

Draft Integrated Children, Youth and Family Strategy

2027-2031

Greater Dandenong

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters, now known as the City of Greater Dandenong.

We honour their enduring connection to Country, their Cultural knowledge, and their sustainable stewardship of these lands and waterways over thousands of generations.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, recognising their vital role in preserving and protecting the sacred lands and waterways of their ancestors, their places, Traditional Cultural practices and stories.

We also acknowledge the Bunurong Land Council as the Registered Aboriginal Party, responsible for caring for the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage of this area.

In the spirit of reconciliation, we value the opportunity to learn from and work alongside Bunurong peoples, as Traditional Custodians.



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Message From the Mayor



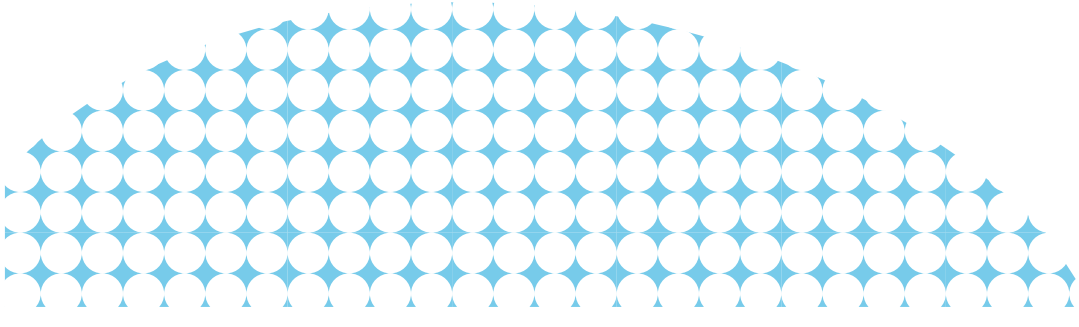
Introduction

Council's vision is that children, young people and families are valued, celebrated and supported to reach their full potential.

Children and young people aged 0–25 years make up over 30 per cent of the City of Greater Dandenong's population of more than 167,000 people, highlighting the critical importance of investing in their wellbeing and future.

The municipality is one of Australia's most diverse and dynamic communities, with over half of residents born overseas and more than 150 nationalities and 120 languages represented. This diversity, combined with a relatively young and growing population, strong community networks and active multicultural organisations, creates a socially rich and resilient community.

Greater Dandenong City Council's Integrated Children, Youth and Family Strategy 2027–2031 is the first integrated strategy of its kind for the municipality. It provides a clear and coordinated long-term framework to guide the planning, delivery and continuous improvement of services for children, young people and families. By bringing together existing plans into a single, cohesive approach, the strategy adopts a life-course perspective, recognising that the needs and experiences of children, young people and families are interconnected and evolve over time.



The Strategy

The strategy responds to the unique strengths and challenges of the Greater Dandenong community. It builds on the area's cultural richness, strong family connections and community resilience, while also addressing gaps, emerging needs and barriers to participation and wellbeing.

This strategy will:

- Provide an integrated and coordinated approach to planning for children, young people (0-25 years) and families.
- Respond to emerging needs and priorities across the 0-25-year life course.
- Guide Council's investment and partnerships over the next five years.
- Ensure services are inclusive, responsive and aligned, enabling children, young people and families to feel valued, supported and able to reach their full potential.



Community Vision | Vision for 2040

The City of Greater Dandenong is home to all. It's a city where you can enjoy and embrace life through celebration and equal opportunity! We harmonise the community by valuing multiculturalism and the individual. Our community is healthy, vibrant, innovative and creative. Our growing city is committed to environmental sustainability.

Welcome to our exciting and peaceful community.

Greater Dandenong People's Panel (2021; reviewed 2024), Community Vision to 2040, setting long-term aspirations and guiding principles.



Guiding Principles

The following principles underpin the development and implementation of this Strategy. Council's approach is grounded in an intersectional lens, meaning that we recognise that children, young people and families experience systems and services differently based on overlapping aspects of identity and circumstance.

1. **Leadership, Advocacy, Planning and Partnerships**
   Lead, advocate, plan and work in partnership to strengthen the local service system to be responsive to the needs of children, youth people and families.

2. **Family Centred Practice**
   Work from a strength-based approach with a focus on prevention and early intervention to uphold the best interests of children and young people.

3. **Participation and Engagement**
   Engage children and young people's voice in discussion and decision making to promote active engagement in community life.

