

Mount Alexander Shire

Early Years Plan

2022-2026

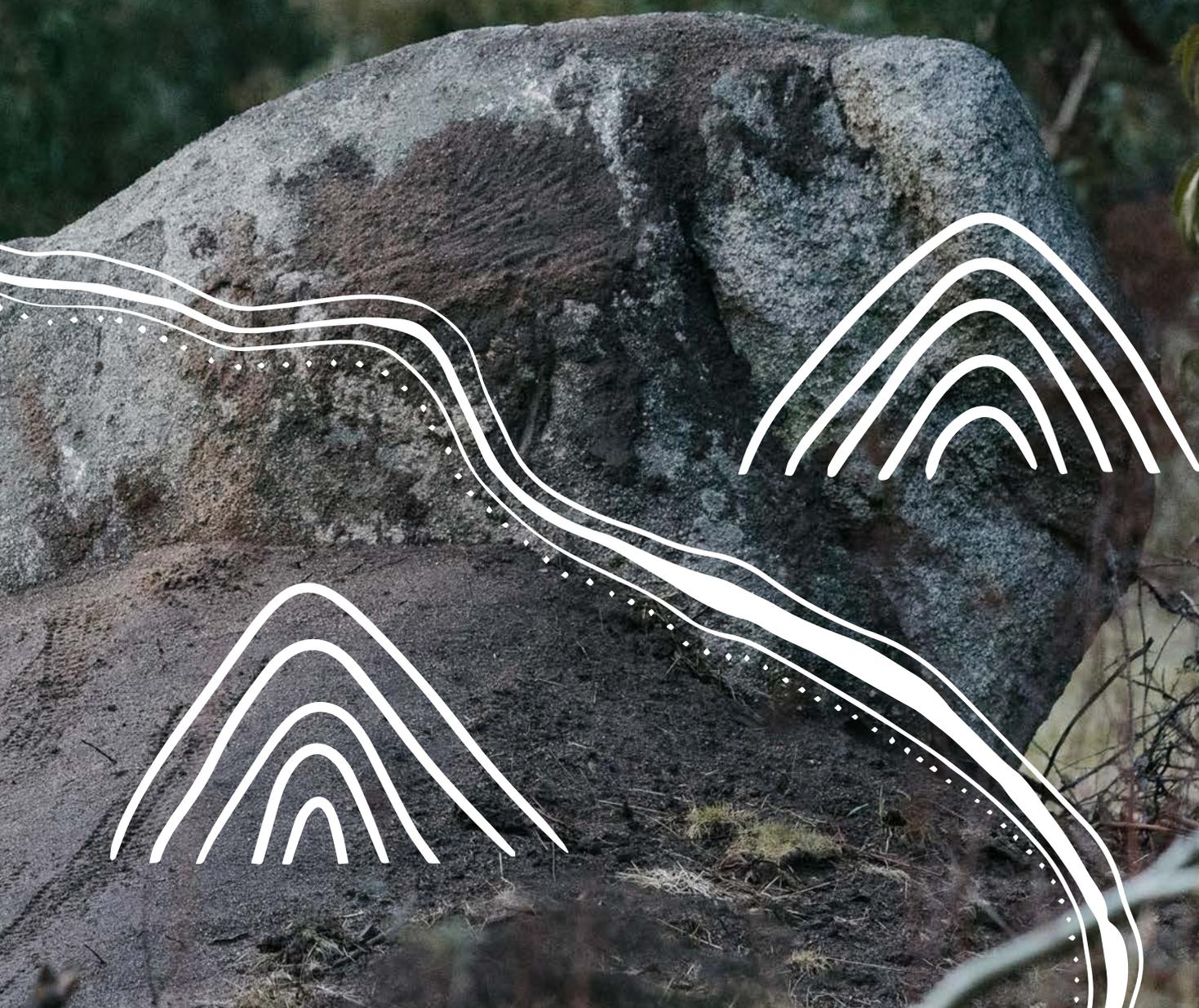
Working together for a healthy, connected shire



Acknowledgement of Country

Mount Alexander Shire Council acknowledges that the traditional custodians of this land, the Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung peoples, proudly survive. We acknowledge their continued practise of custom and their close cultural, spiritual, physical, social, historical and economic relationship with the land and waters that make up their country, which includes Mount Alexander Shire.

