GREATER SHEPPARTON

DRAFT BEST START EARLY YEARS STRATEGIC PLAN

2026-2031

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

"We, the Greater Shepparton City Council, acknowledge the Yorta Yorta Peoples of the land which now comprises Greater Shepparton. We pay respect to their tribal Elders, we celebrate their continuing culture and we acknowledge the memory of their ancestors."

Contents

Message from the Mayor 4

Introduction 5

Our Community 6
- Some quick statistics
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population
- Cultural diversity
- Parents, Caregivers and Families

Evidence and insights that guide our approach 8
- Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2024
- Consultation – what did our community tell us?
- Learnings from the Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Plan 2020-2025
- The Bioecological Model and Centre for Community Child Health – Core Care Conditions for Children and Families: Implications for policy and practice
- More for Children - MOR framework and community jigsaw
- Links with the Greater Shepparton Council Plan 2025-2029

State and National Policies and Frameworks 11
- Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)
- Best Start Best Life (BSBL)
- Early Years Strategy 2024-2034
- ARACY The Nest Wellbeing Framework

Vision, priorities and strategic areas 14
- Vision
- Priority age group
- Priority cohorts
- Priority communities
- Strategic area 1: Home (families, parents and caregivers) – where nurturing and learning starts
- Strategic area 2: Services – accessible, innovative and working together
- Strategic area 3: Community – making connections and building the village

Delivery approach and leadership 22
- Annual Action Plan
- Best Start Model for Improvement Framework – Plan Do Study Act (PDSA)
- The Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Alliance and related workgroups
- Council's role in the early years
- 'Value Add'
- Monitoring and Reporting

Acknowledgements 24

Appendices 25

References 31

Message from the Mayor

As Mayor of Greater Shepparton - and as a parent of young children - I am proud to introduce the Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Strategic Plan 2026–2031. This is our sixth combined strategic plan, bringing together Best Start and the Municipal Early Years Plan.

Greater Shepparton is a family-oriented municipality, recognised for its high-quality facilities, services, attractions, and opportunities that make it an ideal place to live, work and raise children. We are proud of our rich cultural diversity and heritage, with a population nearing 70,000 and the largest Indigenous community outside of metropolitan Melbourne.

While we celebrate the many strengths and assets of our region, we also acknowledge the challenges faced by some families and the impact these can have on early childhood development and family wellbeing. As a community, we must take collective responsibility for what the data reveals about the wellbeing of our children and act decisively to improve outcomes.

This Plan outlines three strategic focus areas, along with clear outcomes and measures, to guide our efforts over the next six years.

Council proudly plays a major role in the delivery of early years services in the municipality, and this Plan will help guide our continued efforts to provide quality education and health services for our youngest citizens and their families.

Greater Shepparton City Council Mayor, Councillor Shane Sali

Introduction

Every day over 200 babies are born in Victoria . In Greater Shepparton, our birth rate sits between 800 and 900 each year . All of these children are born with the hope that they grow, learn and flourish. To ensure they reach developmental milestones and have the opportunity to achieve their full potential, essential supports are required across the community, the service system, and within the home and family environment.

The significance of the first 1,000 days of life—and indeed extending into the first 2,000 days—cannot be overstated. During this formative period, the experiences, interactions, and foundations established, shape lifelong development, health, and wellbeing.

Since 2003, Greater Shepparton has proudly been a Best Start site. This program is now firmly embedded within the local universal early years system, driving innovation, reshaping services to improve access and participation, enhancing the use and sharing of local data, and strengthening collaboration among providers.

Greater Shepparton City Council (Council) plays a pivotal role in investing in and delivering health and educational early years services across the municipality. Working in partnership with families, children, the broader community, and key stakeholders, Council is committed to providing high-quality, responsive, and innovative programs and services that enable children to thrive. Plans and frameworks that guide this work include:

- Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Plan 2026-2031
- Greater Shepparton Council Plan 2025-2029
- Early Years Operation and Reforms department operational plan (includes Best Start, Best Life reforms)

The Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Strategic Plan 2026-2031 (hereinafter referred to as 'the Plan'), sets out a framework and shared commitment to contributing to the raising of children in our municipality, nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by responsive services and strong communities.

Whilst the Plan covers children aged 0 to 6 years across the municipality, there is a particular focus on the ages of 0 to 3 when brain development and growth is at its most rapid. We have also agreed to focus on certain population groups, cohorts and communities where our local data tells us need is at its highest, or where we have the best opportunity for impact and positive change.

This new Plan, which includes three strategic areas of action, has been developed in consultation with the local community and service providers, as well as a review of what current data and research tells us about early childhood development, family functioning and service delivery in our municipality. Reflections and learnings from our previous plan have also been considered, as have state and national frameworks and policy that are leading the way.

Our Community

Nestled in North East Victoria, along the banks of the Goulburn and Broken rivers, Greater Shepparton is the fifth largest regional city in the state. We boast one of the most culturally diverse communities in Victoria, having the largest Aboriginal population outside of metropolitan Melbourne and over 30 different cultures residing in the area.

Since 2020 our community has experienced significant health, environmental and economic events (COVID, 2022 flood and cost of living crisis) which has impacted on the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of our community, especially our youngest residents and their families.

Some quick statistics

The 2021 Census tells us in Greater Shepparton :

Total Population
68,409

6.0% Aged 0-4 years

6.6% Aged 5-9 years

More Kids 0-9 Years than Regional Victoria

41.4% of households were made up of couples with children

17.5% of households were one parent families

3.9% of residents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people

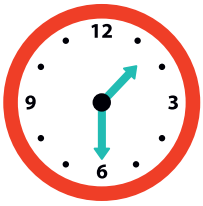
17.4% born overseas

17.6% people speak a language other than English at home

30,143 people were employed

57% Full Time

32% Part Time



Socio-Economic Index (SEIFA)
944

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population

Greater Shepparton is home to the largest First Nations population in regional Victoria and deeply values the richness of its culture and history. The strong physical and spiritual connection to land, family and community is a protective factor, guiding parents and caregivers as they raise their boori.