4. **Continuous Improvement**
   Use evidence informed practice and adopt innovative approaches in developing programs and services for children, young people and families.

5. **Capacity Building**
   Build the capacity of children, young people and families to support their active participation in community.

6. **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion**
   Ensure Council's services are fair, inclusive and responsive to the different experiences, backgrounds and needs of our community.

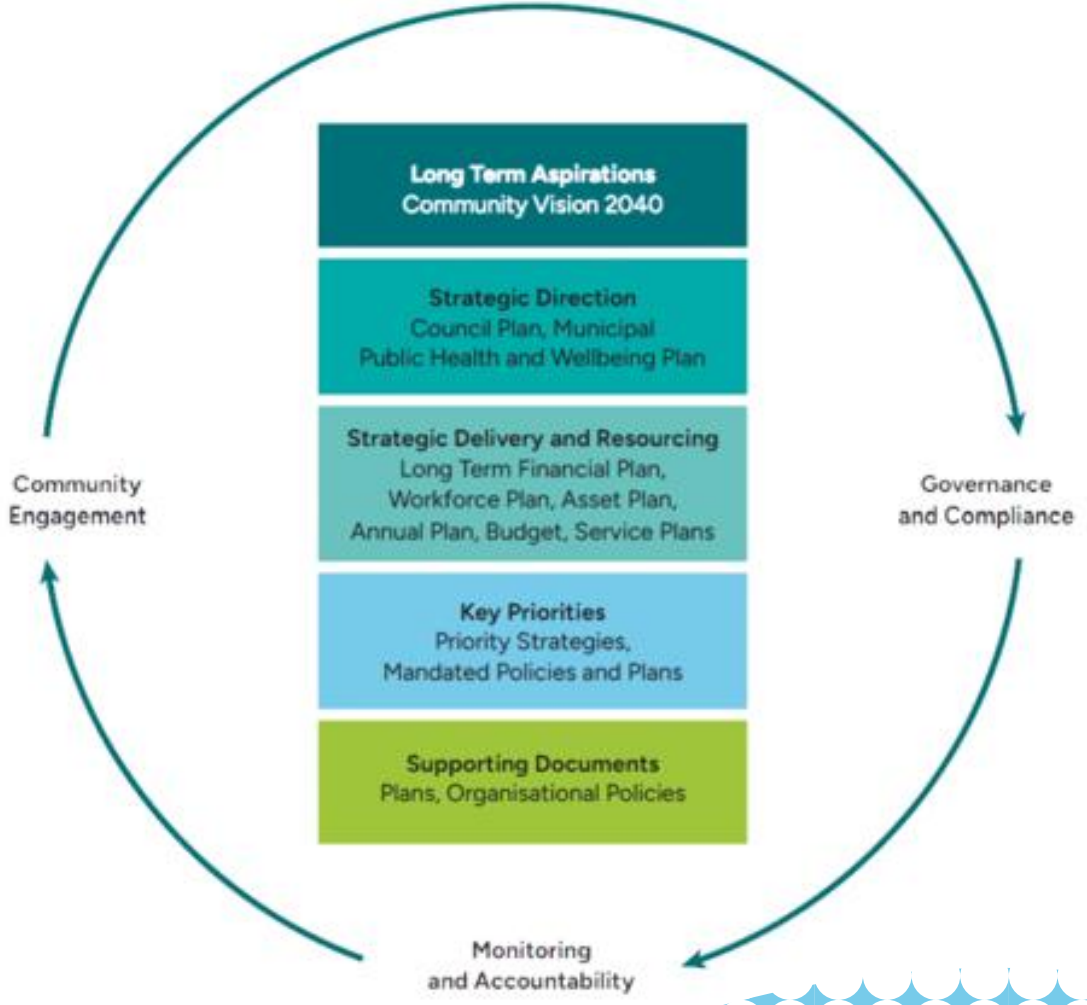
7. **Climate Change and Sustainability**
   Follow environmentally responsible practices and inspire children, young people, and families to care for their surroundings and community.

Council's Commitment and Strategic Approach

Council's Integrated Planning Framework

This strategy is embedded within Council's Integrated Planning Framework, which brings together long-term community aspirations, strategic priorities and service delivery. The Council Plan and the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan have shaped its focus, ensuring alignment with broader community goals. These priorities are delivered through services, programs and partnerships. Clear planning, resourcing and regular reporting ensure progress is tracked and accountability is maintained.

Together, this approach ensures our work with children, young people and families contributes to a stronger, healthier and more connected community.