Council recognises the Victorian Government's Recognition and Settlement with both the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and the Taungurung Land and Waters Council.



Contents

About this Plan	1	Priority Area 1: Belonging	14
Our vision	2	Priority Area 2: Supporting	15
Our priorities	2	Priority Area 3: Collaborating	16
Why the early years matter	3	Priority Area 4: Connecting to Place	17
Council's role	4	Implementation costs	18
Early Years Steering Group	6	Review and evaluation	18
What's changed	6	Risk analysis	18
Who did we hear from?	7	Appendix 1. Policy Context	19
What's working	8	Appendix 2. Mount Alexander Shire Council Child Safe	
Issues	11	Statement of Commitment	20
Our Priorities	13		



About this plan

This plan has been developed to support children aged 0-8 living in Mount Alexander Shire.

Its focus is on their wellbeing, their health, their growth and their learning. It aims to support their families; the services they use and need; the communities around them; and the environment where they live and enjoy growing up.

We are deeply committed to ensuring our towns and communities are inclusive and welcoming for children and families, and this Plan reinforces Council's endorsement of the Child Friendly Cities and Communities Charter in 2019.

This plan has been developed in consultation with children across Mount Alexander Shire. It is an aspirational document, and sets out the new priorities for Council, service providers and partners to explore over the next four years.

We recognise the early years are the most influential stage of a person's development. Committing to support children aged 0-8 means giving our youngest residents the best chance to lead healthy and fulfilled lives.

Artwork by Art - Castlemaine North Primary School





Our vision

Our shire supports child-friendly communities where children thrive and belong.

Our priorities



Belonging

Our **kids** are happy, included and safe



Supporting

Our **families** are supported by their community and their services



Collaborating

Our **service providers** are working together to make life easier for families



Connecting to place

Our **natural environment** opens a world of play, care and creativity

Why the early years matter

The early years of children's lives have a **profound impact** on their learning and development for the long term. From birth to eight years, children's developing brains undergo rapid change. This is when children have the **greatest opportunities** to develop neural pathways for learning and are also most vulnerable to negative experiences.¹

The first eight years of a child's life are influential in the quality of their whole life. Research shows that children who have low cognitive and language skills early

in life tend to continue to remain below the average for their age.² The emotional, social and physical development of a child also has a direct effect on their overall development and on the adult they will become.

By getting it right in the first eight years, recognising the importance and value of investing in our children, we are also investing in improving the social and economic outcomes for our community and our future.

Artwork by Scarlett - Castlemaine South Kindergarten



¹ Victorian State Government. 2016. Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. p.2

² See Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research & Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. 2012. Reading to Young Children: A Head-Start in Life

Council's role

In December 2019 Council endorsed the Child Friendly Cities and Communities Charter. This means Council is committed to creating child-friendly towns, spaces and experiences across Mount Alexander Shire. In addition, the Council Plan 2021-2025 supports a healthy, connected and inclusive community.

- For children 0-8, this looks like accessible and coordinated services, safety regardless of identity or circumstance, mental and physical wellbeing, connection to community and inclusion.
- It also reflects in our efforts to maintain, improve and celebrate our places and spaces for children and families, in harmony with nature.

The Mount Alexander Shire Early Years Plan 2022-2026 will guide how Mount Alexander Shire Council, partners, service providers and the community can work together to maintain child-friendly communities where children thrive and belong.

This plan is guided by the pillars, objectives and strategies identified in the Council Plan 2021-2025. In particular, we recognise the mission “Working together for a healthy, connected shire.”

Table 1 summarises the relevance of these pillars to the four priority areas identified in this plan:



Council Plan

Intersection with Early Years Plan

Pillar	Relevant objective	Belonging	Supporting	Collaborating	Connecting to Place
A healthy, connected and inclusive community	Services in our community are accessible and coordinated				
	Our community is inclusive and connected				
	Our community feels safe, regardless of identity or circumstance				
	Our community is supported to be physically and mentally healthy				
A flourishing environment for nature and people	We are maintaining, improving and celebrating our places and spaces				
	We are focused on the housing affordability challenge in our community				
A resilient and growing local economy	We are supporting continuous learning and personal growth				

Early Years Steering Group

The Early Years Steering Group is a partnership between organisations at the heart of supporting children in Mount Alexander Shire.

