

Municipal Early Years Plan

2023 - 2025



A young Indigenous Australian child is the central focus, crouching on a green lawn. The child has white body paint applied to their face, arms, and legs, and wears a headdress made of dried grass and feathers. In the background, another person is partially visible, wearing a black garment with a red and yellow patterned band. A red rectangular area on the left side of the image contains white text.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Shire of Campaspe is the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung and Yorta Yorta Peoples.

We respect and acknowledge their unique Aboriginal cultural heritage and pay our respect to their ancestors, descendants and emerging leaders as the Traditional Owners of this Country.

We acknowledge their living culture and their unique role in the life of this region.

Statement of Commitment to Child Safety and Wellbeing

Campaspe Shire Council is committed to the safety and well-being of children and is committed to creating and maintaining a child safe organisation, including places managed or owned by Council. All Council Officers, including employees, contractors, volunteers and Councillors have a legal and moral obligation to keep children safe and promote their best interests.

Campaspe Shire Council has a zero tolerance to child abuse. Council is committed to creating and maintaining a safe and friendly organisation where all children are valued and protected from abuse. All allegations and safety concerns will be treated very seriously and consistently, in line with our robust policies and procedures. We are committed to identifying risks early and removing and reducing these risks.

Our commitment to the safety of children is based on our duty of care and responsibilities to children and always acting in the best interests of children. The wellbeing and safety of children and young people in our care will always be our priority and we are committed to providing welcoming, culturally safe and accessible environments where children feel valued, empowered, listened to and considered in decisions that affect their lives. All children have the right to feel and be safe, be protected from harm and to be treated with dignity, respect and integrity regardless of their, or their families', age, gender, race, ability, health, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or social background.

We will ensure that child safety and wellbeing and protecting children from abuse is embedded in our organisational culture, reflected in our policies and procedures, and understood and practiced at all levels of our work.



Children and their families are supported to grow, learn and thrive in our welcoming and inclusive community.

We will achieve this through:

- Creating the best possible start to life
- Providing high quality, safe and accessible services
- Providing family inclusive places and spaces



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Acknowledgement of partners

Campaspe Shire Council would like to acknowledge the partner organisations that contributed to the development of the Campaspe Shire Municipal Early Years Plan.



A Message From the Mayor

I am delighted to present the Campaspe Shire Municipal Early Years Plan 2023-2025 to the community. This plan outlines our strategic direction to promote and influence positive outcomes for children 0-8 years of age and their families.

Campaspe Shire believes that children are a vital part of our community. We also recognise the valuable role that families and carers play in the positive development of children, along with playgroups, early learning centres, kindergartens, schools, local services and a diverse array of other community organisations and individuals.

Council acknowledges the importance of continued investment in the early years. It is committed to the safety, participation and empowerment of all children.

The plan has been developed through engagement with local service provider partners and the analysis of relevant policies, strategic plans, community engagement responses and demographic data. It aligns closely with the *Campaspe Shire Council Plan 2021-2025* vision and principles.

Our priorities for the Campaspe Early Years Plan over the next three years will focus on three themes;

1. **The best possible start to life**
2. **High quality, safe and accessible services**
3. **Family inclusive places and spaces**

On behalf of Councillors and Campaspe Shire Council, I invite you to be actively involved in the implementation of the plan and join us in achieving our Early Years vision:

Children and their families are supported to grow, learn and thrive in our welcoming and inclusive community.

Cr Rob Amos
Mayor



Introduction

The first eight years of a child's life, or what is known as the 'early years', provides the foundation for each child's growth and development throughout their life. It is a time where children's brains are developing rapidly and where they learn to communicate, think, problem solve and understand the world in which they live. It is also a time of physical growth and the development of both fine and gross motor skills. Further, it is a time where they learn to socialise and develop friendships.

How a child develops physically, emotionally and socially in their first eight years of life is dependent upon many factors including:

- Relationships with family, friends, early childhood educators and others
- Access to early learning education opportunities, e.g. playgroups, childcare, kindergarten and school
- Genetics
- Health – physical health and access to health care
- Nutrition
- Physical activity levels
- Family situation / experiences, e.g. access to housing, job security, financial security, safety and non-discrimination
- Broader environmental conditions, e.g. pollution and impact of natural disasters.