Council recognises and respects the Traditional Owners of the land, and since 2019 has delivered a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) that sets out its vision and commitment towards reconciliation. Many local services, organisations and Best Start Early Years Alliance partners also have a RAP in place. Through the Best Start Early Years Strategic Plan 2026-2031, we acknowledge the critical importance of listening to and working alongside our Aboriginal community and providers to ensure delivered programs and services are culturally safe, respectful and welcoming.

Cultural diversity

Greater Shepparton has one of the largest regional settlement populations in Victoria, made up of over 30 nationalities and more than 50 languages spoken in the region. Between 2023 and 2025, 468 new arrivals were settled in Greater Shepparton through the Humanitarian Settlement Program .

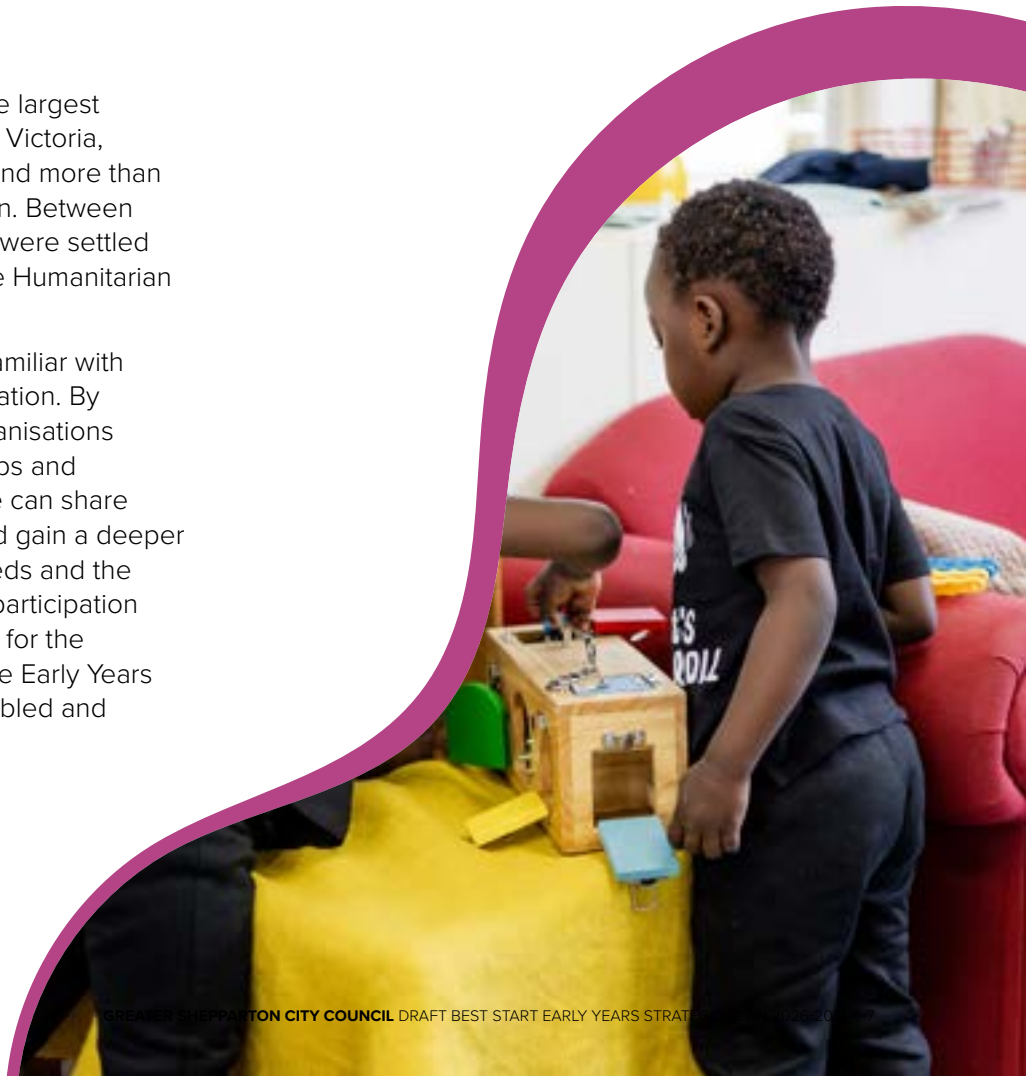
Many multicultural groups are unfamiliar with our early years services and education. By partnering with programs and organisations that already hold close relationships and trust within these communities, we can share important program information and gain a deeper understanding of their cultural needs and the barriers that affect access to and participation in services. Our selection as a site for the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Early Years Outreach initiative has greatly enabled and progressed this work.

Parents, Caregivers and Families

Families come in many forms and can mean much more than biological relationships. It is about the people we feel connected to through love, support, and shared values.

For the Plan, a family is defined as anyone a person considers to be their family.

Families include many different adults who provide children with love, care and guidance. Using the terms parents and caregivers helps recognise this diversity and acknowledges all the important adults who support a child's upbringing. The Plan uses the terms 'parents' and 'caregivers' together and interchangeably.



Evidence and insights that guide our approach

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2024

Collected every three years, the AEDC is a population measure of how well children have been supported and developed in the years prior to school.

Greater Shepparton now has seven sets of data (2008, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021 and 2024), including specific Aboriginal Community Profiles and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse profiles.

Our most recent results (2024) paint a concerning picture. We have seen a significant decline since 2021 in percentage of children 'on track' in 4 out of 5 domains, and the percentage of children considered developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains is the highest it has been since the first national collection in 2009.

This has prompted discussions about why this is – 'what is contributing to these results and how can we best respond'? Open and honest conversations about what needs to change locally are required if we want to shift trajectories in future years. Best Start is committed to sharing the AEDC Community Profile and increasing awareness and knowledge, so there is a shared ownership for responsibility and change. The 2024 AEDC results have been a key factor in identifying priorities for the Plan, including the decision to identify 'developmentally at risk' as one of our focus cohorts.