The group was established to help steer collective action on early years programs.

It will be Council's key partner to help implement this plan, and includes representatives from:

- Department of Education and Training
- Early Years Improvement Branch and Koori Education Support
- Local childcare centres and kindergartens (including YMCA Ballarat)
- Disability services
- Parenting services
- Dhelkaya Health
- Family Services and Early Intervention Services
- Castlemaine Library
- Mount Alexander Shire Council
- Parent community members.

What's changed

Before we engaged widely on this plan, we reflected on what we already know; from Government announcements, to census data and national trends.

A lot has changed for children since our last Early Years Plan – globally and here in Mount Alexander Shire. These are all factors which have shaped the experience of local kids and, by extension, this plan. Here's a snapshot:

- Two years of social isolation, remote schooling and pandemic.
- Our region is getting hotter and drier, with floods and bushfires becoming more common,³ increasing the effect on children who are more vulnerable in emergencies.⁴
- Roll-out of free, universal three-year-old kinder; 15 hours per week.
- Transition of four-year-old kinder to pre-prep; moving to a government-funded 30-hour week program of play-based learning.
- Although significant population growth in Mount Alexander Shire has been in older age groups, the increasing demand on health services affects families.
- More complex behavioural challenges among children locally.⁵
- More children are at risk of falling behind in language and cognitive skills at school.⁶
- But more children are physically healthy and are on track in their communication skills.⁷

³ Victoria State Government. 2019. Loddon Campaspe Climate Projections.

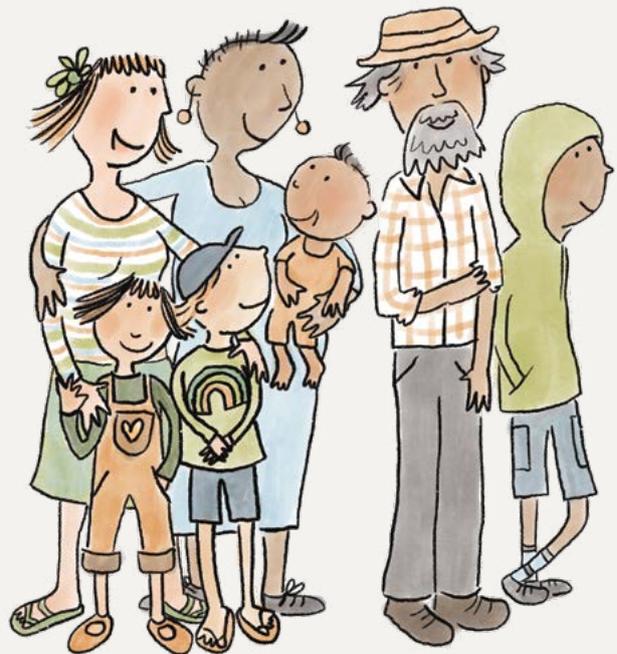
⁴ Victoria State Government. 2013. Emergency management planning for children and young people

⁵ Australian Early Development Census. 2021. Community Profile: Mount Alexander. p.9 ⁶ Ibid. p.12 ⁷ Ibid

Who did we hear from?

This plan has been developed in deep consultation with our community. Most importantly, we listened to our kids – in schools and kinders across our communities. This involved:

- 227** children aged 3-8 in 5 towns across the Shire from 8 kinders and schools
- 111** respondents to the parent/carer survey
- 12** key informant interviews with service providers and partners
- 5** pop-up consultation sessions in local playgrounds
- 1** Council workshop across 6 teams
- 2** focus groups with parents/carers



We thank the children and educators from the following schools and kindergartens who participated in the development of this Plan:

- Newstead Preschool
- Castlemaine South Kindergarten
- Castlemaine Kindergarten
- Maldon Primary School
- Elphinstone Primary School
- Castlemaine North Primary School
- Harcourt Valley Primary School
- Winters Flat Primary School