It is often said that "it takes a village to raise a child." Families, early years educators, schools, early years services, generic health and wellbeing services, sports clubs, arts / cultural groups, places of worship and others – the 'village' - all have an important role in helping our children to reach their full potential. The Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model supports this notion that the child is at the centre and learning and development is shaped by the environment and networks which surround them.

Campaspe Shire recognises that it has a unique role in helping to influence the health, wellbeing, education and development of children at a local level through its policy development, program / service planning and delivery, as well as its role in provision of, or advocacy for, community infrastructure. Guiding its work in this space are the core principles of prevention, equity, health and long-term social and educational outcomes for children. Council recognises that when it has a focus on the needs of children, it ultimately benefits the entire community.

All children and families should have access to affordable and appropriate early years services that meet their needs consistent with best practice frameworks such as the Victorian Early Years Learning & Development Framework (VEYLDF) and National Quality Framework and Standards. Council will advocate for access to services where gaps exist and work with suitable providers for direct service provision to its communities.

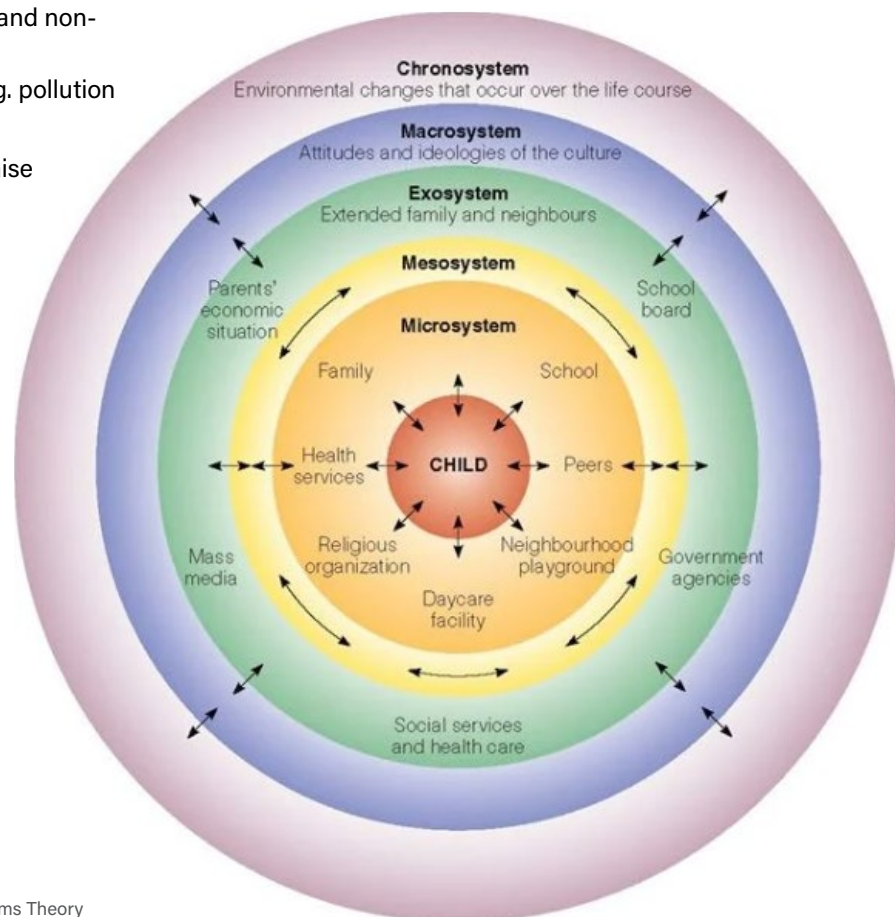


Image sourced from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory
- Simply Psychology

Since the previous Municipal Early Years Plan was completed, the State Government has undertaken sector reform (titled Best Start Best Life). As part of these reforms, it has increased the hours for three-year old kinder from five to 15 hours per week from 2022, increasing this to 15 hours per week by 2029 across the state. Another initiative is the Pre-Prep program. This involves four-year old kindergarten gradually transitioning to pre-prep between 2025 and 2032. By the completion of the roll-out, four-year olds involved in pre prep will be eligible for 30 hours of pre prep per week, which is double the current number of 15 hours per week of kindergarten. As kindergarten is also now subsidised for both three-year old and four-year old kinder, it is more accessible from a financial perspective for families. The impact of these measures and the ability for increased hours of kindergarten and pre-prep programs to be delivered across the municipality is a key focus for planning by the Shire's Early Years team.

