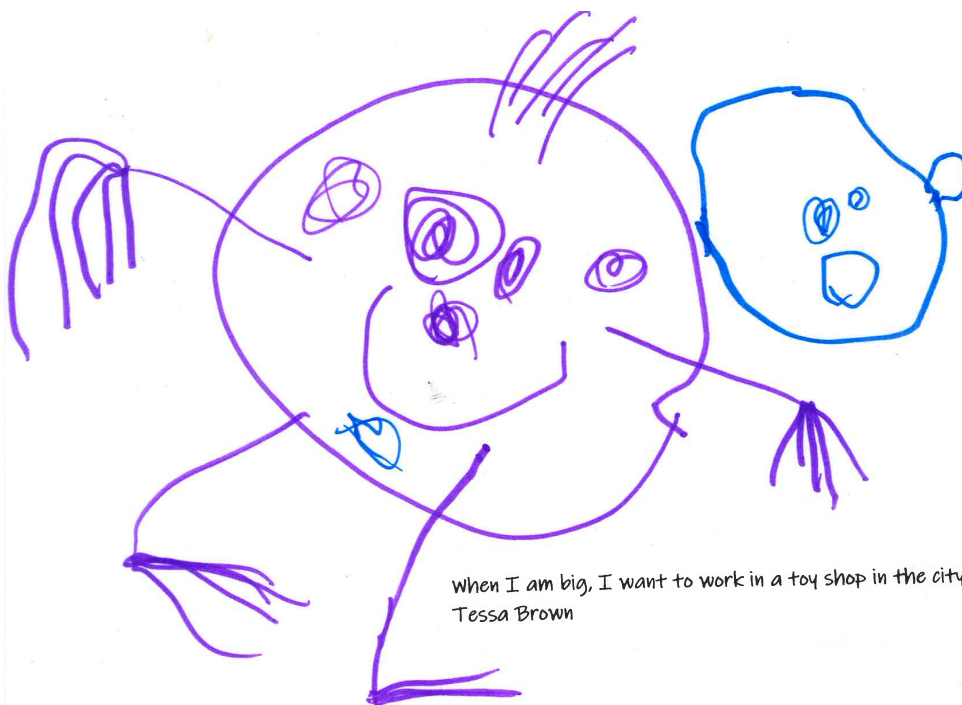
Municipal Early Years Planning supports a focus on encouraging a partnership approach, where all community partners can work towards shaping and focusing childhood as a distinct life stage and developing strategic alignments across Council and Community to achieve optimal health, development and well-being of children.

HOW THE MUNICIPAL EARLY YEARS PLAN HAS BEEN INFORMED





I don't like that our swimming pool isn't open all the time.
I wish we had a big slide and warm water like the one in
Adelaide. Billy Nathan.



When I am big, I want to work in a toy shop in the city.
Tessa Brown

The Municipal Early Years Plan was developed through an analysis of international, national, state and local strategic early years planning, comprehensive data analysis from the Australian Early Development Census 2018 and the State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018, and engagement with a broad range of community members. Each stage of the engagement process included consultation and active feedback. A Municipal Early Years Plan Project Group was established to create a partnership approach to the development of the plan.

We have framed the Municipal Early Years Plan within the key state and commonwealth reforms including but not limited to:

- National: Universal access to 15 hours of kindergarten for children the year before school;
- Victoria: Early Childhood Reform Plan – Maternal and Child Health, School Readiness, the development of the Early Years Compact and a state-wide Kindergarten Central Enrolment Project;
- Victoria: Kindergarten Reform introducing subsidised kindergarten for three-year-old children by 2022;
- Victoria: Road Map to Reform – including the establishment of the Orange Door, strengthening communities to better prevent neglect and abuse, delivering early support to children and families at risk, keeping more families together through crisis, securing a better future for children who cannot live at home;
- Victoria: Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework, Child Information Sharing Scheme and Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme and Family Violence Reforms to enable information sharing in the best interests of the child; and
- Child Safety Legislation and Child Safe Standards - Organisations that provide services or facilities for children must implement Child Safe Standards to protect them from abuse.

We have also been informed by the extensive HUM work - Community Conversations, Voices of Children, and Systems Mapping

The Municipal Early Years Plan builds on the successes of our previous Municipal Early Years Plan 2015-2018, and the Evaluation of that plan, including but not limited to:

- the establishment of our Community's collective impact initiative – Hands Up Mallee
- the development and implementation of the Kindergarten Central Enrolment Scheme
- the initial continuous improvement cycles to capture valid Kindergarten attendance data
- the implementation and growth of the literacy initiative facilitated by Mallee Family Care
- the expansion and increased choice in Supported Playgroup Programs facilitated by qualified staff
- Increased participation in Maternal and Child Health

It also builds on the first phase of the Early Childhood Strategic Evaluation, Mildura Community Report of the Early Childhood Reform initiatives led by Department of Education and Training which identified:

- MCH consultations have increased opportunity to provide greater support to families experiencing vulnerability
- 90-95% of kindergartens were on track in achieving the goals set out in their School Readiness Annual Plans
- Workforce attraction and retention is a substantial issue
- Increased referrals from Parents Next leading to demand in Supported Playgroups
- Parents expressing that the support they have received through Supported Playgroups has improved their parenting skills and confidence.

The Municipal Early Years Plan is based upon an evidence-based framework developed by the Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) – the Nest Agenda.

THE NEST AGENDA

The Nest Agenda is the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) framework for improving the well-being of Australian children. It identifies six interrelated components of a child's life that need to be "going well" for their opportunities and positive trajectories to be maximised. It builds on existing frameworks and programs and bridges the critical gaps between them. It is based on the understanding that governments alone cannot meet all the needs of young people – and the significant issues facing young Australians cannot be improved by one 'magic' program, one policy, or one organisation working in isolation.

1. Positive sense of culture and identity

Having a positive sense of culture and identity is central to the well-being of children and youth and is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and youth. This outcome includes having a sense of spiritual well-being. It underpins and is fundamental to the other Nest child and youth outcomes areas, with appropriate measures of a sense of culture and identity to be developed.

2. Being loved and safe

Being loved and safe embraces positive family relationships and connections with others, along with personal and community safety. Children and youth who are loved and safe are confident, have a strong sense of self-identity, and have high self-esteem. They form secure attachments, have pro-social peer connections, and positive adult role models or mentors are present in their life. Children and youth who are loved and safe are resilient: they can withstand life's challenges and respond constructively to setbacks and unanticipated events.

3. Having material basics

Children and youth who have material basics have access to the things they need to live a 'normal life'. They live in adequate and stable housing, with adequate clothing, healthy food, and clean water, and the materials they need to participate in education and training pathways.

4. Being healthy

Healthy children and youth have their physical, developmental, psychosocial and mental health needs met. They achieve their optimal developmental trajectories. They have access to services to support their growth and development and have access to preventative measures to redress any emerging health or developmental concerns.

5. Engaged in learning

Learning is a continuous process throughout life. Children and youth learn through a variety of formal and informal experiences within the classroom and more broadly in their home and in the community. Children and youth who are learning participate in and experience education that enables them to reach their full potential and maximise their life opportunities.

6. Participating

Participating includes involvement with peers and the community, being able to have a voice and say on matters and, increasingly, access to technology for social connections. In practice, participating means children and youth are supported in expressing their views, their views are considered, and they are involved in decision-making processes that affect them.