Consultation – what did our community tell us?

A community consultation process was undertaken to capture ideas and input from parents, community members, and service providers.

A series of questions were posed to explore what is working well in supporting parents and children's development within our community, as well as to identify areas where gaps remain and opportunities for better collaboration lie. The feedback gathered through this process was carefully collated and has directly informed the development of the Plan. While certain issues—such as housing availability and the broader cost of living—fall outside the scope of the Plan, many of the challenges and opportunities raised are within our capacity to address. These have been recognised as key areas of focus in shaping the new Plan. A summary of the main feedback is included at appendix 2.

Strategic plans of other local initiatives were also considered, and conversations with key stakeholders were held to identify opportunities for alignment and collaboration. The Plan cannot exist in isolation from others as a great deal of our work relies on partnerships, good will and learning from each other.

Learnings from the Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Plan 2020-2025

Whilst the previous plan was impacted significantly by COVID and then the 2022 floods, there has still been some great outcomes as well as key learnings that we take forward.

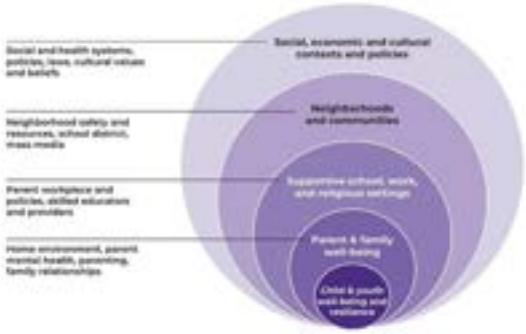
A central strength that continues is the interagency relationships that exist across Greater Shepparton, and a commitment to collaborate for the benefit of the community. Where possible we need to 'value add' to already good work rather than duplicate.

Upon review and reflection, it became evident that any future measures of success require greater precision. The broad indicators used previously limited our ability to assess progress effectively.

We also acknowledged that, given our scope and available resources, it is unrealistic to expect change across the entire municipality. Instead, focusing on specific cohorts, population groups, and communities where need is highest and appetite for change is strong, offers the best opportunity to achieve meaningful and measurable impact, and sustainable change.

The Bioecological Model and Centre for Community Child Health – Core Care Conditions for Children and Families: Implications for policy and practice

The bioecological model is based on the idea that the relationships children have with parents and caregivers impacts their development – and that these relationships are affected by environments like their work, school, and community settings, which are in turn affected by broader social, cultural, and policy conditions. These many layers of relationships and environments interact with each other – ultimately influencing how children develop and become resilient. This theory of human development was originally proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner and Stephen J. Ceci in 1994.



Example of a Bioecological Model (Center for Child and Family Well-being, University of Washington)

In June 2024, the Centre for Community Child Health released a paper describing the core care conditions (key features in the social and physical environments that are important for optimal development and functioning) that children and their parents need to flourish. It challenges practitioners and policy makers to consider all of these conditions in the delivery of programs and services, rather than focusing purely on outputs or outcomes.

A list of core care conditions are included under the broader themes of:

- Core care conditions for children
- Core care conditions for parents and caregivers
- Shared core care conditions for children and families

The visual representation as a bioecological model links the core care conditions to the six outcomes of The Nest. A copy can be found at appendix 3.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model and the Core Care Conditions paper influenced our thinking when deciding on the three strategic areas of our Plan (which focus on the environments children and families live in and the relationship between each), where we have the best opportunity to influence change, and how to visually represent the links between each.

More for Children - MOR framework and community jigsaw

Led by Professor Sharon Bessell from the Children's Policy Centre at the Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, More for Children is a program of transformative research that aims to understand children's experiences of poverty in order to act.

More for Children is driven by the vision that all children have material basics (M), opportunities (O), and strong and supportive relationships (R) – MOR framework. It aims to understand the ways in which poverty shapes and constrains children's lives, the systems and services that need to change, and how we can better support children to be healthy, happy and live free from poverty[5].

Based on the MOR Framework, the MOR jigsaw identifies the themes (or pieces) that children describe as mattering most in each dimension (appendix 4). The MOR jigsaw provides communities with a child-led, place-based means of understanding which pieces are in place, which are missing and where action needs to be taken.

The research that led to the MOR framework and jigsaw was with children aged between six and 16 years. However, both the MOR framework and jigsaw are applicable to children during the first 2000 days. They also help to bridge support in the early years to children as they begin school.

Links with the Greater Shepparton Council Plan 2025-2029

The Council Plan is a shared commitment to building a resilient, inclusive and forward thinking municipality. It has incorporated the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan within the document, ensuring that health equity and wellbeing are central to all decisions.

It includes five strategic priorities:

- Economy
- Infrastructure
- Liveability
- Environment
- Your Council

Under each of these strategic priorities are indicators, focus areas and actions. The BSEYP has strongest links with the strategic priority of 'Liveability' (demonstrated in appendix 1), and through our work we will contribute to the overarching goals of this area.

[5] More for Children: Child-Centred Indicators of Multidimensional Poverty More for Children Discussion Paper 1 https://childrenspolicycentre.org/latest-news/more-for-children-childrens-experiences-ofpoverty-in-australia/

State and National Policies and Frameworks

Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)

The VEYLDF is a guide for early childhood professionals to work together more effectively with other professionals, children and families, to achieve the best outcomes for every child. It identifies five learning and development outcomes for all children from birth to eight years:

- identity
- community
- wellbeing
- learning
- communication.

Eight evidence-based practice principles have been identified to guide practitioner practice and create engaging and inclusive environments. These are:

- Reflective practice
- Partnerships with families
- High expectations for every child
- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Equity and diversity
- Assessment for learning and development
- Integrated teaching and learning approaches
- Partnerships with professionals

Our Plan has synergies with these learning and development outcomes and practice principles, and through the implementation of the programs and activities under the three strategic areas, we hope to have an influence on these outcomes by the time children commence early education, and during their time at kindergarten.