Supporting Documents

Council's strategic objectives in the Council Plan 2025–29 reflect the hopes and aspirations of the community as expressed in the Community Vision and guiding principles. This strategy supports these objectives by strengthening and aligning Council's work with children, young people and families across the 0–25 life course, contributing to their achievement.

- A socially connected, safe and healthy city
- A city that respects and celebrates diversity, our history and the arts
- A city of accessible, vibrant centres and places
- A green city committed to a sustainable future
- A city that supports business, entrepreneurship, quality education and employment outcomes
- A Council that demonstrates leadership, responsible use of public resources and a commitment to investing in the community

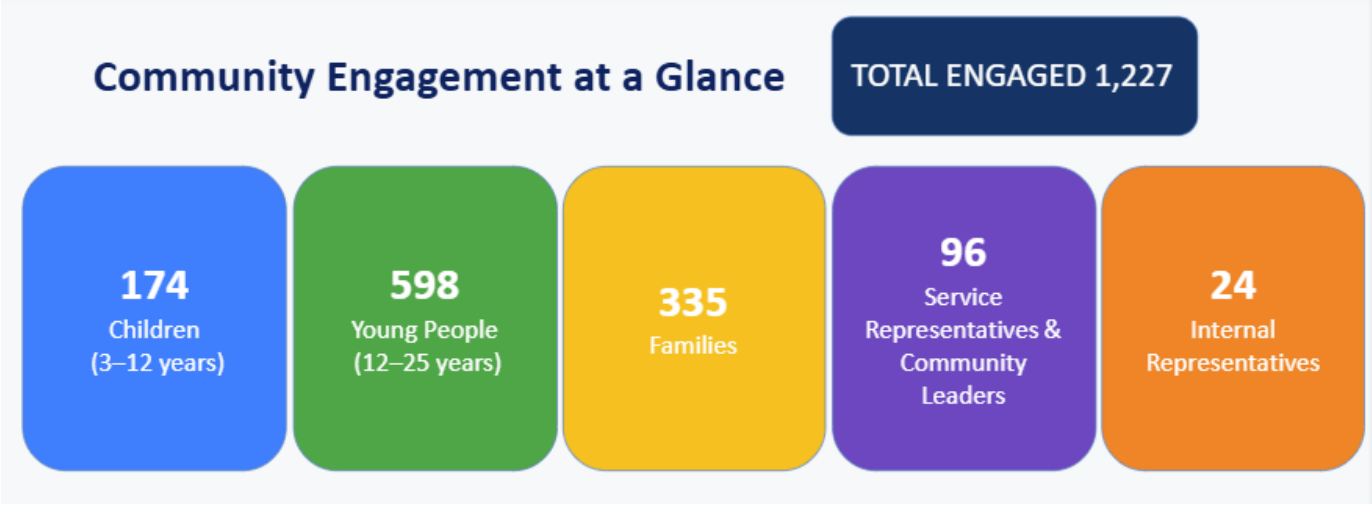


Background

The Development of the Strategy

The priorities in this strategy are based on a comprehensive, evidence-informed approach. This includes a background report drawing on local data, community insights, relevant legislation, policy frameworks, and Council commitments. The strategy is further informed by consultation with children, young people and families, as well as input from service providers and Council departments. It also builds on previous engagement, benchmarking, and the outcomes of the former Children's Plan 2019–2026; and Youth and Family Strategy 2019–2026.

Consultation was undertaken in two phases during 2026: targeted stakeholder engagement from January to May 2026, followed by public exhibition from September to October 2026 to test and refine the draft strategy. Together, these processes helped ensure the strategy reflects current community needs and long-term priorities. The evidence base is detailed in the supplementary document, '*Integrated Children, Youth and Family Strategy Background Report'*: Planning for Communities (May 2026).