Artwork by Louis - Castlemaine South Kindergarten

What's working

Many families are engaging with local services

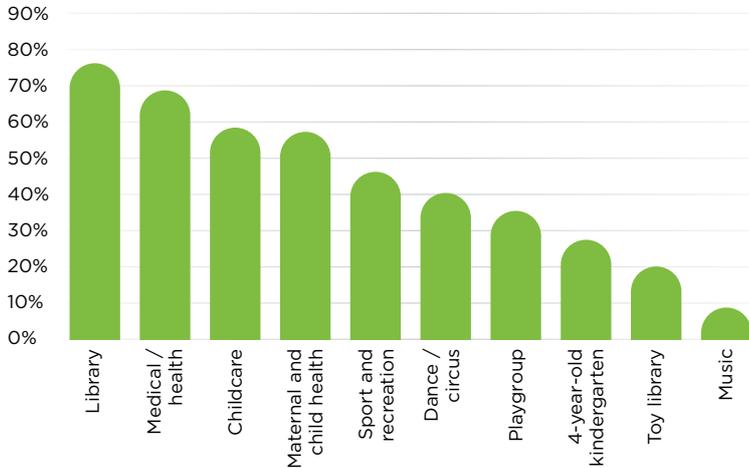


Figure 1. Main services used locally in past 12 months by 111 parents/carers.

There's plenty for kids and families to love about being in Mount Alexander Shire. Local families value the community, natural environment, the lifestyle and the playgrounds enjoyed by their children.

What makes Mount Alexander Shire a good place to live for families and children

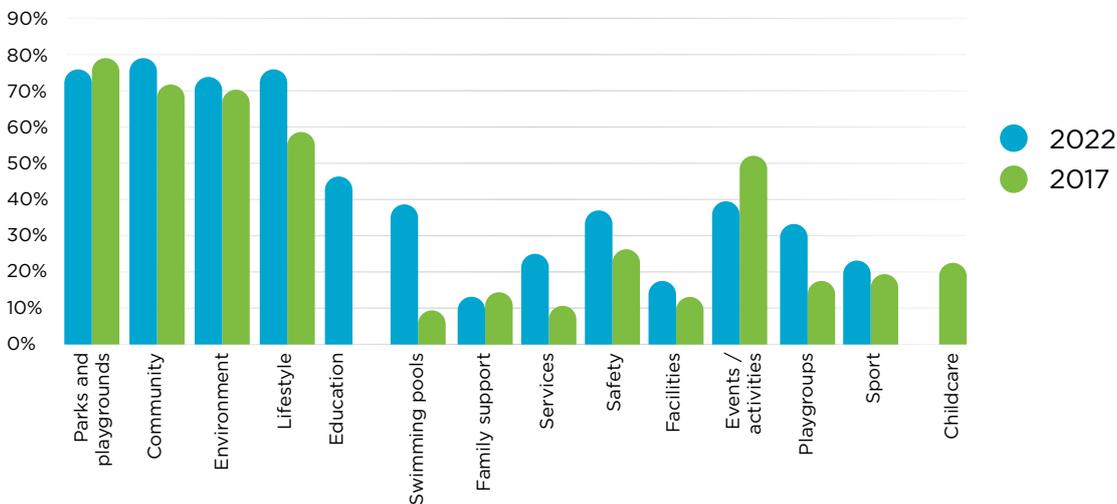


Figure 2. What makes Mount Alexander Shire a good place to live for families and children? Comparison of responses cited by parents/carers in 2017 and 2022.

The children we spoke to believe the playgrounds, their families, the bike tracks, swimming pools and the local environment are the best things in the shire.

Artwork by a student from Castlemaine North Primary School

What's great about being a kid in Mount Alexander Shire

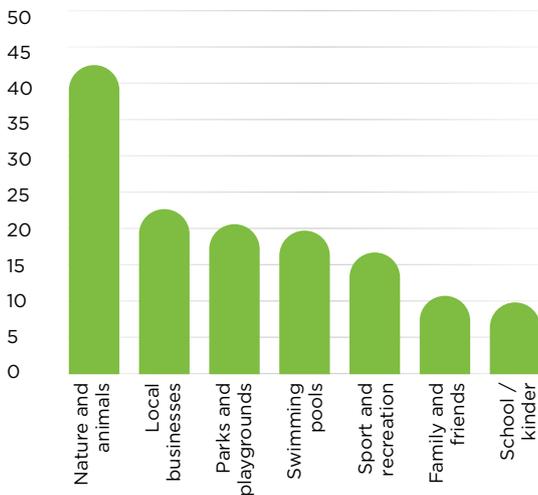


Figure 3. What's great about being a kid in Mount Alexander Shire? Percentage of response cited by 227 children.