Best Start Best Life (BSBL)

The state Government's BSBL reform aims to provide all Victorian children with two years of funded kindergarten prior to school, including 15 hours of three year old kinder by 2029 and 30 hours of 4 year old kinder (Pre-Prep) by 2036. In addition, 50 Victorian government owned and operated early learning centres will be established, including one in Greater Shepparton (to open Term 1, 2026), and a commitment to building kindergartens on or near school sites. This reform agenda and the work to be carried out locally to reach the 2036 milestones has been acknowledged and included in this new Plan.

Early Years Strategy 2024-2034

The Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 is a national framework to improve outcomes for children, as well as their parents, caregivers and communities, through better co-ordination and collaboration across early childhood programs, policies and services.

The Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 has four priority focus areas:

- Value the early years
- Empower parents, caregivers and families
- Support and work with communities
- Strengthen accountability and co-ordination

The strategic areas of our Plan align strongly with these four priorities, and we recognise the work that needs to be carried out locally for children in our community to thrive in their early years.

ARACY The Nest Wellbeing Framework

The Nest© was developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and recognises every aspect of a child's life as integral to preventing diseases, intervening early, and ultimately creating the right conditions to thrive.

The Nest© recognises six connected areas that support children and young people to have the best start in life and to reach their full potential.

Our decision to focus on children who are 'at risk' is also supported by The Nest© framework that notes 'it is possible to have a greater overall impact by reaching a lot of people who may be at the lower level of risk, than by intervening with a small group who are at higher risk.'

Vision, priorities and strategic areas

Vision

The vision of Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Plan 2026-2031 is: All children in Greater Shepparton are given the best start in life through empowered and strong families, responsive services, and inclusive communities.

The three strategic areas and outcomes identified within the Plan have been determined through a comprehensive consideration of research and evidence regarding the needs of children and families, the knowledge and expertise derived from local providers, the perspectives provided by parents and stakeholders during community consultation, and an assessment of the current wellbeing and developmental outcomes of children in Greater Shepparton.

They take into consideration what is 'within our scope of influence', remembering that the BSEYP operates within the universal service system, and factoring in the resources we have available to invest in the six year plan.

Recognising the strong foundations already in place in Greater Shepparton is essential — from the quality of our early years service system to the wide range of child and family friendly facilities, and the strong professional partnerships across services. At the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge that fresh thinking, critical reflection and renewed approaches to child, family and community wellbeing and connection are required if we are to see positive changes to future data like AEDC.

With this in mind we have put in some parameters to guide our work and identify priority areas or cohorts that will be the focus of specific activities, projects and programs implemented over the next six years.

Priority age group

Whilst the Plan is for children aged 0 to 6 years, there is a particular focus on the ages of 0 to 3, when brain development is at its most rapid and foundations for future skill acquisition are laid. The importance of the home learning environment and concept of 'parents are first teachers' is critical during this time.

Priority cohorts

'Developmentally at risk' – specifically those at the lower level of risk, and using the AEDC definition as those who are 'neither developmentally on track nor vulnerable.' We believe identifying these children and families early (in the years 0 to 3) and linking them in with the right services and supports may result in these children being 'developmentally on track' in future AEDC results or stop them from falling into 'developmentally vulnerable'.

Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander – selected due to our large Aboriginal population in Greater Shepparton, the results from our 2024 AEDC Aboriginal profile and the opportunity to partner with key stakeholders and listen to community for change. It is also one of the priority groups for Best Start

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse – selected due to our large multicultural, refugee and asylum seeker population and the results from our 2024 AEDC Culturally and Linguistically Diverse profile. We are also a CALD Early Years Outreach initiative and multicultural storytime site. It is also one of the priority groups for Best Start.

Children and families experiencing vulnerability – Best Start priority group and refers to a broad range of co-occurring factors that may inhibit children's participation and development including involvement with child protection; at risk of abuse and neglect; involved with other key secondary and tertiary support services like Enhanced MCH, The Orange Door and family services and children with a disability or developmental delay.

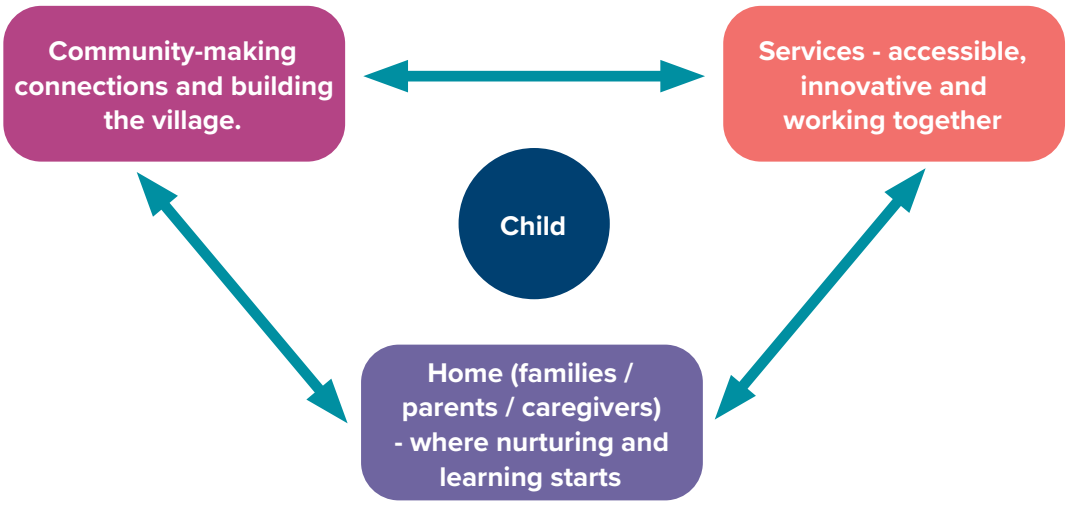
Priority communities

Driven by data like AEDC and SEIFA, as well as local knowledge and appetite for communities to respond, specific communities will be selected for certain activities and implementation of strategies or programs. This will also assist with evaluation and measuring impact, as it will enable us to monitor, track and review data specific to that community (e.g. MCH attendance data for centres in a specific community).