OPERATING PRINCIPLES: TO ENSURE OUR COMMUNITY WORK IS EFFECTIVE

We have developed the following principles to guide how we approach the Municipal Early Years Plan:

A commitment to the child at the centre

We need to start from the perspective of the whole child, focusing on what is required to ensure their overall well-being across all the dimensions of their lives, rather than planning within established professional disciplines and service boundaries.

A commitment to privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and knowledge

We need to recognise that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is well placed to determine the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. We must privilege local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and self-determination when developing agendas and delivering services.

Families are the child's first educator

We need to recognise that parents, families and carers are a child's first and most important teacher. No amount of formal teaching can compare to the influences families have on their children, who they teach every day – by word and example. Children thrive when parents have the support they need.

A commitment to a long-term, evidence-informed approach

We need a movement away from policy short-termism and adopt a 'long-term' view. There is no 'quick-fix' for some of the complex issues facing our children and we will need to monitor, review, report and communicate effectively on our long-term progress, based on reliable data sources.

A commitment to social inclusion and equity

We need to ensure our community and its services are inclusive of all children and their families so they feel they belong, are socially connected, and can access the services they need. This means that we respect and welcome multicultural diversity, and understand what families value and give cultural priority to. We will value the strength in diversity of families and individuals. Will we also be proactive in addressing gender equity, systemic and structural inequalities and unconscious bias. We need to ensure our approaches serve to close the equity gaps so that all children enjoy a best start in life.

A commitment to prevention and early intervention

While tertiary action will always be required, evidence points to the maximum benefits being achieved by shifting our efforts towards preventing problems and intervening early.

A commitment to a life-stage approach

Our responses and interventions must also be appropriately distributed along the age continuum of childhood, knowing the greatest impacts are as early as possible in the life course. The system should also recognise that children move through 'life-stage' transitions in different ways and at different ages.

A commitment to systemic change using an outcomes approach

We need agreement to work toward a shared vision and improved collaboration between child well-being agencies, professions, community and governments to align efforts and deliver mutually reinforcing activities. We need to use the shared outcomes framework that is provided by The Nest, in the ARACY Report Card: The well-being of young Australians.

Accountability: transparency, participation, evaluation and feedback

We need to use an accountability framework that provides a disciplined way of thinking and acting which communities can use to improve the lives of children, families and the community. We need to not just preference data, but also involve local knowledge, traditional knowledge, narrative/stories and community voice in tandem, in our decision-making processes, to help communities get beyond talking about problems to taking action to solve them. We need to start with ends (the results you want to achieve) and work backward, towards means (programs and actions).

Locally based, cross sector approach

We need to take a locally based approach to guide planning for the best outcomes for children and families - looking at, listening to, and engaging with community members who live, work and play in a locality to understand their needs and aspirations. We also need to ensure that a cross-sector approach is taken, where various local community groups can come together to collectively focus their expertise and resources on how those local needs and aspirations can be effectively met.



**“A connected
community where
families matter,
and children
thrive”**

Photo by Mark Morgan

OUR VISION

In keeping with the collective impact approach, we have retained the HUM shared vision for our Municipal Early Years Plan

" A connected community where families matter, and children thrive"

PRIORITY AREAS

Working together, we have identified seven priority areas to work on - that will ultimately make a difference in "turning the curve" on the well-being of our children and families. These priorities are reflected in our goals, strategies and high-level actions as seen in the next section "Municipal Early Years Plan in Practice."

Our priorities are:

1. Valuing and learning from the local Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander community
2. Supporting access for children to safe and secure housing
3. Improving capacity of all families to actively participate in community life
4. Improving the health of children in Kinship Care and Out of Home Care
5. Expanding places and spaces that are welcoming to children and families
6. Recognising, respecting and including all cultures
7. Improving developmental outcomes for every child.



THE MUNICIPAL EARLY YEARS PLAN IN PRACTICE

To ensure that work in the community is effective, the Municipal Early Years Plan adopts a systems approach to address children and family's needs and an optimal health and learning environment for all children. Community partners will be invited to join a Municipal Early Years Steering Group which will consist of internal and external stakeholders who play a pivotal role in improving population outcomes for children and families. The Steering Group will underpin the Plan in practice, through a two-year action plan, review and reporting process.

The priorities, goals and strategies outlined in our Municipal Early Years Plan have been developed through understanding what our community, children and the data is telling us, and with extensive input from local service providers.

The Municipal Early Years Plan is closely aligned with Council's Municipal Health and Well Being Plan (MHWP). The MHWP includes many important early years health and well-being activities already being undertaken and reported on, so are not duplicated in this Plan. For example:

- Improve the food supply to the priority settings of Early Years Services, schools, workplaces and sporting clubs through targeted partnerships with suppliers and the Victorian Healthy Eating Advisory Service
- Increase participation rates for Maternal and Child Health services and immunisations for all
- Undertake a settings-based approach to the promotion of healthy eating and physical activity
- Continue to work towards an integrated community approach to reduce substantiated child maltreatment incidents.

The Municipal Early Years Plan will not address all children's health and learning issues in the municipality, or all the strategies identified to address them. Rather, it is our best effort to undertake achievable, innovative, collaborative work practices aimed at better improving developmental outcomes for our children, and empowering families and carers to succeed as their children's first and primary educator.

OUR PLAN OF ACTION: OVERARCHING STRATEGIES

The Steering Group will work in partnership strategically, to implement some overarching strategies across the life of the plan, including:

1. Continue to pursue reconciliation and reducing inequalities, alongside the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, through Council's Reconciliation Action Plan and the National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap
2. Utilise the Local Government/Department of Education and Training/Department of Health and Human Services Early Years Compact to:
 - a. Strongly position council MEYP's as a regional priority
 - b. Advocate for improved coordination and resources to all MCH services across the region
 - c. Advocate for sufficient and equitable provision of early intervention services for children 0-8 across the whole municipality
 - d. Strengthen the training, recruitment, support and retention of the early years workforce
 - e. Advocate for prioritising investment, as a community, early in children's lives
3. Investigate the potential to develop a Middle Years Strategy
4. Support the work of Hands up Mallee and utilise the principles of Collective Impact to build "A connected community where families matter, and children thrive"

NEST AREA 1: POSITIVE SENSE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

All children have a right to feel accepted and respected. This is a principle set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This means that children and their families can express their individuality and uniqueness; knowing where you come from, where you are, where you belong, that you are valued and have the capacity to choose where you are going. Culture is about being part of life – ideas, values, customs and behaviours.



The voices of our children

- ☒ I want to learn languages
- ☒ Children want to travel to other countries

"I don't like it when people are angry and hurt other people"

"I don't like it when people are sad or mean"



Community conversations

What do you love about living here?

- ☒ Cultural diversity
- ☒ Place based identity

What are some of the biggest issues the community is facing?
"Equity"



Data Snapshot

- ☒ High number of indigenous children
- ☒ More humanitarian arrivals
- ☒ Seventy-nine different cultures
- Less acceptance of diverse cultures
- More families isolated by Language
- High number of indigenous one parent families

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories around the townships and areas within and surrounding the municipality dates back more than 40,000 years. Approximately four percent of the Mildura Local Government area residents are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, making the area home to the second largest population of Aboriginal people in regional Victoria. There are two Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAP's). They are the First People of Millewa Mallee Aboriginal Corporation who identify four Tribes in their RAP - The Latji, Ngintait, Nyeri and Wergaia Tribes. We also have the Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation representing the Tribes of the Wotjobaluk peoples. This Municipal Early Years Plan acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land and recognises the unique status of First Nations people, whose families have been their children's first educators for multitudes of generations.

Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people remain one of the most vulnerable groups in Australia, experiencing much higher rates of poverty, exclusion, discrimination and removal from their homes and cultures. This reflects serious systemic denial of human rights and intergenerational trauma requiring targeted, strengths-based measures that redress the causes behind these problems.

To accelerate improvements in life outcomes, programs and services need to be designed, developed and implemented in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have called for a community-led, strengths-based approach, one that values their experience. In 2019, the Council of Australian Governments, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and the Australian Local Government Association signed a Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap and established a Joint Council on Closing the Gap. Council is consequently a partner to meeting Closing the Gap targets.

The Municipal Early Years Plan commits to support an early intervention approach to contribute to strong, healthy, self-determining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are connected to family and culture. High quality early education holds great potential for improved outcomes for our children. Our Municipal Early Years Plan works towards supporting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services in the municipality that offer a unique type of support for children and families that is culturally grounded, holistic and responsive.

Mildura is also home to a rich, culturally diverse community, with over 70 different nationalities represented locally. With a high number of humanitarian arrivals, Mildura Rural City Council is an official Refugee Welcome Zone - where the community commits to welcoming and supporting refugees.

Children and families embody and experience this diversity in a multitude of forms – including ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual identity, living with a disability and socio- economic status.

The Municipal Early Years Plan is a call to action to acknowledge and value our diverse and multicultural community. In diversity is strength, and actions need to create better access and inclusion for all. Families feel more welcomed in professional settings when their culture and child rearing practices are respected. The plan acknowledges the skills our culturally diverse people bring with them, the social contributions they make to enrich our lives in so many areas, and their role as their children's first and primary educator.

OUR PLAN OF ACTION: POSITIVE SENSE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Our goals:

- Strong, healthy, self-determining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, connected to family and culture
- Children build their sense of identity through belonging to people, place and culture

Our priorities:

- Valuing and learning from the local Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities
- Recognising, respecting and including all cultures

Strategy:

- Continue to provide a strengths-based wrap around model that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, carers and their children from conception to school entry
- Enhance the capacity of early years settings to effectively provide access to and cater for the diversity of multicultural children and their families

Related Council Plans and Strategies:

Reconciliation Action Plan, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Recognition Policy, Community Health and Well-being Plan, The Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care, The Early Years Compact, Gender Equity Policy, Child Safe Standards Policy, LGBTIQ Inclusion Plan





NEST AREA 2: BEING LOVED AND SAFE

All children have a right to grow up in loving and safe environments. Children are vulnerable and if the right caring environments are not there, they face many more risks and challenges than children who are nurtured, supported and encouraged to meet their potential.



The voices of our children

- ☒ "I like my sister helping me to do make up"
- ☒ "I like to ride my bike fast down the street with mum"
- ☒ "I like to be home inside"
- ☒ "I like to be home outside"
- "I don't like it when people are angry and hurt other people"
- "I don't like it when people are sad or mean"



Data Snapshot

- Improving social competence over time
- ☒ Increasing levels of social and emotional vulnerability
- ☒ More families feel unsafe walking alone
- ☒ More children are victims of crime
- ☒ More children are less safe at home



Community conversations

What do you love about living here?

- ☒ Sense of community
- ☒ Social life

What are your hopes for you, your family and community?

- ☒ Safety

What are some of the biggest issues the community is facing?

- Safety

What do you think is causing this issue?

- Bullying and harassment
- Family violence

What can we do to make a difference?

- ☒ Reduce family violence
- ☒ Improve policing and justice
- ☒ Increase public safety

HOW ARE WE DOING WITH BEING LOVED AND SAFE?

The community consultation work through Hands Up Mallee, the data from the State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018 and the Australian Early Development Census results 2018, indicate more challenges than strengths in this component of children's well-being.

The aspirations of the community through community conversations reveal that families want to live in a safe community, and they want to reduce family violence, bullying and harassment.

Children value time spent at home with their families, visiting their grandparents and relatives. They aspire to a life of happy family relationships and living in clean, safe homes- just enjoying regular home routines.

The challenges to having a safe, secure and nurturing home environment in Mildura cannot be underestimated. The data in Table 1 shows us that we have concerning numbers of children experiencing family violence and children

in Out of Home Care. Table 2 shows us that across the municipality, we have an increasing number of children developmentally at risk in social competence, compared with our Victorian counterparts - and some concerning spikes in vulnerability in Mildura and Red Cliffs.

There is a wide range of services and programs offered to support positive role modelling for families – such as Supported Playgroups and the Family and Community Hubs at MDAS and Sunraysia Community Health Services. Working against this is the ongoing inter-generational disadvantage some families in our community experience, which makes it hard for them to create a safe, loving environment for their children.

A key principle for our Municipal Early Years Plan is a commitment to the family's role as their child's first educator. If our community understands the importance of children living in safe, secure homes we can help them have the best start in life. If we make our early learning, health and family services easy to access and friendly to use for families experiencing complexities – children can thrive because their families have their needs met.

Table 1: Safety of children, State of Mildura Rural City Report, 2018

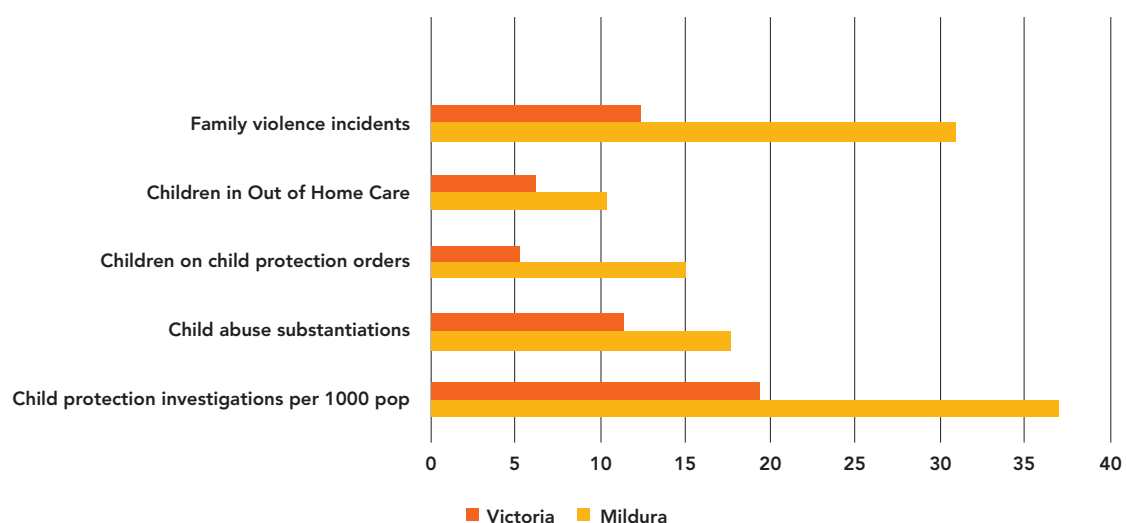
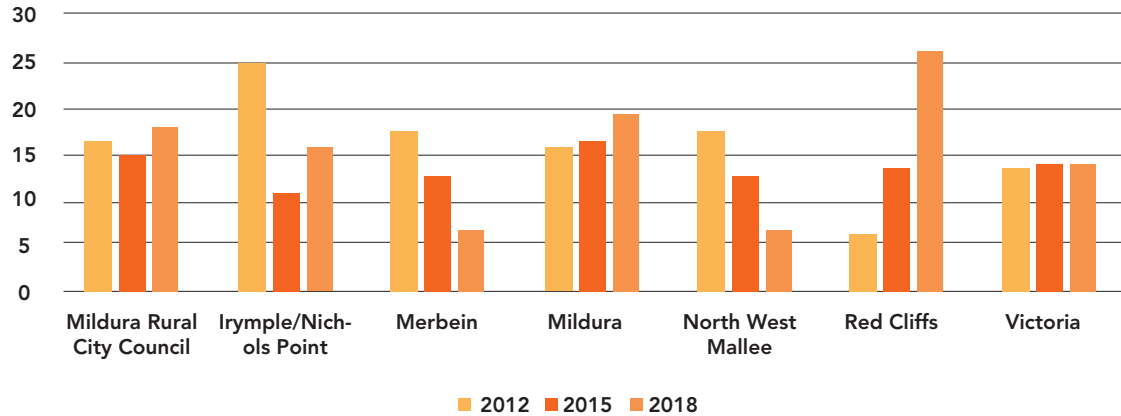