Many children aged 3-8 are passionate about the natural environment's value to them. In an unprompted question about life in Mount Alexander Shire, 43% of children mentioned or drew animals and nature as the thing that makes it great to be a kid growing up here. 48 children (21%) suggested that what would make their life better was environmental action. Their answers included planting more trees, not cutting down trees, better road safety for wildlife and creating homes for wildlife. Improving playgrounds and creating splash parks, waterslides, fairgrounds, circuses and trampoline parks also rated highly, highlighting a need for more play infrastructure and fun spaces for kids.



Artwork by Eddie - Castlemaine Kindergarten

What would make being a kid in Mount Alexander Shire even better? What's missing?

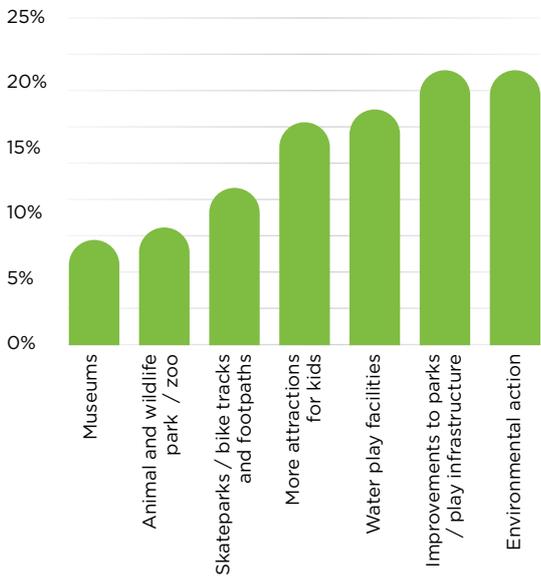
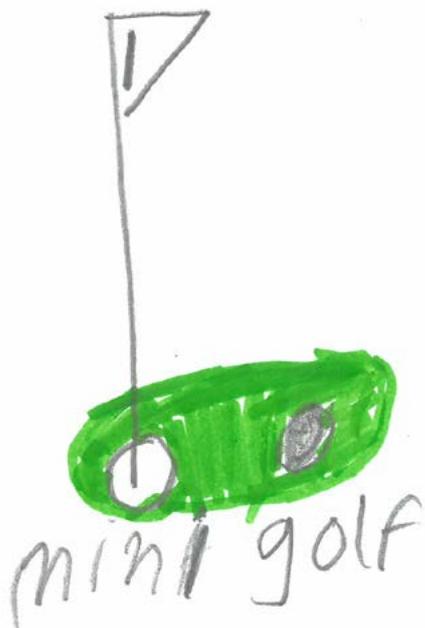


Figure 4. What would make being a kid in Mount Alexander Shire even better? What's missing? Percentage of response cited by 227 children.



Artwork by Thomas - Maldon Primary School

Issues

We know the pressures on many families have grown in recent years. These are the big issues we heard this plan needs to address.

There is a shortage of childcare and outside of school care hours (OSCH) options for families.

78% of survey respondents (compared to 37% five years ago) indicated childcare and OSCH was a challenge for families. 21% of respondents indicated they haven't been able to access this service locally.

"We have to go to a centre in Bendigo as the hours are more accessible" (survey respondent).

"This is an equity issue and not fair. Families have a right to choose their local kinder and also access care on other days" (service provider interviewee).

It is difficult for families to access the medical and health support their children need locally.

Nearly 40% of survey respondents felt access to services was an issue for local families. Services struggled to keep pace with a spike in Mount Alexander Shire's population - growing by nearly 8% over the past five years. This means more people needing GPs and disability support and more families needing specialised paediatric, and occupational and speech therapy services.

"We can't even get in to see a local GP" (survey respondent).

Many parents lack established support networks in the area.