With all of this in mind, we have identified three strategic areas to guide our work over the next six years. These areas have a focus on the environments that children grow up in, but also environments they, their caregivers and families interact with and seek support from. An Annual Action Plan will be developed each year listing the activities and work to be carried out under each strategic area.

Placing the child at the centre of all we do, the strategic areas are:

- **Home (families, parents and caregivers) – where nurturing and learning starts**
- **Services – accessible, innovative and working together**
- **Community – making connections and building the village**



Hush
Baby Hush

Strategic area 1: Home (families, parents and caregivers) – where nurturing and learning starts

Why this area?

Most of a child's first 1000 or 2000 days are spent primarily at home, shaped by the care and influence of parents, caregivers and family members. We know that foundational skills of children are developed during this time, and if the opportunity for these to be acquired is significantly limited or missed, it can be very difficult to close the gap as children enter and progress through school.

The nurturing and learning that parents and caregivers provide during this time is influenced by many factors, including their own upbringing, their attachment with their child and confidence in their parenting role, their own needs being met, their knowledge and understanding about early childhood development, and their access to information, services and supports.

Insights gathered through the community consultation process, our local 3 year old kinder vulnerability data, research papers such as the Centre for Community Child Health's 'Core Care Conditions for Children and Families' and Professor Edward Melhuish's presentation locally on the importance of the home learning environment, have helped shape and validate this strategic area.

Outcomes and High Level Actions:

Outcomes	High Level Actions
Parents are supported and confident in their parenting role, and as their child's first and most important teacher	Collaborate with programs and services that build parental confidence, skills and capacity
Children are reaching developmental milestones by 3 years of age	Promote engagement with Maternal and Child
	Partner with stakeholders to support early intervention

Measures of Success (high level):

- A statistically significant increase (as per the AEDC measurement tool) for children 'on track' in the social, emotional and language domains in target communities by 2031 (baseline is 2024 AEDC).
- At least a 20% reduction in the percentage of children identified as experiencing vulnerability in their 3 year old kindergarten year in target communities by 2031 (baseline is 2025 kinder vulnerability data).

Measures of Success (annual)[6]:

- Increase in parental confidence and capacity to support their child's development and learning, measured through agreed indicators included in the Annual Action Plans.
- Increased participation in key early years touchpoints (e.g. MCH, kinder and playgroup indicators)

Data sets for Measures of Success:

- AEDC Community Profile 2027 and 2030, including our Aboriginal profiles and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse profiles
- Greater Shepparton Child and Family Vulnerability tool – annual collection of 3 year old kindergarten data
- Greater Shepparton MCH annual report
- School Entrant Health Questionnaire
- Supported Playgroup parent survey
- Alliance partner surveys (clients) and reports

[6] Please refer to the Annual Action Plan section on page 20 for more information on the annual measures of success

Strategic area 2: Services – accessible, innovative and working together

Why this area?

The benefits of programs and services working collaboratively is well known. Whilst Greater Shepparton has a plethora of quality early years and family support services, and strong interagency relationships exist, funding and operational silos continue to limit genuine collaboration. Conversations with service providers and parents through the community consultation process highlighted the following:

- Identify opportunities for collaboration and pooling resources to deliver more effective support, and advocate strongly for this.
- 'Value add' to already effective programs and services, don't duplicate.
- Asking families what they want from services, not simply what services can provide.
- Services must be welcoming, non judgemental, and culturally safe.
- Earlier and timely intervention is critical.
- Improved awareness and promotion of available services and programs.

This is supported by research that indicates greater coordination and integration of services has been shown to improve access to early intervention and support, particularly for children who may be at risk of developmental delay. Providing effective early intervention—both early in a child's life and early in the emergence of an issue—can help reduce the impact of risk factors or developmental delays and may decrease the level of support and intervention needed over the long term[2].

Outcomes and high Level Actions:

Outcomes	High Level Actions
Children and families actively engage with MCH services, attending key ages and stages visits	Promote engagement with Maternal and Child Health
Children engage and participate in early childhood education	Support families to register, enrol and participate in kindergarten
	Implement the Best Start Best Life reforms
Improved collaboration and innovative service delivery	Partner with stakeholders on initiatives that improve access and engagement in early years and family services
Services are welcoming and staff are inclusive and responsive	Professional development and training is supported

Measures of Success (high level):

- 95% participation in 3 year old kinder and 98% participation in 4 year old kinder by 2031[3].
- Best Start, Best Life reforms are on track for full implementation by 2036.
- A reduction of at least 5% of children 'at risk' across all five AEDC domains by 2031.

Measures of Success (annual):

- Increase participation in key universal and targeted early years and family support services in priority communities (agreed indicators and measurements will be documented in the Annual Action Plan).
- Improved collaboration amongst agencies and services, evidenced through 'valuing adding' to existing programs and innovative service delivery.

Data sets for Measures of Success:

- AEDC Community Profile 2027 and 2030, including our Aboriginal profiles and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse profiles
- Greater Shepparton Child and Family Vulnerability tool – annual collection of 4 year old kindergarten data
- Greater Shepparton Maternal and Child Health annual reports
- Greater Shepparton Early Years Profile (provided by Department of Education annually)
- School Entrant Health Questionnaire

[2] Early Years Connect – Working together to create inclusive services and communities: information sheet 12
[3] Please note 'participation' is a term used by Department of Education and refers to enrolment, not attendance

Strategic area 3: Community – making connections and building the village

Why this area?

The proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" reflects the idea that a child's development depends on the support and investment of the whole community. This may be demonstrated through shared care and nurturing from extended family and friends, and the community valuing parenting and child rearing as a most critical role.