Some other priority areas of State Government in the early years sector include:

- Prioritising the development of new kindergartens on primary school grounds to enable better access for families
- Promotion of gender equity to help reduce family violence
- Reforming the early years to enable a higher quality more equitable and inclusive early childhood system
- Encouraging respectful relationships
- Strengthened Child Safe Standards which are designed to promote the safety of children; prevent child abuse; and ensure that organisations and businesses have effective processes in place to respond to and report all allegations of child abuse.

This Plan sets out the community's vision, objectives, themes and goals relating to children aged 0 to 8 and their families. The vision, objectives, themes and goals contained in the Plan were developed in consultation with local service providers. The focus is to ensure that the community understands the importance of the early years and that families and carers have the support they need during this important developmental phase. We are committed to working with families, carers and local organisations, so that each child can grow, learn and thrive.



Council's Role in the Early Years

Campaspe Shire plays an important role in facilitating the growth and development of children, and in supporting their families and carers. Working in partnership with local service provider partners, Campaspe Shire's key roles in the early years are:

Planning and Coordination

Council plans for and identifies early years needs as they relate to council service delivery or to the wider service system that supports Campaspe families. This includes the coordination of central enrolment for most kindergartens in the Shire. It also undertakes a collaborative approach with local service providers to share information and expertise and to further develop skills and knowledge to build early years sector capacity.

Service Provision

Council delivers the Maternal and Child Health Service throughout the municipality and also early years services at Campaspe Community Children's Centre in Echuca and Rochester Early Learning. Council also delivers the funded Supported Playgroup program, along with Library service programs and events that are inclusive of children and families.

Facility Planning

Council maintains a range of existing dedicated early years infrastructure such as Maternal & Child Health centres, as well as community infrastructure which is used by children and families including libraries, play spaces, parks and recreational facilities. Council's planning and advocacy role aims to encourage relevant stakeholders to plan for and deliver child and family friendly places throughout the municipality.

Advocacy

Council lobbies and advocates to state and federal government and other relevant organisations so that the needs of children and their families are heard and addressed.