Table 2: Development at risk in social competence, AEDC 2018



OUR PLAN OF ACTION: BEING LOVED AND SAFE

Our goal: Children live in safe and supportive homes, with positive and secure relationships

Our priority: Supporting access for children to safe and secure housing

Strategy

- Connect families to housing options and integrated supports
- Strengthen the universal early learning platforms so they can engage and respond to children and their families who may be experiencing complexities along their life journey
- Embed family centred co-design to strengthen service response at the tertiary level so that all vulnerable children and families have every opportunity to access and remain engaged with early years' programs
- Improve the local understanding and application of Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework, Child Information Sharing and Family Violence Information Sharing legislation.
- Building strong partnerships between services to increase referral pathways to access family support and prevention programs to reduce escalating risk issues.

Related Council Plans and Strategies:

Reconciliation Action Plan, Community Health and Well-being Plan, The Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care, The Early Years Compact, Gender Equity Policy, Child Safe Standards, LGBTIQ Inclusion Plan



Photo by Mark Morgan

NEST AREA 3: HAVING MATERIAL BASICS

Essential needs are those fundamental building blocks that every child needs to thrive. Having enough money to buy food, having a permanent house to live in with enough bedrooms, having a job and access to transport are all vitally important to families bringing up children.



The voices of our children

- ☒ "I like to stay home and relax"
- ☒ "I like to go shopping"
- ☒ "I would like to learn languages, go to High School, go to School"
- "I wish there were more toys that don't cost money"
- "I would like to have a bigger house"
- "I would like a car to drive to hospital to visit mum"



Community conversations

What do you think are the biggest issues facing this community?

- Vulnerable families with little or no prevention or education support
- Financially disadvantaged families not able to afford childcare and kindergarten

What can we do to make a difference?

- ☒ More programs working with parents to support them
- ☒ Early years hub that focuses on health and education
- ☒ Foster relationships between early education and families
- ☒ Increase public safety



Data Snapshot

- ☒ Reasonable house prices
- ☒ High access to bulk billed medical services
- Low home purchase stress
- Low median income
- More families run out of food
- High number of jobless families
- More long-term unemployment
- Low education attainment of mothers
- High social and economic disadvantage
- High rental stress for families
- Low availability of properties to rent

HOW ARE WE DOING WITH HAVING MATERIAL BASICS?

The community consultation work through Hands Up Mallee and the data from State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018 again indicates more challenges, but some strengths in this component of children's well-being.

Families have better access to bulk billed GP attendances. Whilst housing is affordable for some families, there are still many who suffer rental stress. Concerningly, there is a high proportion of families who struggle to put food on the table. Mildura children live in families with lower family incomes and with less access to education and employment.

Parents, caregivers and family life have the biggest influence on children. Employment, secure housing, access to transport and sufficient income are all factors in supporting families to have the essential basics they need to provide for their children. If families struggle to find appropriate stable housing, employment, or are unable to provide their children with nutritious meal, they can find it hard to deal with other issues – such as looking after their own emotional and physical well-being and that of their children. There are many non-government and government agencies in the community who support families to find housing, work and other essentials. However, Governments invest short term - according to their political cycle. Often their resources, solutions and policy do not meet family's basic needs.

Table 3: Not all basic needs can be met - State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018

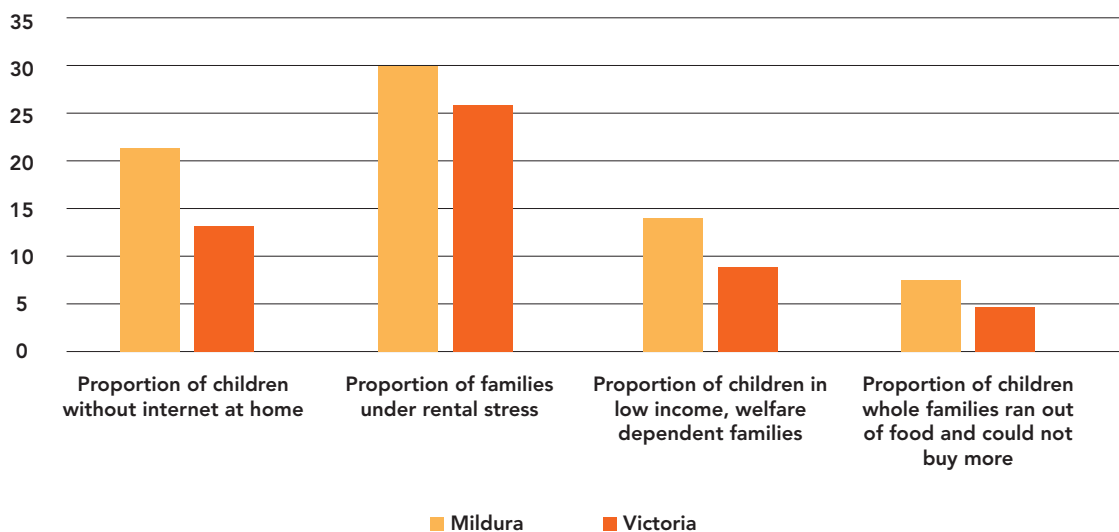
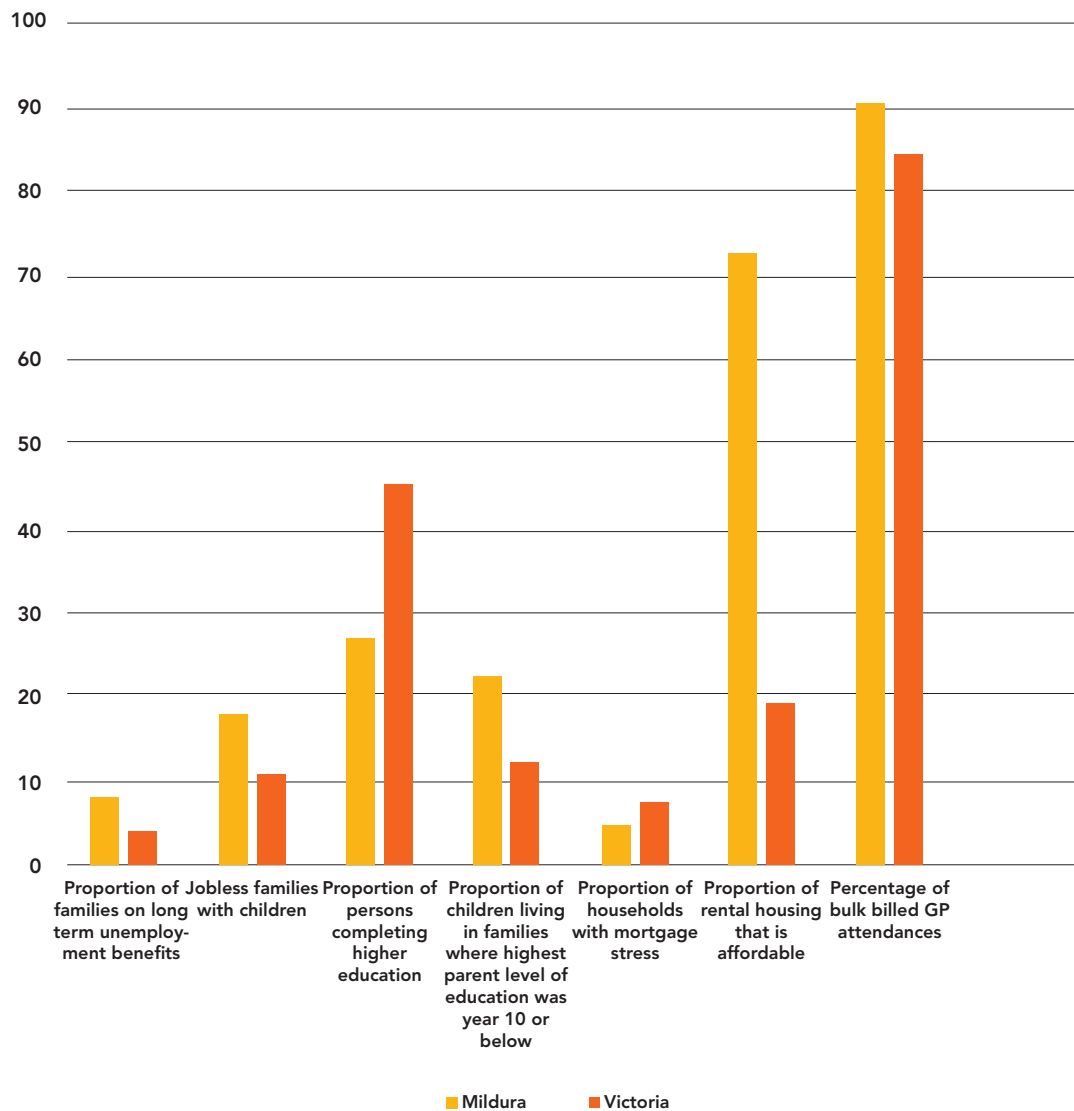