Supportive and inclusive communities are essential in creating the right conditions for families with young children to thrive. Safe, informal and family friendly places or activities where families can connect with others help build strong social support networks. It also opens opportunities for information sharing, promotion of services and parent to parent support. Research shows that a strong sense of community helps families feel accepted, valued and confident in seeking help when they need it[4]. COVID had a major effect on our ability to socialise and connect in person, and rebuilding those relationships and connections is now essential.

Through the community consultation process, parents and service providers highlighted the need for more opportunities for families to connect with their community, build relationships, feel a sense of belonging and supported in their parenting role. In Greater Shepparton there are already positive models we can build on such as Our Place, Community Hubs and the Family Haven that facilitate connections between families, services and community. Collectively we can also explore the provision of regular family friendly community activities and events to bring people together.

Outcomes and High Level Actions:

Outcomes	High Level Actions
Families feel connected to their local community	Partner with services and community spaces that foster inclusion and connection
Our community has a shared responsibility for its children	Communicate and promote access tocommunity data sets that measure child development and family wellbeing
Our community values parenting as the most important role	Explore a community wide campaign that celebrates the value of parenting, families, and connected communities

Measures of Success (high level):

- A statistically significant reduction (as per the AEDC measurement tool) of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains in target communities by 2031.

Measures of Success (annual):

- Strengthen family connection to community and participation in community activities, measured through agreed indicators included in the Annual Action Plan, and partner reporting.
- Increase community awareness and strengthen shared responsibility for supporting children, parents and families by ensuring relevant profiles and data are accessible and actively shared.

Data sets for Measures of Success:

- AEDC Community Profile 2027 and 2030, including our Aboriginal profiles and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse profiles.
- Annual supported playgroup survey.
- Relevant Alliance partner surveys (clients) and reports.

[4] Triple P - In This Together: The Benefits of Community for Parents and Children, June 2023

Delivery approach and leadership

Annual Action Plan

The Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Strategic Plan 2026-2031 will be supported by an Annual Action Plan, which will document the programs and activities to be implemented under each of the three strategic areas over 12 month periods. Each Annual Action Plan (five in total) will include the 'what' (what is the activity or program to be implemented), 'who' (who is responsible for implementing the activity), 'when' (when will it be completed by) and 'how' (how will we know we have had an impact – data to be collected). Specific annual measures of success (e.g. 8% increase in the 3.5 year MCH key age and stage visit for 2026/27) will be included that contribute to the high level measures documented under each strategic area. The Annual Action Plan will function as a dynamic, evolving document, enabling the Alliance and its workgroups to adapt to both current and emerging issues as we aim to make progress towards the goals and measures of success set out in the Plan. A six month progress report and a final twelve month report will be prepared during each cycle, followed by the development and implementation of the next Annual Action Plan. An example of an Annual Action Plan is included at appendix 5.

Best Start Model for Improvement Framework – Plan Do Study Act (PDSA)

The Best Start program has been using a Model for Improvement framework since 2020, which includes an annual Program Logic and Plan Do Study Act cycles to test and measure small changes or improvements linked to short term outcomes. These will be reported on as part of the Annual Action Plan mentioned above, and through the Best Start Collaboration site.

The Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Alliance and related workgroups

The Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Alliance is recognised as the leading local authority on early years matters and oversees the governance of the Plan. The Alliance also plays an important advocacy role, raising key issues that affect children, families, and the broader community. An annual action plan guides the work of the Alliance.

A range of workgroups support the Alliance, including the Early Years Reference Group which oversees the Best Start primary outcomes. The collective expertise, insight and skills of members of the Alliance and workgroups ensure a strong, informed voice for the early years sector. Members include parents, community representatives, service providers, educators, health professionals, government partners and Council staff, including representation from our Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities and providers.

Best Start and Council representatives also participate in, or collaborate with, a range of other initiatives, committees and networks that share similar goals. This involvement helps strengthen collaboration, highlight common themes and gaps, identify opportunities for innovative service delivery, and support the sharing of information and data to guide community wide planning and action.

Council's role in the early years

Greater Shepparton City Council holds a central role in shaping and delivering early years services for the community. This includes Maternal and Child Health, three year old and Pre Prep kindergarten, kindergarten central registration, the CALD Early Years Outreach Initiative, long day care, supported playgroups, and multicultural storytime.

Council also manages a wide range of programs and facilities used by children and families, such as immunisation services, libraries, playgrounds, and bike and walking paths. This substantial investment positions Council as a key leader in strengthening how universal services operate and collaborate to deliver programs, and how as a community we value the importance of the early years, parents and families.

The Early Years Operations and Reform department will be especially important in putting this new Plan into action and supporting the local rollout of the Best Start Best Life reforms. Council is also committed to working alongside other valued local programs and initiatives to advance the Plan and improve outcomes for children and families.

Greater Shepparton City Council continues to endorse the Plan and acts as the fund holder for the Best Start program.

'Value Add'

An important delivery approach of the Plan is to enhance existing successful and promising programs, particularly those that already demonstrate strong engagement with children and families. For example, a speech pathologist might attend playgroups to talk with parents about their child's language and communication development, offering guidance and support when needed. Given our limited resources, creating numerous new programs isn't feasible. Instead, we need to focus on where we can strengthen or 'value add' to the good work already happening, work collaboratively with other services and provide added benefit to families participating in these programs.

Monitoring and Reporting

Each strategic area sets out Measures of Success and the data sets that will be used to determine our progress against each.

Regular reflection, adjustment (where required), data collection and reporting will be carried out by the Alliance and relevant workgroups to monitor progress against and impact of the PDSAs, strategies and activities outlined in the Annual Action Plan. As mentioned above, six and 12 monthly progress reports will be developed. Access to service and community data and dashboards like the State of Greater Shepparton's Children Report will be central to overall reporting and measuring impact, noting that while some indicators and data sets are available annually, others—such as the AEDC—are only released every three to four years.

Maintaining consistent reporting to the community and Council will help strengthen transparency and reinforce the Council's ongoing commitment in this space.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to those who have been involved in the development of the Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Plan 2026-2031.