Extended family, friends and community connections can strengthen children's sense of belonging and provide critical support to parents in times of need. Social isolation was the most common concern mentioned by service providers interviewed - making up nearly one fifth of all issues raised. Covid, trauma, population growth, transportation and economic disadvantage all play a part individually, or layered across one another. Kids also told us they want better footpaths so they can ride more easily and more safely.

"Social isolation is a big issue for young parents - it has definitely gotten worse" (service provider interviewee).

It's hard for families to find out what's on and where they can get help for their children.

Parents often rely on local networks - schools, kindergartens and friends - to share events, activities and advice for support options. This informal information flow can be difficult to access for new arrivals to the community and those less connected through circumstances.

"There's no central place to find out what's going on in Mt Alexander for families, like school holiday programs, festivals, events for kids" (survey respondent).

Parents are feeling stressed.

Insecure housing and the rising cost of living are putting many local families under pressure. Parental stress impacts children's learning, emotional regulation and overall wellbeing.

"Some families renting have been forced further out to afford housing where there are little or no transport options" (service provider interviewee).

Covid has hugely impacted our children.

Nationally, 41% of children surveyed in 2021 reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their wellbeing, and around one in five children reported that they were feeling more down, scared or worried than they used to.

"I'm seeing more developmental challenges now; from social and emotional to learning and behavioural" (service provider interviewee).

Our early learning professionals need more care and support.

Local teachers and early childhood educators are stressed; balancing increased and more complex needs among children and staff shortages. Expectations are high among frontline early years workers - while turnover is increasing.

"In the past few months 3 educators have left. Since January, 6 educators have left, many back to Melbourne" (service provider interviewee).

⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission. 2022. *Covid-19 and kids' wellbeing*



Our priorities

Our vision for this plan is for child-friendly communities where children thrive and belong.

This means Council will continue to deliver its core services to support children in the shire; including maternal and child health, maintaining playgrounds, pools and parks and supporting access to kindergartens, library services and sport and recreation opportunities.

In addition, this plan sets out **19 new actions**, across **four priority areas**.



Belonging

Our **kids** are happy, included and safe



Supporting

Our **families** are supported by their community and their services



Collaborating

Our **service providers** are working together to make life easier for families



Connecting to Place

Our **natural environment** opens a world of play, care and creativity

Each action states the responsible agencies for its implementation. Those where Council is responsible will be led by the Early Years Project Officer. Those actions where the Early Years Steering Group is responsible will be collaborative responses initiated and shaped by the steering group and supported by Council. Each action has also been defined as either High, Medium or Low priority in which to be implemented. This prioritisation is not reflective of importance, rather the proposed order in which actions should be delivered.

The plan is an adaptive document that recognises that as a community we are already greatly contributing to a shared vision. It also acknowledges that there are many stakeholders who will develop their own strategies that will complement and support different areas of this plan.



Priority Area 1: Belonging

Our kids are happy, included and safe. They feel valued and know where to ask for help.

What we want to achieve (Objectives)	How will we do it? (Actions)	Responsibility	Priority
1.1 We live in a child-friendly Shire for all children	1.1.1 Conduct a child-friendly audit of services, events and spaces in the shire, including for children with a disability	Council	Medium
	1.1.2 Support services, clubs and businesses to be child-safe and welcoming for families, and encourage play where possible	YMCA, Dhelkaya Health, Library, Council	High
1.2 Children have a say in the decisions that impact them	1.2.1 Formalise consultation with children to help inform our community's decision-making on issues that matter to them	Early Years Steering Group	Medium
1.3 Children have opportunities to play and learn throughout the year	1.3.1 Create more play opportunities for children, increasing winter programming and incorporating Aboriginal Children's Day in a calendar of events	Council	Medium
	1.3.2 Improve access to, and supports for local community and supported playgroups	Early Years Steering Group	Low
	1.3.3 Support and promote language, music and rhyme programming for ages 0-3 across the shire	Council, Library	Medium