Strengthening Community Capacity

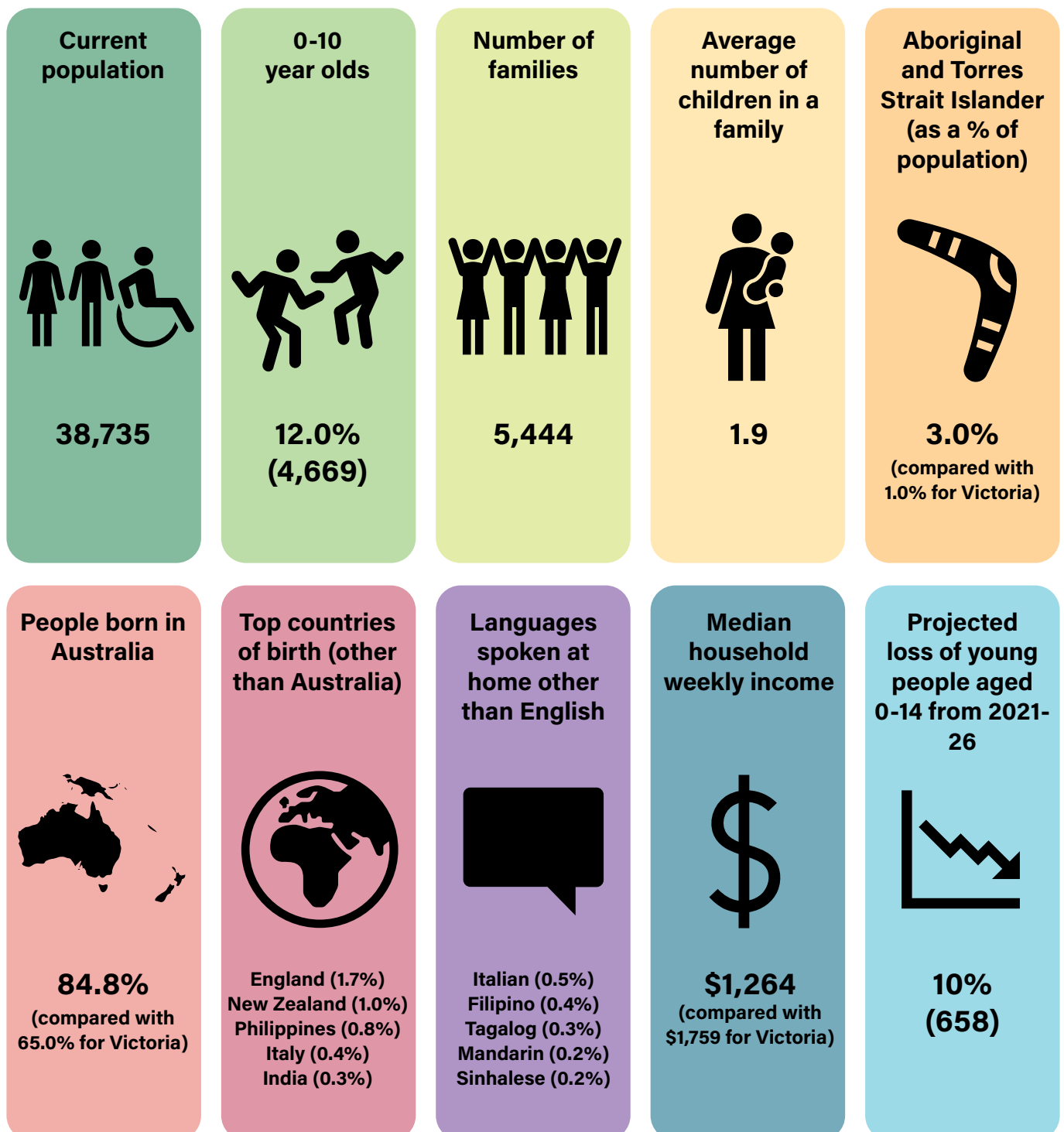
Council promotes participation by children and their families in decision making; provides information about services; and supports access to services where needed to build the capacity of families and carers and to enhance the development of children.



Children and Families in Campaspe Shire

Our Community

The Shire of Campaspe is situated in northern Victoria and covers an area of 4,519 square kilometres. Larger towns include Echuca, Kyabram, Rushworth, Rochester, Stanhope and Tongala. Our children live in a diverse range of settings, ranging from urban settlements through to rural properties.



The Health and Wellbeing of our Children

The Campaspe Primary Care Partnership (Public Health Unit)- Community Health and Wellbeing Profile (2020) and the Healthy Heart of Victoria (Healthy Loddon Campaspe) Active Living Census – Campaspe (2019) have been used to help inform the priorities of the Municipal Early Years Plan and will inform the development of annual implementation plans. These plans tell us that we are currently performing well in relation to birth weights, breast feeding rates, immunisation participation and kindergarten participation.

These plans also tell us that we need to address issues such as increasing awareness of how to prevent accidental injuries to children, preventing harm to children, reducing smoking during pregnancy, supporting families who experience financial stress, helping to prevent hospitalisations from conditions such as asthma, reducing school absenteeism, improving children's early development (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills), encouraging healthy eating and improving children's sense of worth.