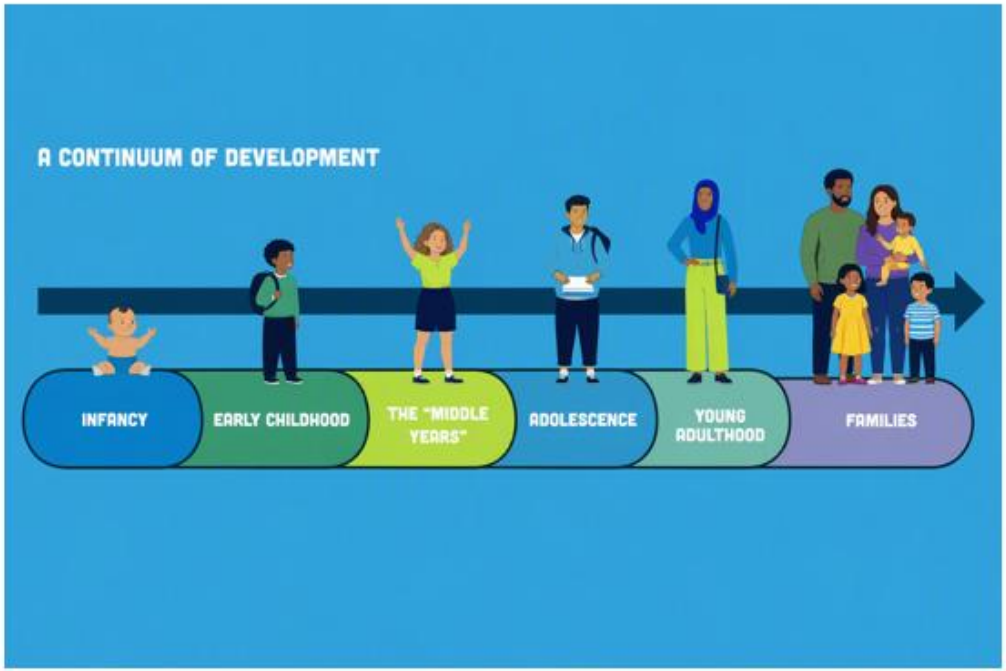


A Life-Course Approach: Supporting People from Birth to 25 years

Council has adopted a life course approach in developing this strategy because it reflects the way people move through various stages of life. People don't grow, learn or face challenges in fixed stages that start and stop at certain ages, our lives evolve over time. Our health, wellbeing and opportunities are shaped by what happens early in life, including during the first 1,000 days when the foundations for development are established, as well as during important changes and milestone transitions, and through the support of our families and communities.

By adopting this approach, Council recognises that supporting children early, assisting people through key life transitions, and strengthening families can prevent more complex issues later and lead to fairer outcomes for everyone, now and into the future.

Council is committed to being a child safe organisation, placing the safety, wellbeing and rights of children and young people at the centre of everything we do. This commitment is critical to our work and underpins the delivery of the strategy, ensuring our services, programs and decision-making actively create environments where children feel safe, supported and empowered.

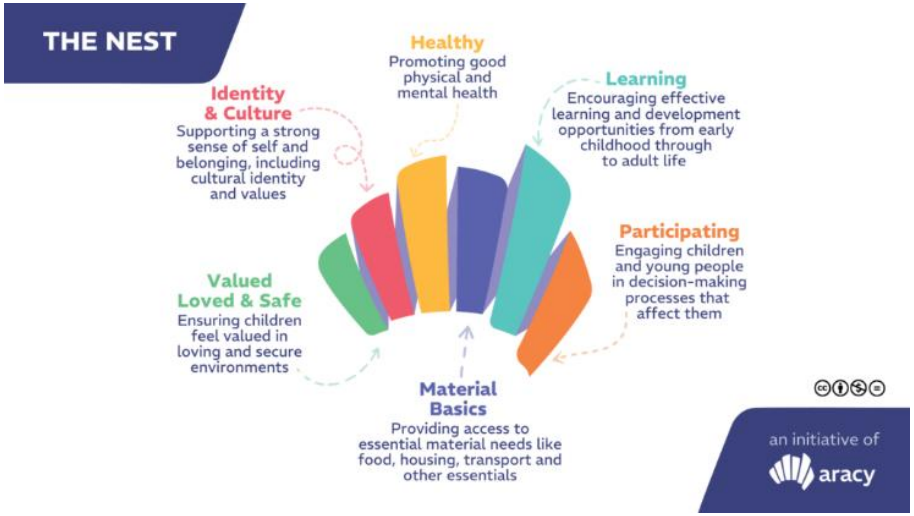


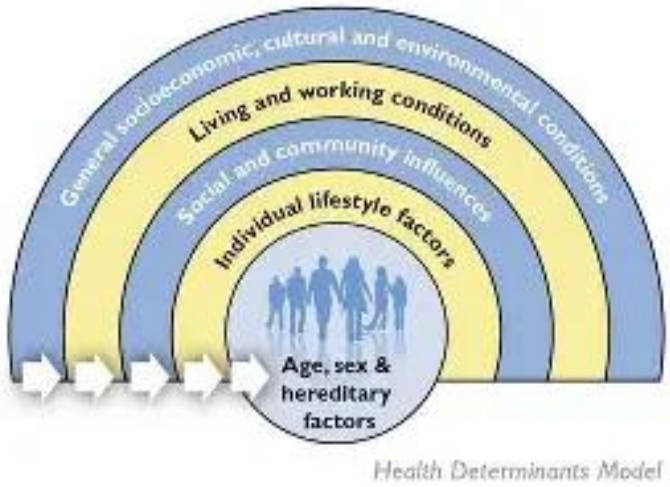
The ARACY Nest Framework and A Social Model of Health