Table 4: Education and employment status - State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018



OUR PLAN OF ACTION: HAVING MATERIAL BASICS

Our goal: Education and workforce participation help families provide for their needs

Our priority: Improve capacity of all families to actively participate in community life

Strategy:

- Promote opportunities to better link families to pre-employment and study
- Increase access to early childhood education and care so families can participate in further education and employment

Related Council Plans and Strategies:

Reconciliation Action Plan, Community Health and Well-being Plan, The Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care, The Early Years Compact, Gender Equity Policy, Child Safe Standards, LGBTIQ Inclusion Plan



NEST AREA 4: BEING HEALTHY

Our children are our future. Being physically, mentally and emotionally well is important for everyone, but for our children; starting out in life being healthy sets them up for a strong future.



The voices of our children

- ☒ Children love active play and being outdoors
- ☒ Children love treats, healthy food and going to eateries
- ☒ Some like to go to health services
- ☒ Children aspire to be a Doctor, a Midwife, a Nurse "like my mum"
- ☒ "I have to grow up by eating all my veggies, then going to school"
- "I want to stay at home not go to school when I feel sick"
- Some don't like to go to the Doctor, Hospital, Dentist or the Bush Nurse "Because of getting injections"



Community conversations

What do you love about living here?

- ☒ Country lifestyle
- ☒ Sense of community

What are your hopes for you, your family and community?

- ☒ Affordable and accessible education

What do you think are the biggest issues facing this community?

- Health and well being
- Mental health
- Substance abuse and addictions



Data Snapshot

- ☒ Relatively high rates of MCH participation
- ☒ High proportion of children eat fruit and vegetables
- ☒ Improving gross and fine motor skills
- More children vulnerable in physical and health well being
- High rates of smoking during pregnancy
- High proportion of low weight babies
- Low breastfeeding rates
- Low rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attending MCH
- High number of MCH referrals for developmental reasons

HOW ARE WE DOING BEING HEALTHY?

The community consultation work through Hands Up Mallee indicates that access to health services and having a healthy, active lifestyle are important to children and families. Children and families emphasised how they love outdoor play, enjoying Mildura's natural environment, open spaces and participating in sporting events – that are so connected to positive health and well-being, and building confidence in children.

Data from the State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018 and the AEDC 2018, indicate there are areas of strengths as well as areas of concern for the health of our children. We have improvements in the way children can use their fine and gross motor skills – essential for healthy active physical development and to develop literacy and numeracy skills in school – however still comparatively low compared with our Victorian counterparts. More families are attending their MCH key ages and stages visits and children are eating enough fruit and vegetables – essential for healthy childhood development.

However, Mildura children are still comparatively vulnerable in their physical and health well-being when they reach school, with increasing vulnerability in Irymple-Nichols Point, Red Cliffs and Mildura. The data indicates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders MCH participation rates in MCH key ages and stages visits is low. (However, Mallee District Aboriginal Service provides a Maternal and Child Health Service, with some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients choosing to attend this service). We have comparatively higher rates of smoking through pregnancy, low weight babies and comparatively low breastfeeding rates.

Equipping children and families with the information and skills they need to make healthy choices and maintain a healthy lifestyle is an important preventative health measure. Building trust and collaboration between families and services empowers families to have greater knowledge of which services do what - so they can act to support their children. It also assists to build strong referral pathways so that any developmental delays can be picked up early. Health and well-being outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are positively influenced by cultural connection and self – determination. The health needs of children and their families from refugee backgrounds can be influenced by their experiences of "forced migration", trauma and disruption of health services – they may have complex physical and mental health issues arising from their pre-migration experiences, during their journey or after settlement in Australia.

Table 5: Health of our children - State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018