Early Years Snapshot

The following table provides a snapshot of how children and families are faring. Information has been sourced from Campaspe PCP Community Health & Wellbeing Profile (August 2020); Campaspe Shire kindergarten enrolment statistics; Campaspe Shire Maternal and Child Health service statistics; the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; the Australian Early Development Census; and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Maternal and child health (MCH) participation	Birth rate	Aboriginal maternal and child health (MCH) participation
Enrolment in the MCH service in 2022-2023 was 101.61%, however the participation rate in key developmental visits was 69.36% (although the four-week visit ranked much higher at 95.43% participation rate).	There were 378 birth notices in 2022-23 in Campaspe Shire. The average birth rate from 2019/20-2022/23 is 391.	Aboriginal children's MCH participation rates increased from a rate of 69.54% in 2018-19 to 80.90% in 2022-23.
Breastfeeding rates	Immunisation	Family stress
Higher proportion of infants fully breastfed on discharge and at 2 weeks, 3 months and 6 months of age, compared to the Victorian average.	A higher percentage of children fully vaccinated in Campaspe Shire compared with Victoria at 1 year of age (95.5% vs 94.3%) 2 years of age (92.8% vs 91.2%) and 3 years of age (97.0% vs 95.5%).	Higher proportion of low-income and welfare dependent families with children in Campaspe Shire compared with Victoria (10.4% vs 8.4%) and a much higher proportion of children whose parents report high levels of family stress (13.4% vs 9.9%) compared to the Victorian averages.
Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)	Childhood obesity	Family violence
31.4% of children in Campaspe are developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the AEDC domains (notably social competence, physical health and wellbeing and communication skills) compared with 19.9% of Victorian children. 19.7% of Campaspe children and 10.2% of Victorian children are vulnerable on two or more domains.	Almost one quarter of Victorian children and (24.9%) of Australian children aged 5-17 years were overweight or obese in 2017-18 (17% overweight and 8.1% obese). The rates were similar for boys and girls.	There were 1,967 reported incidents of family violence per 100,000 people in Campaspe in 2019 compared with 1,282 per 100,000 people in Victoria. Of the reported family incidents in Campaspe in 2019, 10% of children and young people were considered to be affected, compared with 8% of Victorian children and young people.
Smoking during pregnancy	Kindergarten participation	Child abuse
17.1% of mothers in Campaspe smoked during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy compared with 9.4% of Victorian mothers.	426 children enrolled in funded four year old kindergarten in 2022, with a participation rate of 95%. 348 children enrolled in funded three year old kindergarten in 2022, with a participation rate of 92%. 48 children enrolled in Early Start Kindergarten.	Campaspe children aged 0-17 (per 1,000), have notably higher rates of child abuse investigations than Victorian children (31.7 vs 19.4) and similar levels of child protection substantiation (11.5 vs 11.4). Child first assessments were much higher in Campaspe than Victoria (15.0 vs 10.1), along with children who are the subject of care and protection orders (9.2 vs 5.4), and children in out of home care (8.5 vs 5.0) compared to state averages.

Strategic Context

Strategic directions related to the early years feature in numerous Council strategies and plans and will help guide us in the development of our annual Implementation Plans. A summary of each of these documents can be found below. More details of strategic documents can be found in the background document that accompanies this plan.

Access and inclusion plan (2020-26)

The focus of the Access and inclusion plan is to “demonstrate Council’s commitment to equal participation for all people across Campaspe and develop a road map to support the Shire to become more accessible and supportive.”

The nine communities of priority identified in this plan are: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disability, youth, LGBTIQ+, people with a mental illness, women, culturally diverse groups and people with social disadvantage.

Active transport strategy (2019)

The aim of this strategy is to “dramatically increase the amount of people walking and cycling in Campaspe.”

A key focus area of the strategy is to create an environment where kids feel safe and confident to walk and cycle to school and continue travelling actively for life.

Campaspe Shire Advocacy Priorities (2021-25)

The purpose of this document is to highlight the priority infrastructure and policy needs for Campaspe between 2021 and 2025.

One of the key priorities is to advocate for funding to support the co-location of kindergartens with already established primary schools across the municipality.

Campaspe Prevention / Health Promotion Work Plan (2021-2022)

This document sets out the four key priority areas that organisations working in the prevention space or health promotion in Campaspe are working towards, i.e.

- Increasing healthy eating
- Increasing active living
- Reducing tobacco related harm
- Prevention of family violence through gender equity.

Council Plan (2021-2025)

The Community Vision contained within the Council Plan is: “Our places are vibrant and sustainable; our people are strong and supportive.”

The three principles within the plan are: inclusion, respect and sustainability.

Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan (2021-2025)

There are numerous actions contained within this plan that are of relevance to the broader community, of which children and families are a cohort. Those that specifically relate to children 0-8 years of age are as follows:

Focus area 1 - Active and Healthy Lifestyles:

- Work with schools to hear the ideas of young people and leverage in-school and extra-curricular activities to promote active living
- Early years health systems and health measurement protocols are monitored to identify communities of concern

Focus area 2 – Socially Connected and Inclusive Campaspe

- Work to ensure cultural safety by ensuring community spaces are safe for all community members
- Embed the principles of trauma informed practice in early years services

Focus area 5 – Food Secure Campaspe

- Improve school access to primary prevention programs
- Support schools to integrate food awareness within STEM programs

Department of Education and Training (2020) Kindergarten Infrastructure Services Plan (KISP)

This plan identifies a shortfall in three- and four-year old kindergarten places in the Shire of approximately 83 in 2023, increasing to 138 places by 2029.

By 2029, Echuca is anticipated to have a shortage of 138 kindergarten places; Kyabram 29 places; Lockington / Gunbower 9 places, Rochester 12 places and Rushworth 0 places.

The demand for kindergarten will increase as a direct result of the Victorian Government’s Better Start, Better Life reform. This demand will be reflected in the 2023 KISP (currently under development).

Community and Service Provider Engagement

Community Engagement

Feedback from community consultations undertaken for the development of the Council Plan of relevance to the early years has been used to help provide an evidence base for the development of this Plan. Key focus areas for consideration include:

- The need for enough childcare and kindergarten places available across the Shire – i.e. access to sufficient childcare and kindergarten places to meet demand
- The need for access to a range of early years services are accessible to all, e.g. allied health services
- The need for accessible and diverse early years services for all children and families
- The need for access to programs and services that are affordable
- The need to ensure that there are opportunities for parents to learn new skills and to build their capacity, e.g. provision of First time Parent groups and "Smalltalk" parenting program
- The need to ensure that there is a continued focus on gender equity / healthy relationships in the early years sector within the stakeholder groups e.g. Campaspe Early Years Network Group
- The need to ensure that there is safe access to programs, services and facilities via active transport options
- The need to promote physical activity opportunities and ensure that quality play opportunities are provided throughout the Shire.

Service Provider Engagement

A workshop was also held with local service providers to review the previous Municipal Early Years Plan and to identify priorities for the new plan.

Some of the broad strategic directions for the collective early years' service system in Campaspe include:

Our Practice

We acknowledge families' experiences and circumstances are diverse and understand:

- The need to adapt and target priorities where required to achieve positive health and wellbeing outcomes for children
- That early years' services and support services have a clear perception of the community's needs and challenges and that we are responsive and respectful

- The strength achieved through a greater focus on participatory service planning and genuine community engagement principles with children and families
- The options to explore different ways of delivering services, e.g. utilising telehealth
- How we provide clear referral pathways and additional supports where required to enable families to access specialist services
- The importance of and advocate that the voices of children and their families are heard and understood
- The need to build the knowledge and skills of families and people who work in the early years sector to enable children to thrive
- The importance of promoting gender equity
- The need to highlight and implement the Child Safe Standards
- The benefits of working collaboratively with other relevant services and organisations,
- The need to advocate for greater access to specialist early years services for local families.

Information / Communications

- We need to enhance our online capability to promote events, programs and services for children and families
- Campaspe Shire Council's commitment to the Child Safe Standards is promoted.

Places and Spaces

- Child Safe Standards signage is displayed as a visual message in public spaces.
- Consider specific cultural and physical features of family spaces and all access amenities that meet the needs of families
- The value of quality play experiences features predominantly in new and upgraded play spaces, providing opportunities for children to actively explore, create, imagine and participate within the infrastructure and the variety of elements which support children's development and abilities
- Provision and promotion for active play (e.g. pump parks, trails, etc) and participation in arts / culture, library programs, community events.