Council takes a people-centred and place-based approach to improving health and wellbeing and meeting the needs of our community. This is reflected in the way this strategy is structured and will be delivered.

At the heart of this strategy are two complementary approaches that guide how Council supports children, young people and families.

The first is the ARACY Nest framework, which defines what children and young people need to thrive, including being safe and supported, having enough to live on, being healthy, learning and growing, feeling connected, and developing a positive sense of identity.





Health Determinants Model

The second is a social model of health, which recognises that these outcomes are shaped by broader factors such as housing, income, education, community connection and access to support. By applying these approaches, Council focuses not only on the outcomes children and young people need, but also on the conditions that influence their wellbeing and how support is delivered across the system.

Council has structured this strategy in a clear and practical way:

1. The ARACY Nest defines the outcomes we want for children and young people.

2. The social model helps us understand the broader conditions shaping those outcomes.

Role of Council in Responding to the Needs of Children, Young People and Families

Council plays a leadership role in shaping coordinated, responsive and inclusive approaches that support children, young people and families to thrive. Council demonstrates leadership and commitment to the community through the following strategic roles:

Lead	Collaborates with all levels of government and service providers to identify priority needs and mobilise coordinated, innovative responses.
Advocate	Advocates for local priorities and emerging issues, ensuring the needs and experiences of children, young people and families are represented in decision-making.
Deliver	Delivers programs, services and opportunities that support children, young people and families to participate in community and civic life, build skills, and improve health and wellbeing.
Facilitate	Facilitates connections, access and coordination across community, services and spaces to support collaboration, participation and shared outcomes for children, young people and families.
Partner	Works in partnership with community, service providers and other stakeholders to strengthen local service systems and deliver integrated, place-based responses.



Council's Service Model – Coordinating Support from Early Childhood to Young Adulthood

Council supports children, young people and families across a 0–25 service continuum, connecting Maternal and Child Health, Children's Services and Youth and Family Services to ensure coordinated support and smooth transitions between these milestones, life stages.

Life Stage	Key Focus	Key Supports (What We Do)	Service Area
Antenatal & Infancy 0–3 years	A strong start	Free, universal support for families Health and development checks Parenting, feeding, sleep and wellbeing advice Early identification of needs Connections to local services	Maternal & Child Health
Early Childhood 3–5 years	Learning and early development	Kindergarten access and enrolment supported playgroups Outreach to diverse communities Inclusive early learning opportunities Building family connection to services	Children's Services
Childhood 6–12 years	Connection and participation	Safe and inclusive places to learn and play Support through community and school partnerships Opportunities for social connection Encouraging children's voice and participation	Children's Services
Adolescence 12–18 years	Voice, identity and belonging	Youth programs and safe spaces Leadership and participation opportunities Support for wellbeing and connection Information, referrals and access to services	Youth Services
Young Adulthood 18–25 years	Pathways and independence	Education, employment and volunteering pathways Skills and leadership development Ongoing support and connections Responsive, evidence-informed programs	Youth Services
All Life Stages 0–25 years	Extra support when needed	Support for families experiencing vulnerability Where relevant, case management and practical help Connections to specialist services Focus on safety, wellbeing and keeping families together	Family Services

Local Profile of Children, Young People, and Families in Greater Dandenong



Total Population in Greater Dandenong

167,000

*Vic Dept Planning and Transport 2026



Birth Notifications in Greater Dandenong

(for the period 1 July 2024-30 June 2025)

1920



Percentage of Total Population in Greater Dandenong 0-24 years

31% (51,000)

*Vic Dept Planning and Transport 2026



Percentage of persons who speak a language other than English at home

69%

(ABS Census 2021)



Single parents with children 19% (ABS Census 2021)



Couples with children 48%

Cultural Diversity

Greater Dandenong is the most Multicultural Community in Australia

(ABS Census 2021)


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Challenges and Opportunities for Council

Council plays a critical role in supporting children, young people and families across the 0–25 life stages. This work is occurring in a context of increasing demand and complexity, driven by cost-of-living pressures, social inequality, and changing community needs.