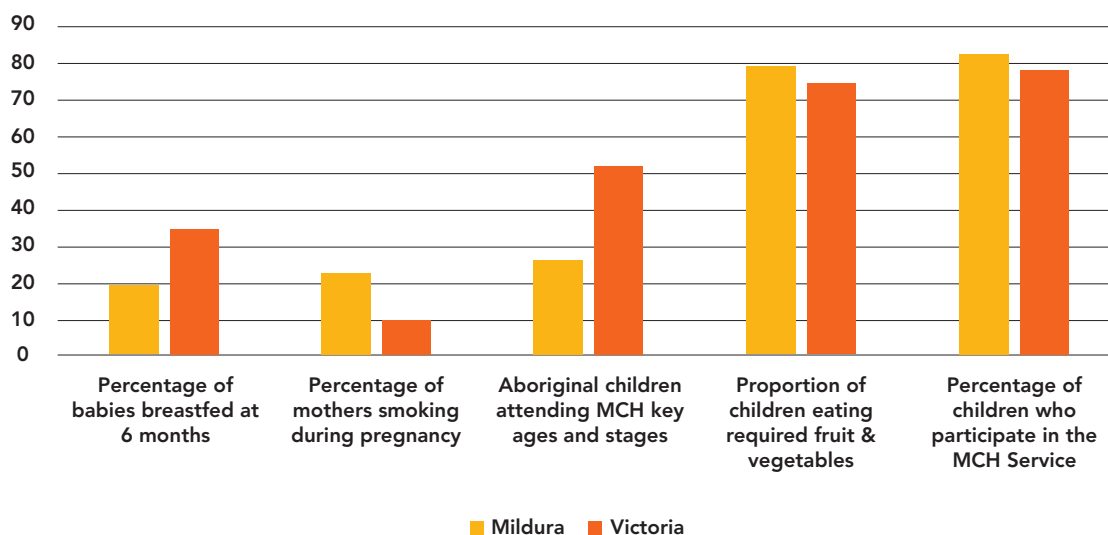
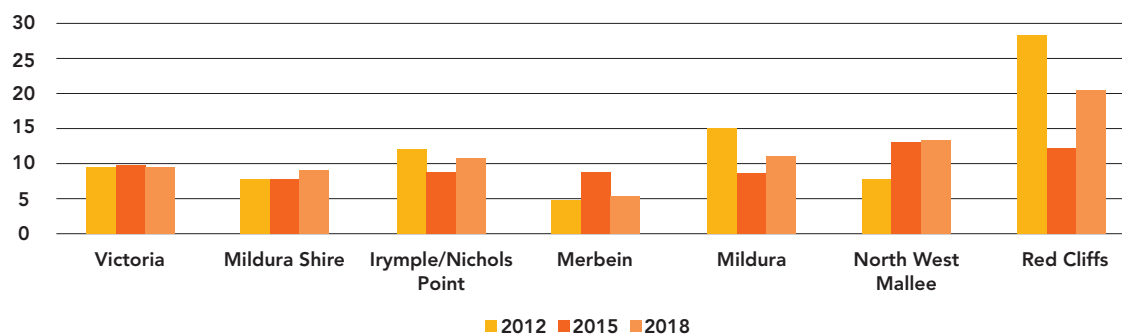


Table 6: Developmentally vulnerable in physical health and wellbeing, AEDC 2018



OUR PLAN OF ACTION: BEING HEALTHY

Our goal: Confident families raise healthy, thriving children

Our priority: Improve the health of all children, prioritising those in kinship care and Out of Home Care

Strategy:

- Continue to explore new ways to increase participation in Maternal and Child Health and Immunisation
- Empower families to provide their children with the optimal health environment, commencing at pregnancy
- Improve child health support for Kinship Carers through the DHHS Kinship Care Model

Related Council Plans and Strategies:

Reconciliation Action Plan, Community Health and Well-being Plan, The Early Years Compact, Gender Equity Policy, Child Safe Standards, LGBTIQ Inclusion Plan



NEST AREA 5: ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

Learning is a continuous process throughout life. Children learn through a variety of formal and informal experiences, and particularly through play. Families and carers are children's first and most important teachers.



The voices of our children

- ✓ Children love to develop their creativity and problem solving through imaginative play
- ✓ Children love family time, when dad tells stories about the bush or lets them help with farm machinery
- ✓ "I like to play at my house because there is a swing and a rainbow"
- ✓ Children have high career aspirations – to "save a burning house with people in it", "to mix two DNA's together and see what happens"
- ✓ "I would like a rocket to fly up in the sky!"
- Some don't like to be left at preschool or day care



Community conversations

What do you think are the biggest issues facing this community?

- Financially disadvantaged families not able to afford childcare and kindergarten
- Engagement and attendance in education
- Intergenerational disadvantage
- Lack of parent interest in education

What can we do to make a difference?

- ✓ Support our early years workforce
- ✓ Foster relationships between early education and families
- ✓ Give our children the best start in life
- ✓ Address affordability
- ✓ Expand book sharing
- ✓ Holistic approach to education
- ✓ "Get the first five years of a child's life right"



Data Snapshot

- ✓ Learning programs are increasing in quality
- ✓ Children are participating well in kindergarten
- ✓ Children are physically ready for school
- ✓ Good participation in Playgroups

- ✓ Good physical independence
- ✓ School readiness program is working well
- ✓ Well-developed motor skills
- More children vulnerable in all five developmental domains
- More children vulnerable on one, two and more domains
- Increased vulnerability in Mildura and Red Cliffs

HOW ARE WE DOING WITH ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING?

The community consultation work through Hands Up Mallee indicates that access to affordable early learning programs at a young age is very important to families. Promoting the importance of early childhood education and supporting and strengthening our early years workforce are also very important. Community acknowledge our workforce and early childhood service providers who are committed and skilled and have improved the quality of service delivery.

Children emphasised how they loved learning through play. They have high aspirations for their future as active participants in work, family and community life. They express an understanding that being healthy and participating in education are important building blocks to achieving their aspirations.

Data from the State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018 and the AEDC 2018, indicates there are some areas of strength but many areas of concern in how our children are developing. There is a positive overall improvement in children's fine and gross motor skills – essential in developing school readiness. Children are coming to school physically independent, and there is comparatively good attendance at kindergarten and playgroups.

However, there are no developmental areas where children in the Mildura municipality shine. There are developmental declines across the municipality and particularly in Red Cliffs, Mildura and Nichols Point. There is a significant and concerning increase in vulnerability across the municipality in the developmental areas of language/cognitive skills and emotional maturity. There is still clearly a long way to go. Not all our children are ready for school when they begin Prep. When our children can move seamlessly from maternal and child health to playgroup, from playgroup to kindergarten, and from kindergarten

to school - they have better ability to be engaged in their education. We need to leverage our work off the existing and new reforms, that will remain permanent in our local service system, to strengthen learning outcomes for all children, particularly our most vulnerable. This includes Maternal and Child Health, Kindergarten Central Enrolment, Supported Playgroups, Best Start, School Readiness Funding and the impending roll out of subsidised three-year-old kindergarten for all children.

When our local services are easy to access and welcoming, families can engage and continue to engage. Having culturally safe, aware, affordable, quality learning programs promotes better opportunities for our children to learn. Families embracing the value of early childhood education, and services embracing families and carers as children's first and main educators, are pivotal to turning the curve on positive developmental trajectories for children.

It is important to build workforce development strategies across disciplines, so that anyone with a role that faces families and children, is well supported and skilled to do this important work. Our region, located over 560 km's from the state capital, is geographically isolated. This makes it harder to attract and retain early years staff. When we can't access quality staff or training, the local workforce is negatively impacted. When we don't have enough staff, the capacity, or availability of services shrinks. Despite these local challenges, we are lucky to have passionate and knowledgeable staff in the early years.

Evidence shows that the best outcomes for children occur when support services are built into universal platforms. Skilling our workforce so they can identify, intervene and refer families early to supports - is critical to preventing developmental delays. Empowering staff to use the levers we have, is key to achieving optimal development outcomes.