Priority Area 2: Supporting

Our families are supported by their communities and services

What we want to achieve (Objectives)	How will we do it? (Actions)	Responsibility	Priority
2.1 Families can access the support they need, when they need it	2.1.1 Advocate for increased provision of child-focused health services, including paediatric, speech therapy, psychiatric, physiotherapy and disability support	Early Years Steering Group	High
	2.1.2 Support efforts to increase childcare places throughout the shire (including kinder and OSHC) and state funding for infrastructure upgrades where required	YMCA, DET, Council	High
	2.1.3 Coordinate the delivery of parent education and support programs for our families to improve child wellbeing, child safety, healthy eating and family resilience	Council, Library, Dhelkaya Health	Medium
2.2 Families are aware of the support and services available to them locally	2.2.1 Establish centralised information resources that are accessible and open for children's activities, services and supports locally	Council	Medium





Priority Area 3: Collaborating

Our services are working together to make life easier for families

What we want to achieve (Objectives)	How will we do it? (Actions)	Responsibility	Priority
3.1 Services are connected and place-based	3.1.1 Support child-friendly co-located service models that better meet the needs of children and families in the Shire	Early Years Steering Group	High
	3.1.2 Coordinate opportunities for local early years professionals to connect and share practice	Council, YMCA, DET	Medium
3.2 Services work together to tackle barriers to families thriving	3.2.1 Identify ways to enhance our kinder enrolment processes (e.g. ensuring there is no wrong door for enrolments)	Council, YMCA, DET	Low
	3.2.2 Ensure that local strategies to combat insecure housing consider the needs of children	Council	High
	3.2.3 Support our early years service providers and organisations to ensure safety for children at home and in the community (including child safe and/or family violence awareness)	MCH, Dhelkaya Health, DET	Medium



Priority Area 4: Connecting to Place

Our natural environment opens a world of play, care and creativity

What we want to achieve (Objectives)	How will we do it? (Actions)	Responsibility	Priority
4.1 Our natural environment is a space for play and learning	4.1.1 Identify opportunities to expand nature-based education and play, including bush kinder programs	DET, Council	High
	4.1.2 Support Traditional Owners to share Aboriginal culture with local children ⁹	Council, YMCA, DET	Medium
4.2 Children care about our environment and creatures	4.2.1 Identify needs and opportunities to support conservation bush-based education programs – such as wildlife warriors, junior rangers and animal welfare	Council	Low
4.2 Our natural environment is a space for active recreation	4.2.1 Identify where walking and cycling paths would benefit children and families and ensure their voices and needs are prioritised in footpath upgrades and play space renewals	Council	High



⁹ For more on opportunities see Djaara. 2014. Dhelkunya Dja Dja Dja Wurrung Country Plan 2014-2034.

Implementation costs

The implementation of the Mount Alexander Shire Early Years Plan 2022-26 will be predominantly undertaken with existing Council resources, and through the in-kind and financial support of key stakeholders as required.

External grants and resources will also be explored as and when required.



Review and evaluation

The outcomes in this plan will take time to achieve. Being both systemic and individual in nature, monitoring their progress is crucial to the plan's success.

The ongoing success of the Early Years Steering Group will be critical to this process. We will meet quarterly to review progress, discuss opportunities and set a course for actions.

Regular conversations, forums and bulletin updates will ensure that the community and key stakeholders are regularly informed of the plan's progress and successes, and that each achievement is acknowledged, shared and celebrated.

This approach will be supported by an annual review process that will allow for actions to remain responsive to new and emerging priorities and needs. Annual statements will also be produced to share the findings of each review and provide an outline of the focus for the following year.

In December 2026, an evaluation of the plan will be undertaken with learnings and outcomes used to inform the development of future early years planning.



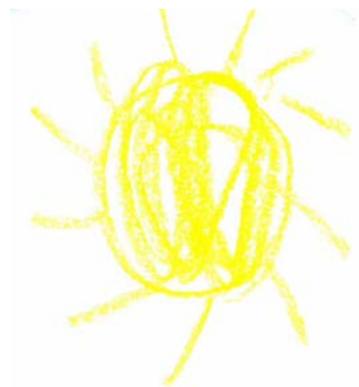
Risk analysis

The main risks identified as impacting the implementation of the plan are: the inability to deliver the actions, sustained engagement of key stakeholders, community ownership of the plan and the ability to source external funding when required. These risks will be addressed by:

- Maintaining an Early Years Steering Group to oversee the implementation of the plan, including the regular review and delivery of actions;
- Ensuring key stakeholders are co-signatories of the plan and developing regular communications and updates on the plan's delivery and achievements;
- Developing a plan on a page summary of the aims, objectives and actions in easy English terminology and designing the look and feel of the plan with a community focussed lens; and
- Identifying actions that require external funding and those that can be undertaken within the existing funding and support of key partners.