1. Rising Demand & Complexity

Families are experiencing rising and layered challenges including mental health concerns, family violence, housing instability and financial stress. Services are increasingly responding to crisis rather than providing earlier, preventative support.

Opportunity:
Prioritise early intervention through universal and targeted support to identify vulnerability sooner, reduce escalation, and improve long-term outcomes.

2. Workforce Constraints

Recruitment and retention challenges, an ageing workforce and strong sector competition are impacting service capacity, continuity and quality.

Opportunity:
Strengthen workforce sustainability by investing in attraction, retention and development, while building multidisciplinary practice, cultural capability and staff wellbeing.

3. Funding & Cost Pressures

Funding has not kept pace with demand or rising costs and is often short-term and program specific. This limits service adaptability, innovation and the ability to respond to emerging needs.

Opportunity
Data-informed decision making and targeted investment. Use local data and evidence to guide investment toward high-impact services and priority cohorts.

4. Equity, Inclusion and Access

Families from CALD, Aboriginal and disadvantaged backgrounds face structural barriers including language, cultural safety, system navigation and trust, resulting in inequitable access and outcomes.

Opportunity:
Co-design with community and lived experience. Embed genuine co-design approaches with communities to ensure services are culturally safe, accessible and responsive. Strengthen community-led and place-based responses.

5. Fragmented Service System

Services are often disconnected, resulting in duplication, gaps and poor navigation. Families must repeat their story and coordinate their own care across multiple providers.

Opportunity:
Place-based, integrated service delivery. Strengthen local service integration through partnerships, shared pathways and coordinated responses. Progress models that provide 'no wrong door' access and wraparound support.

6. Government Reforms

Ongoing government reforms are reshaping roles, responsibilities and service delivery structures, creating both opportunities and uncertainty for local government.

Opportunity:
Strengthen partnerships to position Council as a system leader, influencing reform to meet local needs and support cohesive service delivery.

Challenges and Opportunities for Community

What our children, young people, families and community told us…

They want timely, affordable and stigma-free mental health support, safe and inclusive communities, and stronger social and cultural connections that foster a sense of belonging. They also want services that are easier to find and access, meaningful opportunities to have a voice in decisions that affect them, and clear pathways to education, training and employment.

1. Mental health, wellbeing and support

2. Feeling safe, included and respected

3. Stronger connections to community, culture, and others

4. Genuine voice, participation and co-design

5. Access, affordability and navigating services

6. Learning, development and future pathways



Priority Themes

1 | Leading and Partnering

2 | Healthy and Thriving

3 | Engaged and Valued

4 | Belonging, Safety and Connection

5 | Learning and Growing

1 | Leading and Partnering

Strategic Objective | Work in partnership to lead and advocate for coordinated responses that improve access to support, and improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

What Community Told Us

Children, young people and families told us that cost of living pressures, housing stress, and knowing where to go for support are key challenges in their day-to-day lives. These pressures can limit access to essential services, opportunities and community participation, particularly for those experiencing disadvantage. These interrelated and complex issues highlight the importance of a well-connected, responsive and easy-to-navigate service system.

Council plays an important role as a leader, advocate, deliverer, facilitator and partner, working across government, community and service providers to strengthen the local service system. Through this role, Council advocates for community needs, supports coordinated responses, improves access to services, and contributes to addressing structural disadvantage and enhancing quality of life.

Council Plan		Priority	Council's Role	Measure
A Council that demonstrates leadership, responsible use of public resources, and a commitment to investing in community.	1.1	Work with partners to identify, respond to, and advocate for emerging needs and trends affecting children, young people, and families.	Partner | Advocate	Number of new coordinated responses led or initiated by Council to address emerging needs and trends impacting children, young people and families.
	1.2	Facilitate local service networks to strengthen collaboration, share information and improve coordination across the service system.	Facilitate	Increased number of local services engaged in networks, coordinated approaches or initiatives facilitated by Council that improve collaboration and service coordination for children, young people and families.
	1.3	Support sector development by building capacity, sharing knowledge and promoting effective, coordinated practice across services.	Deliver	Increase in the number of capacity-building initiatives led or facilitated by Council that strengthen sector capability and coordinated practice.
	1.4	Proactively pursue funding and partnership opportunities to address identified gaps and improve access to support for the community.	Lead	Increase in the number of funding and partnership initiatives pursued by Council to address identified service gaps and improve access for children, young people and families.