Table 7: Vulnerability in two or more domains summary - AEDC 2018

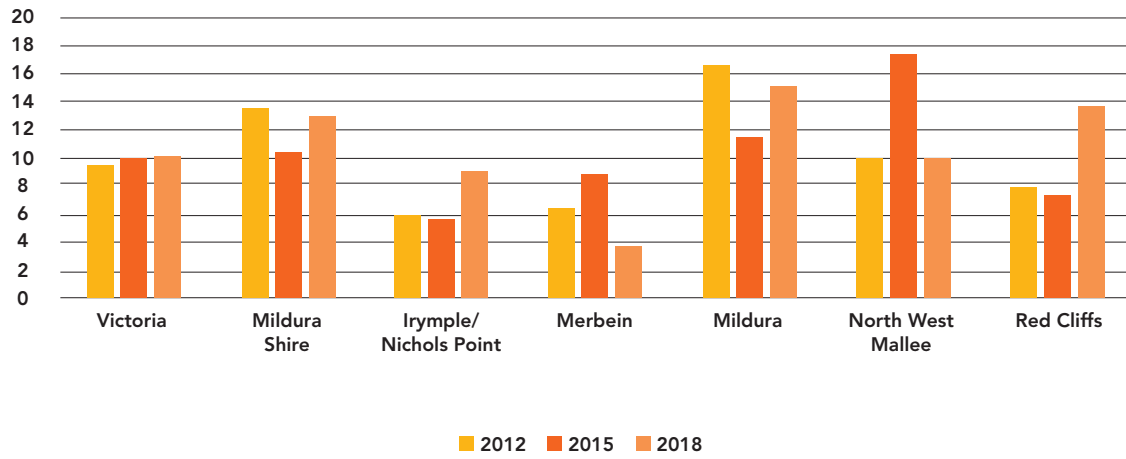


Table 8: Engaged in learning - State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018

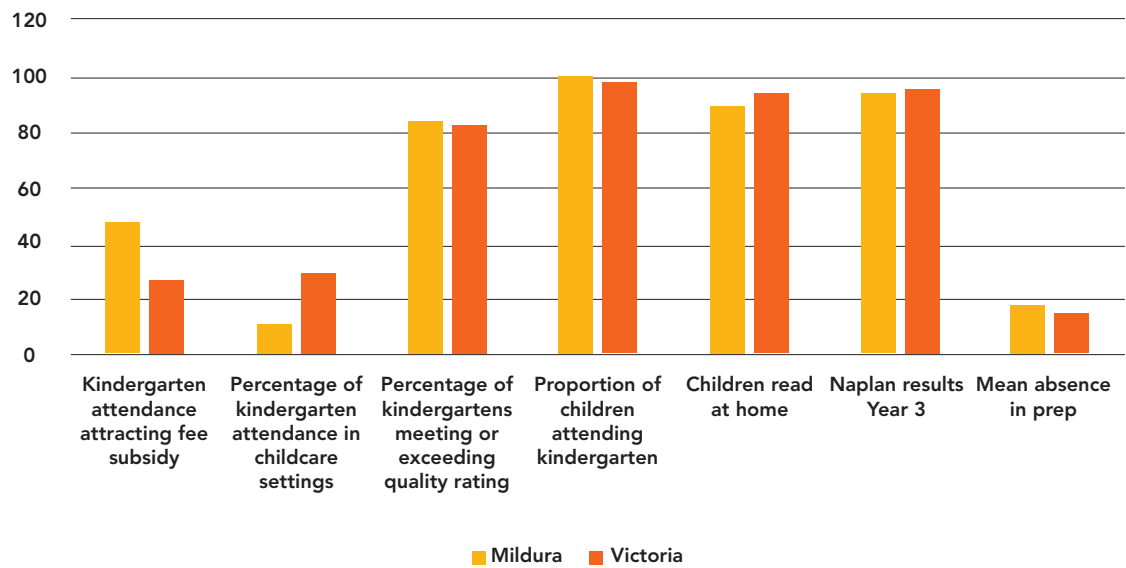
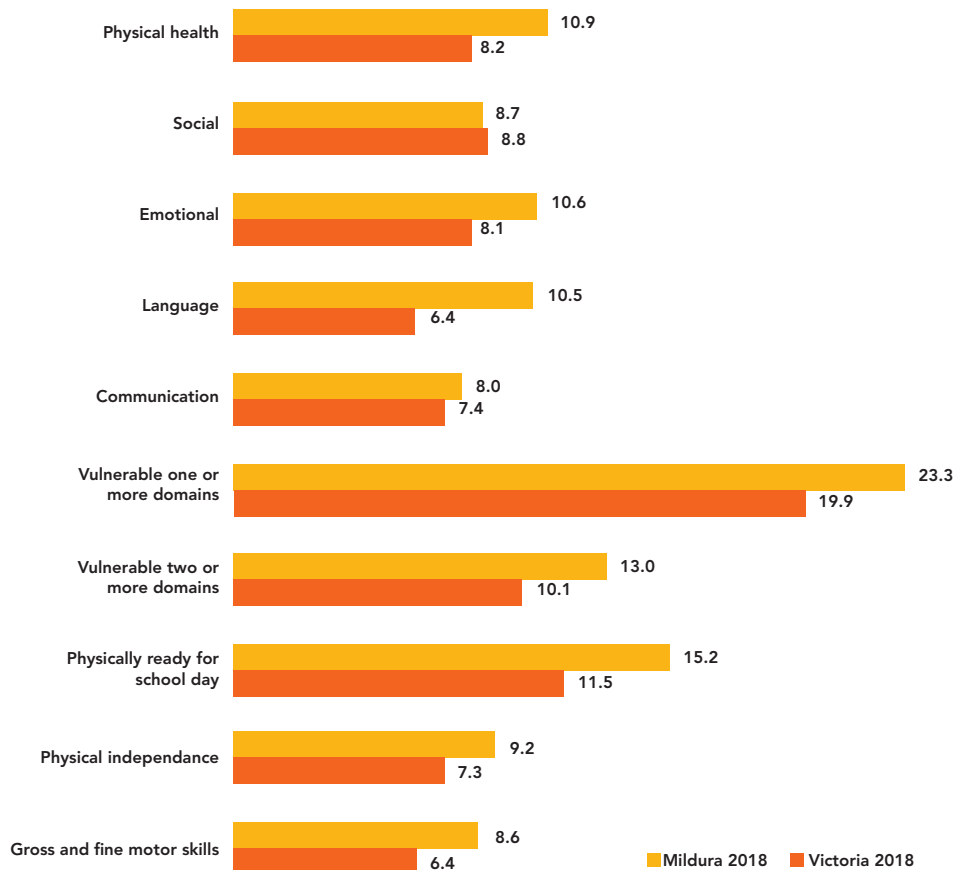




Table 9: Vulnerability in all development domains Mildura/Victoria - AEDC 2018



OUR PLAN OF ACTION: ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

Our goal: All families are empowered to support their children to be involved and successful learners across childhood

Our priority: Improving developmental outcomes for every child

Strategy:

- Develop a comprehensive language and early years literacy strategy so that all children can progress from learning to read to reading to learn
- Co-designing approaches to enhance home learning environments with community

- Support all early childhood settings to be culturally safe and responsive
- Respond to participation gaps in early childhood programs to enable easy transitions across childhood
- Increase awareness of how Maternal and Child Health, Kindergarten, Childcare & Playgroups support children to reach their full potential
- Develop and adopt a principles-based approach to building the capacity of the workforce so that every child and family feels understood, valued and included

Related Council Strategies and Plans:

Reconciliation Action Plan, Community Health and Well-being Plan, The Early Years Compact, Gender Equity Policy, Child Safe Standards, Developing Playground Strategy, LGBTIQ Inclusion Plan



Photo by Gina Babeth

NEST AREA 6: ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING

Participating includes opportunities to be involved with peers and the community, being able to have a voice and say on matters, and access to places, spaces and technology for social connections. Participating means children are supported in expressing their views, their views are considered, and they are involved in decision-making processes that affect them.



The voices of our children

- ☒ Children love to play games with friends such as "hide and seek or hunting bears in the forest:
- ☒ Children love playing and watching team sports such as football, soccer, netball, gymnastics and dance classes
- ☒ " The Easter egg hunt at the river where my mum took me – you had to find them and share them with people who missed out"
- ☒ Children love the natural environment
- Some children don't like parks that bore them and some public toilets
- Some children don't like noisy places "like inflatable world, the Aqua – coaster or the motor bike dirt track



Community conversations

What do you love about living here?