Council Plan

The Campaspe Shire Council's vision and planning principles have been used to guide the development of the vision and themes contained within the Municipal Early Years Plan. Council's vision and three planning principles are as follows:

Council Plan Vision:

Our places are vibrant and sustainable; our people are strong and supportive




Principle 1: Inclusion	Principle 2: Respect	Principle 3: Sustainability
Everybody is included and has something to contribute to the community. Nobody is left behind. Everybody should have an equal chance in life.	Respectful relationships are the norm between individuals and within communities. We respect the diversity in our community, and in particular, we respect the contribution of our older residents, our young people, and those with Aboriginal cultural heritage.	This is at the heart of everything we do. Sustainability is a key factor in planning for future land use, advocating for additional educational facilities, approving a development, or making decisions around how we use our infrastructure



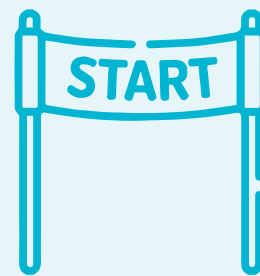
Early Years Framework

The Municipal Early Years Plan is built around a vision and seven guiding principles. From the vision and planning principles, three key themes, objectives and related goals have emerged. Together, the vision, guiding principles, objectives, themes and goals create the framework for the development of annual Implementation Plans.

Annual plans will outline the actions that Council intends to take with its partners towards the achievement of the vision and goals. It is important to note that many of these goals are dependent upon a collaborative approach between Council and its strategic early years partners.

Early Years Vision	Children and their families are supported to grow, learn and thrive in our welcoming and inclusive community		
7 Early Years Guiding Principles:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusion – we welcome and include children and families in all aspects of community life. Respect – we respect the diverse needs of children and families and their right to be heard and understood. Diversity – we acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of families that live in our community. Equity – we recognise that not all of our children and families have access to the same resources and will ensure that we address barriers to participation and access, using a strength-based approach. Quality – we advocate for and promote the importance of quality programs, services and facilities for children and families. Safety – we promote and encourage early years services to be physically and culturally safe for children and their families. Connection – we provide opportunities for children and families to develop strong community connections and a sense of belonging. 		
3 Themes:	 <p>The best possible start to life</p>	 <p>High quality, safe and accessible services</p>	 <p>Family inclusive places and spaces</p>
3 Objectives:	Our children have the opportunity to grow, thrive and learn in a rich, nurturing and inclusive environment.	Our collaborative early years services help to enhance the health and wellbeing of children and families living in our community.	Our public spaces and places are welcoming of children, accessible for people of all abilities and inclusive of diversity.

Theme 1 - The Best Possible Start to Life



Our children have the opportunity to grow, thrive and learn in a rich, nurturing and inclusive environment.

Goals for the next three years

1. Families and carers are supported to develop the skills and knowledge to enable children to be healthy, happy and to reach their potential.
2. Children's voices are valued, heard and acted upon for all matters of relevance to them.
3. Children are actively encouraged and supported to participate in a diverse range of experiences, activities and events to build upon their interests and strengths.
4. Children's connection to place, culture and community are respected and celebrated.
5. Gender equity and respectful relationships are promoted in the early years.



Theme 2 - High Quality, Safe and Accessible Services



Our collaborative early years services help to enhance the health and wellbeing of children and families living in our community.

Goals for the next three years

1. Families and children are consulted with and involved in co-design of services so that service providers better understand their diverse needs, circumstances and challenges.
2. Families are aware of the range of existing early years services available to them within Campaspe Shire and online.
3. Families can access early years services and specialist support services that are required for their development, health and wellbeing, or are provided additional supports to access these services.
4. Gaps in service delivery are identified by service providers and the community and either these gaps are addressed or service providers advocate for these gaps to be addressed.
5. Early years services maintain partnerships and networks in order to share information, enhance skill levels and advocate for improved services.
6. Work collaboratively to identify and support families in relation to child safety.



Theme 3 - Family Inclusive Places and Spaces



Our public spaces and places are welcoming of children, accessible for people of all abilities and inclusive of diversity.

Goals for the next three years

1. Community places and spaces are inclusive of children and diversity.
2. Community places and spaces are safe (both physically and culturally) and accessible for children and families.
3. Activities that occur within community places and spaces are affordable for children and families wherever possible.
4. New or upgraded community places and spaces are co-designed by children and families where relevant.
5. Early years facilities and schools are co-located where possible to improve access to these services.





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