2 | Healthy and Thriving

Strategic Objective | Increase positive health and wellbeing outcomes for children, young people and families (0–25) over the life of the strategy by strengthening mental health, supporting active living, enhancing social connection, and improving access to quality care and healthy environments.

What Community Told Us

Children, young people and families told us that health and wellbeing are a key priority. They place strong emphasis on mental health, social connection and opportunities for active living. Access to services, trusted support, safe parks and playgrounds, and inclusive spaces that support physical activity and community connection are essential.

Council Plan		Priority	Council's Role	Measure
A socially connected, safe and healthy city	2.1	Support the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and vulnerable families by facilitating early identification, referral and connection to trusted services and programs.	Facilitate	Reported improvement in number of children, young people and families accessing mental health support.
	2.2	Support families facing vulnerabilities affecting parenting through a family-centred Enhanced Maternal and Child Health (MCH) program.	Deliver	Increase in the number of families accessing the Enhanced MCH program.
	2.3	Deliver quality health services through immunisation with targeted outreach to students facing access barriers.	Deliver	Increase immunisation consent and vaccinations delivered within the Secondary School Program.
	2.4	Enable children, young people and families to adopt active and healthy lifestyles through participation in physical activity, access to healthy food, and support for overall wellbeing.	Deliver | Facilitate	Children, young people and families participating in and reporting improved physical activity, and a healthy lifestyle through council-supported initiatives.
	2.5	Support the delivery of health education and initiatives that promote community wellbeing, including those that prevent and reduce the impacts of alcohol and other drug use.	Deliver	Participants in council supported education and prevention initiatives reporting increased awareness and confidence to make safer decisions.
	2.6	Collaborate with key health and wellbeing agencies to support and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.	Partner	Increase in involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies in active partnerships. Increase in the number of families accessing the Aboriginal MCH Nurse.

3 | Engaged and Valued

Strategic Objective | Increase participation and engagement of children, young people and families in decisions that affect them, by ensuring their voices are heard, their contributions are valued and acted on, and that participation is inclusive, safe and respectful of culture and identity.

What Community Told Us
Children, young people and families told us they feel engaged and valued when they are listened to, included in decisions that affect them, and able to participate in ways that are accessible, inclusive and responsive to their needs, with clear evidence that their input leads to action.

Council Plan		Priority	Council's Role	Measure
A socially connected, safe and healthy city	3.1	Facilitate children, young people, and families to have their voices heard and to co-design and deliver initiatives, ensuring their perspectives directly influence Council decision-making.	Facilitate	Increased participation and influence of children, young people and families in Council decision-making and initiatives.
	3.2	Support children and young people to develop leadership skills, contribute to their community and be recognised and celebrated as active citizens.	Deliver	Increase the percentage of young people who report positive outcomes across participation, leadership, voice and recognition.
	3.3	Enable children and young people to participate in environmental sustainability and climate action learning and initiatives.	Partner	Creating opportunities for children and young people to participate in sustainability initiatives; including a reported increase in knowledge and confidence to take climate action.

4 | Belonging, Safety and Connection

Strategic Objective | Increase positive experiences of belonging, safety and connection for children, young people and families, so they feel included, supported and able to participate in community life.

What Community Told Us

Children, young people and families told us that strong relationships, safe environments free from bullying and discrimination, and a sense of belonging are central to their wellbeing and growth. They value opportunities to connect, feel included and safely participate in community life. When these strengths are present, children and young people are more confident, supported and able to thrive.

Council Plan		Priority	Council's Role	Measure
A city of accessible, vibrant centres and places	4.1	Strengthen social cohesion and a sense of belonging by supporting inclusive, culturally safe and connected communities.	Lead	Increase the number of community members who report a sense of belonging, inclusion and cultural safety.
	4.2	Prevent and respond to family violence by addressing its underlying causes and strengthening support for children, young people and families.	Deliver | Partner | Facilitate	Reduce risk and impact of family violence by strengthening early intervention, safety, and support for children, young people and families.
	4.3	Promote inclusion, equity and respect across the community, particularly for children, young people and families, including LGBTIQA+ people and those facing barriers to participation.	Lead | Partner | Facilitate	Priority groups represented (including LGBTIQA+ people and those facing barriers) in programs relative to the community.
	4.4	Strengthen community safety through prevention, early intervention and partnership approaches that respond to community safety concerns.	Lead | Partner | Facilitate	Increase in the number of children, young people and families who report feeling safer and more supported in their community.
	4.5	Support children, young people and their families to safely navigate digital environments and emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), by building awareness, resilience and safe online behaviours.	Lead | Partner | Facilitate	Number of children, young people and families who report increased confidence and capability to safely navigate digital environments and technologies.