- ☒ Sense of community, social life and recreation

What do you think are the biggest issues facing this community?

- Equality
- Social responsibility

What do you think is causing these issues?

- Social norms

What can we do to make a difference?

- ☒ Increase our social awareness
- ☒ Help others
- ☒ Participate in the community
- ☒ Increase our sense of community
- ☒ Practice social inclusion



Data Snapshot

- ☒ Learning programs are increasing in quality
- ☒ Children are participating well in kindergarten
- ☒ Children are physically ready for school
- ☒ Good participation in Playgroups
- ☒ Good physical independence
- ☒ School readiness program is working well
- ☒ Well-developed motor skills
 - More children vulnerable in all five areas of developmental
 - More children vulnerable on one, two and more domains
 - Increased vulnerability in Mildura and Red Cliffs
 - Low NAPLAN results in year 3
 - Less children read to at home

HOW ARE WE DOING WITH ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING?

The community consultation work through Hands Up Mallee indicates that participation in community life is important to children and families. Community conversations reveal that the second most important thing families love about being here is their sense of community – with social life and recreation rating high. Families want their children to grow up with a sense of social responsibility and see this as one of the most important issues moving forward.

Children emphasised how they love to play with their friends – in team sports, in natural bush settings, in parks and playgrounds. They show clear ideas of how they want their community environment to be with ideas of cleanliness, beauty, fun, stimulation and imagination reflected in their voices.

Data from the State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018 and Early Childhood Development Census 2018 show many strengths to build on. Families and children feel more part of the community than their Victorian counterparts. They attend more civic events, are more part of organised groups and more involved in civic engagement.

There is a positive sign that overall, vulnerability in the developmental domain of social competency is reducing. Social competency is a key area that promotes confidence and civic engagement.

However, it is harder for some families to participate in community life – particularly if English is not their first language. Mildura has over 4,000 residents with a Non-English-speaking background, 690 of whom have arrived over the past two and a half years. For these families, settlement, transition and participation in community life is a journey that needs to be supported.

Community life has the power to add to our knowledge and resources, and to improve our everyday lives. Our community behaviour and values builds our social norms. These social norms help us to create a shared community vision and fuel public will. Children are part of our community. They have firm ideas about how they want to participate in community life. They express clear direction we should follow, when creating new and modifying existing spaces and facilities where children play and learn. They are never too young to contribute to our civic society, and to provide input into our planning processes, including our local community plans.

Table 10: Participation - State of Mildura Rural City Report 2018

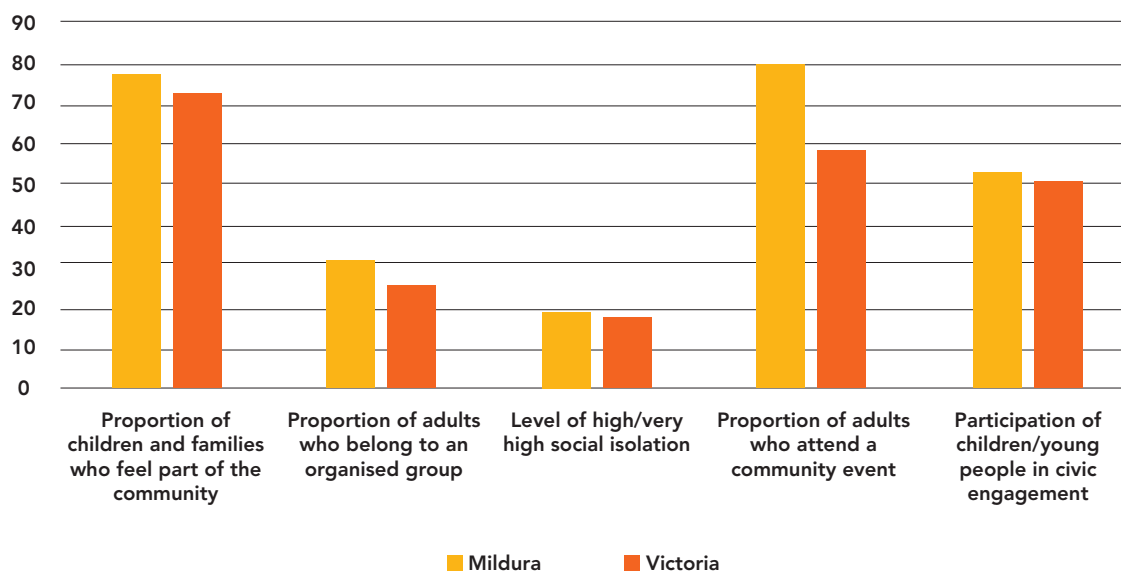
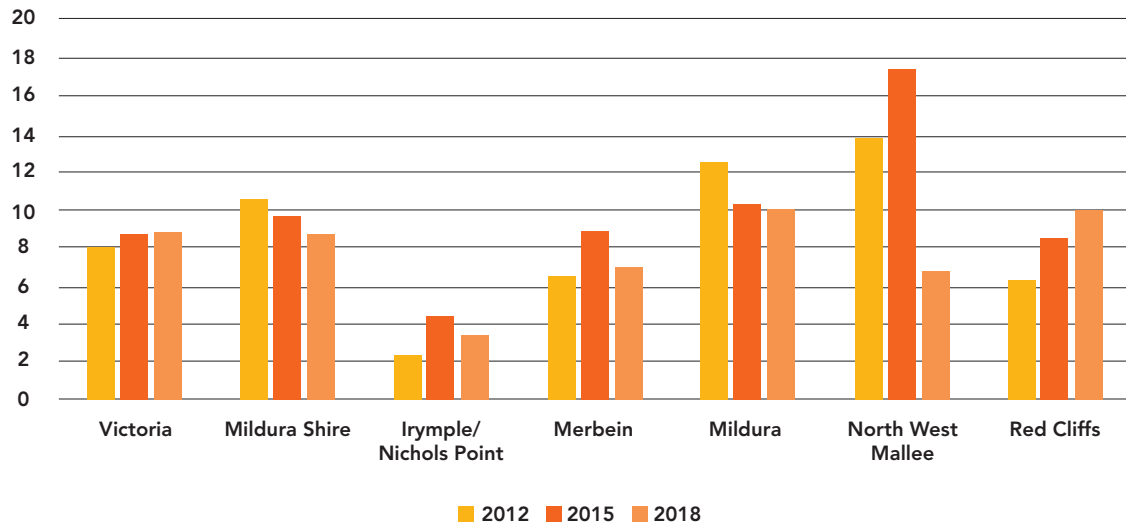


Chart 11: Development vulnerable in social competence - AEDC 2018



OUR PLAN OF ACTION: ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING

Our goal: Community spaces are safe and welcoming to children and families

Our priority: Expanding places and spaces that are welcoming to children and families

Strategy:

- Continue supporting all diverse families to settle, engage and transition into work, learning and to actively participate in community life
- Advocate that all new infrastructure and renovations cater for the needs of children – child safe, accessible, welcoming and culturally appropriate
- Ensure children's voices are embedded into an infrastructure plan that promotes early childhood learning through play - across technology, facilities, playgrounds, natural, and open spaces to meet current and future need

Related Council Strategies and Plans:

Reconciliation Action Plan, Community Health and Well-being Plan, The Early Years Compact, Gender Equity Policy, Child Safe Standards, Developing Playground Strategy, LGBTIQ Inclusion Plan, Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy, Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

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