We thank you for your time, expertise, feedback and ongoing commitment to making Greater Shepparton a great place to live, work and play.

We believe Greater Shepparton is a great place to live and raise a family. Together we can make a difference.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Links to the Greater Shepparton Council Plan 2025-2029

Council Plan Strategic Outcome: Liveability

Focus Areas	Actions
Access, inclusion and universal design	Partner with diverse community cohorts through targeted engagement and access and inclusion strategies
Health, wellbeing and social connection	Partner with stakeholders on initiatives that improve mental wellbeing and social connection
	Support community centres, services and spaces that provide inclusive opportunities for connection and wellbeing
	Support the delivery of initiatives that celebrate cultural diversity, respect and inclusion
Reconciliation	Partner with First Nations community members, agencies, and groups to strengthen community outcomes
Children, youth and families	Provide services and programs that improve the health and wellbeing of young people
	Implement the Victorian Government's Best Start, Best Life reforms
	Support participation of vulnerable children and families in early years services
	Development of a 10 year early years' service and infrastructure plan by 2026
	Development and implementation of the Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Plan 2026-2031

Appendix 2 - Community consultation for the development of the Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Strategic Plan 2026-2031

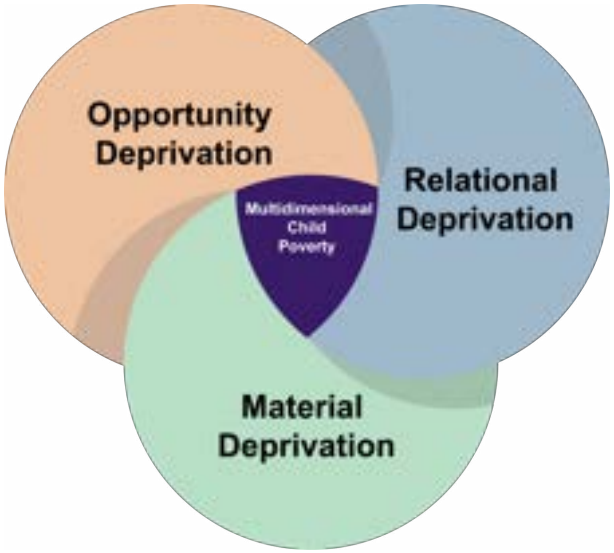
Summary of the main themes and feedback from participants that fall 'within scope':

- The increasing use of technology and screen time is having a significant impact on children's development.
- Positive interactions remain central to healthy development. Strong relationships between parents and children, families and services, and families and the wider community provide the foundation for resilience, learning, and wellbeing.
- Supporting parents to build confidence, knowledge, and capacity is essential. By empowering parents to be their child's first and most important teacher, and by enriching the home learning environment, children are better positioned to thrive.
- Parents are feeling overwhelmed and need their own needs met to effectively care for their children.
- Getting back to basics – parenting skills, life skills, understanding importance of play, etc
- At the same time, many families experience social isolation and a lack of connection to community. With extended family networks often absent, parents can struggle without close informal supports, highlighting the need to strengthen community ties.
- Services must be welcoming, non judgemental, and culturally safe to ensure all families feel respected and included. Staff need to be trauma informed and operate from a strength based / family centred approach. Greater coordination between services is also required, with a focus on identifying opportunities for collaboration to deliver more effective support.
- Earlier intervention is critical, as children are presenting with increasingly complex needs from a young age. Timely support can make a profound difference in developmental outcomes.
- Finally, there is a need to improve awareness and promotion of available services and programs. Many families remain unaware of the supports at their disposal, limiting participation and access to valuable opportunities.

Appendix 3 – Centre for Community Child Health: The relationship between the core care conditions for children and families and child outcomes

The relationship between core care conditions for children and families[1] and child outcomes[2]

Appendix 4 – More for Children conceptual framework and community jigsaw



Child Centred Definition of Multidimensional Poverty

Poverty is the interplay between key material and non-material deprivations, limiting children's choices now and into the future.

It means children do not have the material basics, their opportunities are narrowed, and foundational relationships are not in place or are under pressure.

A definition of each dimension and theme is provided on the next page.

Dimension	Theme	Theme definition
Material basics ***Definition:*** Insufficient money and material resources to meet basic needs Inadequate and inaccessible essential infrastructure and facilities	Money	There is enough money in the family to pay for essential things and not miss out. Not worrying about money.
	Housing	Having a comfortable home that is affordable, good quality and has a private place. Not worrying about having to move or being without a home.
	Food Security	Always having enough healthy food. Not having to miss meals and not being hungry.
	Healthcare	Always being able to get quality health care (including dental and allied health care) when its needed. Always being able to afford and access medicine and vaccines.
	Utilities	Having affordable and reliable access to electricity, water, plumbing and internet.
	Transport	Having affordable, reliable, accessible transport.
Opportunity ***Definition:*** Lack of meaningful connection and participation in the community Limited and/or narrowed choices now and into the future Compromised health, play, relaxation, and learning. Learning things at school that open choices now and for the future.	Quality Education	School has resources to support students to learn.
	Feeling Safe	Feeling safe in the community or neighbourhood. Not seeing or experiencing violence.
	Learning Beyond School	Being able to learn important and interesting things outside school.
	Being able to relax	Not being stressed or overwhelmed about problems now or worried about the future.
	Places to Build Connections	Places that are free, welcoming and build ongoing connections.
	Being part of a Club or Group	Being able to join and regularly be part of a club or group outside of school.
Relational ***Definition:*** Family relationships are under pressure or not in place A network of trusted, caring adults is not in place Repeated negative experiences of key institutions and services.	No Violence at Home	Not seeing, hearing or experiencing any form of violence at home. Not being or feeling unsafe or being worried about violence at home.
	Time with Parents/Carers	Having time to be with parents/carers and regularly do things together.
	Ongoing connection with caring adults	Regular, positive interactions with caring adults outside home and school.
	Parents/Carers not Under Stress	Parents and carers are not stressed or overwhelmed by problems the family faces. Parents are not often worried about not having enough money, having to work long hours, not being able to find work.
	Being treated with respect when seeking support	Feeling respected when going to services for help or support. Not being judged or treated badly.
	Nurturing Schools	There are supportive and caring relationships between students and school staff, and between students. School staff believe in students.