5 | Learning and Growing

Strategic Objective | Increase positive outcomes across key life stages, including early childhood development, school engagement, and successful transitions into further education, training, employment and community participation.

What Community Told Us
Children, young people and families told us they want stronger skills, clearer pathways and better support to navigate school and their future. They highlighted the importance of building confidence, communication and social skills, as well as access to practical learning opportunities and support through key transitions.

Learning and growing recognises that development begins in the first 1,000 days and continues through early learning, school transitions and into adolescence and young adulthood. It includes strong early foundations, support through key transitions, and opportunities for young people to build skills, confidence and pathways into further education, training and employment, including informal learning and community participation.

Council Plan		Priority	Council's Role	Measure
A city that supports business, entrepreneurship, quality education and employment outcomes	5.1	Support vulnerable parents to foster their child's development as their first educator through accessible MCH services, Children's Services and community supports.	Facilitate | Deliver	Number of first-time and vulnerable parents who report increased confidence in supporting their child's health, development and learning.
	5.2	Promote and support enrolment and participation in 3-and 4-year-old kindergarten, with a focus on vulnerable children.	Facilitate	Increase in the number of children enrolled in and attending 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten, including those from priority cohorts.
	5.3	Strengthen a whole-of-council approach to supporting children and young people navigating key education transitions, notably pre-school to primary school, and primary school to secondary school.	Partner | Facilitate	Increased participation of children, young people and families engaged in initiatives that support key education transitions.
	5.4	Facilitate opportunities for young people to build skills, confidence and experience through informal learning, volunteering and pathways to education, training and employment.	Facilitate	Number of young people who report increased skills, confidence and readiness for education, training or employment.
	5.5	Strengthen referral pathways for young people experiencing, or at risk of, disengagement from education and employment.	Facilitate	Number of young people who report being successfully connected to education, training or employment opportunities.
	5.6	Support participation in library, arts and cultural programs as spaces for learning, exploration and community participation for children, young people and families.	Facilitate	Number of children, young people and families who report increased participation in and connection to learning, arts and cultural experiences.



Monitoring Outcomes

Action Plan Implementation

Council's Children, Youth and Family Services teams will lead the implementation and monitoring of this strategy. Annual action plans for each unit will accompany this strategy, to support its implementation and to provide a framework for annually reviewing the progress against each strategic objective.

Monitoring and Review

Key outcomes will be reported in line with Council annual reporting processes.

Appendix

Legislative and Policy Context This strategy has been informed by a range of Local, State and Federal policies and legislation.

Local (City of Greater Dandenong)

- Community Vision 2040
- Council Plan 2025–2029 (including Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan)
- Youth and Family Strategy 2021–2026
- Children's Plan 2021–2026
- Community Safety Plan 2026-30 (in development)
- Open Space Strategy 2020–2030
- Anti-Poverty Strategy 2022–2025
- Reconciliation Action Plan 2025–2027
- Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy 2022–2026 (under review)
- Library Strategy 2022–2026 (under review)
- Make Your Move Physical Activity Strategy 2020–2030
- Our Bright Green Future Strategy 2026-2036
- Economy and Place Strategy 2026-2036
- Disability Action Plan (in development)

State

- Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008
- Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005
- Children, Youth and Families Act 2005
- Victorian Child Safe Standards 2022
- Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023–2027
- Wellbeing in Victoria: Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2025–2035
- Victorian Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy 2025–2035
- Best Interests Framework for Vulnerable Children and Youth
- Best Start, Best Life Reforms 2024–2036
- Our Promise, Your Future: Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022–2027
- Supporting Children and Families in the Early Years (2017–2027)
- Victoria's Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility (2013–2022)
- Pathways to Support for Children and Families: Priority Setting Plan 2021–2024

Appendix

Legislative and Policy Context This strategy has been informed by a range of Local, State and Federal policies and legislation.

Federal

- Education and Care Services National Regulations
- Early Years Learning Framework 2022
- Early Years Strategy 2024–2034
- National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020–2030
- Engage: Strategy to Include Young People in Decisions 2024
- Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2021–2031)
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Australia)