Artwork (bird) by Delilah - Castlemaine North Primary School
Artwork (child on bike) by Felix - Maldon Primary School

Appendix 1. Policy Context



The development of this plan has been guided by current data, research and feedback received from our community. It has also been developed within the context of local, state, federal and international legislation, policies and strategies which has included, but is not limited to the following:

Local	<p>Mount Alexander Shire Council Plan 2021-2025</p> <p>Mount Alexander Shire Council Child Safe Policy 2022</p> <p>Mount Alexander Environmental Strategy, 2015-2025</p> <p>Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) 2021-2025</p> <p>Loddon Campaspe Integrated Transport Strategy</p> <p>Mount Alexander Shire Council Middle Years Plan 2020-2023</p> <p>Mount Alexander Shire Council – Let’s Play 2014-2024: Investing in Play, 2014</p> <p>Reconciliation Plan 2020-2023</p> <p>Walking and Cycling Strategy 2010-2020</p> <p>Youth Engagement Charter 2013</p>
State	<p>Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, Victorian Government 2016</p> <p>Healthcare that counts: A framework for improving care for vulnerable children in Victorian health services, Victorian Government, 2017</p> <p>Free from violence: Victoria’s strategy to prevent family violence, Victorian Government 2018-21</p> <p>Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, Victorian Government</p> <p>Child, Youth and Families Act 2005, Victorian Government</p>
Federal	<p>Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children, Australian Government, 2021-2031</p> <p>Belonging, Being and Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework, Australian Government 2009</p> <p>A stronger, fairer Australia: national statement on social inclusion, Australian Government 2009</p> <p>Shaping our Future: A ten year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high quality children’s education and care workforce, 2022-2031, Education Services Australia</p>
International	<p>Child Friendly Cities Initiative, UNICEF 2009</p> <p>Convention of the Rights of the Child, United Nations 1989</p>

Artwork this page by a student from Castlemaine North Primary
 Artwork opposite by Delilah - Castlemaine North Primary School

Appendix 2.

Mount Alexander Shire Council Child Safe Statement of Commitment

Mount Alexander Shire Council is committed to the prevention of harm and abuse to children and young people and will work in accordance with the Victorian Child Safe Standards.

We recognise our legal and moral responsibilities in keeping children and young people safe from harm and promoting their best interests. We commit to ensuring that a culture of child safety is embedded into our practices and processes and that all Councillors, employees, volunteers, contractors, agency staff, consultants and students over the age of 18 understand that the safety of children and young people is everybody's business.

Every child and young person accessing our organisation and its services has the right to feel and be safe.

We have zero tolerance for child abuse and will treat all complaints and allegations seriously and immediately.

We take a risk management approach in line with the Risk Management Policy to minimise or eliminate the potential for child abuse or harm to occur.

We embrace diversity and inclusion and in doing so we recognise that all children and young people, regardless of their gender, race, religious beliefs, age, disability, sexual orientation, family background and social background, have equal rights to protection from abuse.

We commit to the cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and children and young people from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds, and to the provision of a safe environment for children and young people with a disability, as well as other vulnerable groups of children and young people.

We create environments where all children and young people have a voice and are listened to, their views respected and they contribute to how we plan for, design and develop our services and activities. We are committed to the physical, emotional, psychosocial and cultural wellbeing of all children and young people.

All Councillors, employees, volunteers, contractors, agency staff, consultants and students over the age of 18 have a responsibility to understand and activate their role in preventing, detecting, responding and reporting any suspicions of child abuse to the relevant authorities and in maintaining a child safe culture.

We do not tolerate racism or discrimination and expect that Councillors, employees, volunteers, contractors, agency staff, consultants and students over the age of 18 will act on all incidents of racism.



DARREN FUZZARD
Chief Executive Officer



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