Appendix 5 - Example of an Annual Action Plan

Strategic Area 1: Home (families, parents and caregivers) – where nurturing and learning starts

Outcome 1.1 Parents are supported and confident in their parenting role, as their child's first and most important teacher

Action / Activity	Timeframe	Responsible Workgroup / Stakeholders	Measurement and Progress
Greater Shepparton City Council runs at least 11 smalltalk supported playgroups each term, and offer In Home Support sessions to eligible parents.	Ongoing	Supported Playgroup facilitators Best Start Team Leader	Quarterly reports – number of playgroups offered, number of families enrolled, weekly attendance, number of IHS sessions. Annual Playgroup Survey
Run 4 multicultural storytime programs (Arabic, Dari, Punjabi and Mandarin) to promote: • Reading • Positive interaction between parent / child • Health and development information	July 2026 to June 2027	Multicultural storytime facilitators Best Start Team Leader St Georges Rd Hub Leader Arthur Mawson kinder South Shepparton Community Centre GV Libraries	Quarterly reports – number of sessions held, weekly attendance, feedback from parents on topics discussed. Annual Storytime Survey

Strategic Area 2: Services – accessible, innovative and working together

Outcome 2.1 Children and families actively engage with MCH services, attending key age and stage visits (Best Start outcome)

Action / Activity	Timeframe	Responsible Workgroup / Stakeholders	Measurement and Progress
Promote attendance at the 2 and 3.5 year MCH KAS visit by sending a 'happy birthday' SMS message to parents of children turning 2 and 3 years and encourage them to book in for their child's KAS visit	July 2026 to June 2027	MCH service	10% increase in the 2 year KAS visit for 26/27 8% increase in the 3.5 year KAS visit for 26/27
MCH admin attends specific kinder interview days to book in 3.5 year MCH KAS visits of children without a booking	Jan 2027	MCH service Our Place Mooroopna	8% increase in the 3.5 year KAS visit for 26/27

References

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). (2014). The Nest Wellbeing Framework. ARACY, Canberra, Australia. Retrieved from https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-wellbeing-framework/

Australian Government. (2024). Australian Early Development Census Community Profile Greater Shepparton 2024. Available at www.aedc.gov.au

Australian Government (2024) National Early Years Strategy 2024-2034. Available at https://www.dss.gov.au/early-years-strategy/resource/early-years-strategy-2024-2034

Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. 2024. More for Children: Children's Experiences of Poverty in Australia, Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University. Available at: https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12416.24321

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994) Ecological Model. Available at https://www.ncj.nl/wp-content/uploads/media-import/docs/6a45c1a4-82ad-4f69-957e-1c76966678e2.pdf

Communities for Children, Greater Shepparton City Council and Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project. (2025). The State of Greater Shepparton's Children Report. Available at: https://seerplatform.com/dashboards/557/e1f79f3e-0547-4216-b154-f1d554791429bb5a3900-778f-4a79-95a5-4f82196da38d

Department of Education (2016). Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework – For all children from birth to eight years. Revised version. 2016. Treasury Place East Melbourne, Victoria.

Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services and Municipal Association of Victoria. (2017). The Early Years Compact: Supporting children and families in the early years. Retrieved at https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/theearlyyearscompact.aspx

Greater Shepparton City Council. (2025). Greater Shepparton Council Plan 2025-2029. Retrieved from http://greatershepparton.com.au/assets/files/documents/consultations/2018/Draft_Public_Health_Strategic_Plan_Web.pdf

Greater Shepparton City Council. (2025). Maternal and Child Health Annual Report 2024-2025. Internal document. Community Directorate.

Greater Shepparton City Council (2025). City of Greater Shepparton Community Profile. profile.id. Available at: https://profile.id.com.au/shepparton/seifa-disadvantage

Queensland Government Early Years Connect Information Sheet 12 – Working together to create inclusive services and communities. Available at: https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/newsResources/Documents/info-sheet-12-working-together-create-inclusive-service-communities.pdf

Moore, T.G. (2024) Core Care Conditions for Children and Families: Implications for policy and practice. CCCH Working Paper No. 6. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Available at: https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597

Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute

Municipal Association of Victoria. Resource Guide to Municipal Early Years Planning May 2025

Triple P Positive Parenting Program. In This Together: The Benefits of Community for Parents and Children, June 2023.

Uniting, Humanitarian Settlement Program data for Greater Shepparton (internal report) 2025.

University of Washington, Center for Child and Family Wellbeing. Exploring how children's relationships and environment interact to help them thrive. Available at: https://ccfwb.uw.edu/about-us/the-bioecological-model/

Victorian Government Births, Deaths and Marriages, Births registered per month. Available at: https://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/births-registered-month

Victorian Government (2025) Best Start, Best Life Reforms. Available at https://www.vic.gov.au/best-start-best-life-reforms

CONTACT US

Business hours: 8.15am to 5pm weekdays
In person: 90 Welsford Street, Shepparton
Mail: Locked Bag 1000, Shepparton, VIC, 3632
Phone: (03) 5832 9700 **SMS:** 0427 767 846
Email: council@shepparton.vic.gov.au
Web: www.greatershepparton.com.au

Join the conversation:

Greater Shepparton City Council is NRS friendly. If you are deaf, hearing-impaired, or speech-impaired, we ask that you call us via the National Relay Service:

TTY users: 133 677 then ask for (03) 5832 9700.

Speak & Listen users: (speech-to-speech relay) 1300 555 727 then ask for (03) 5832 9700.

Internet relay users: Connect to the National Relay Service via www.relayservice.com.au and then ask for (03) 5832 9700.

A hearing loop is also available at Council's customer service centre and Council meeting rooms.

Interpreter service available.