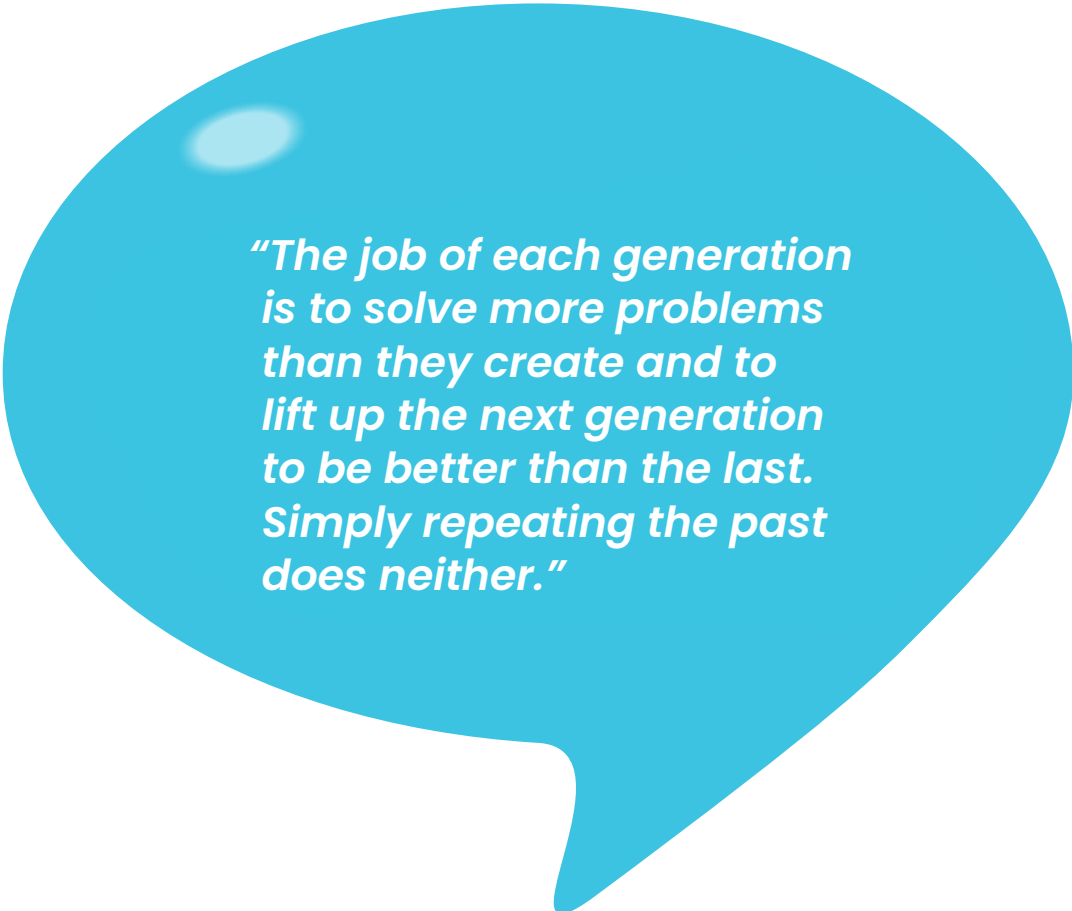




Municipal Early Years Plan 2024-2027

**Building Our Best
Future Together.**





"The job of each generation is to solve more problems than they create and to lift up the next generation to be better than the last. Simply repeating the past does neither."



L.R. Knost

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and their ongoing connection to the land and waters that make up Baw Baw Shire. We pay our respects to their Elders; past, present and emerging.

We thank the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for caring for Country and continuing the customs that maintain the longest practised culture in the world. We also recognise that Aboriginal people have been nurturing and teaching children on this land for many thousands of years; we honour and respect that role.

A healthy and well Baw Baw Shire involves embracing the lived experiences and contributions of all cultures in our community; this starts with the recognition and inclusion of First Nations peoples.

Baw Baw Shire Council's Statement of Commitment to Child Safety

Council is committed to providing and actively promoting a safe environment for children. Council has zero tolerance towards child abuse, and is committed to protecting the physical, emotional, cultural and social wellbeing of all children. Council has policies and systems to protect children, and all allegations and safety concerns will be treated seriously.

Baw Baw Shire Council acknowledges that children's safety is a whole of community responsibility and is everyone's business.

Recognition of Diversity and Inclusion

We recognise and celebrate diversity in our community, we acknowledge and respect the skills, insights and life experiences of all community members irrespective of gender, ethnicity, ability, sexuality or age.

Preventing Violence Against Women

Council promotes the prevention of violence against women, through leading gender equity and building respectful and safe relationships and breaking down gender stereotypes.

Baw Baw Shire's commitment to children

To the children of Baw Baw

We want you to achieve your goals and we will support you to be the best you can be

We understand that family, friends and loved ones are important to you

We will ask you about things that are important to you , and we will listen to what you say

We will take your worries seriously

We want you to have family friendly spaces and places, and feel connected to your community

We want you and your family to have access to the supports you need

We want want you to thrive, and

Reach for the stars.



Mayoral introduction.

Our children hold our future and it's never been more important for Baw Baw Shire Council to forward plan for our next generations.

On behalf of Council, I am very proud to present the "Building our Best Future Together: the *Municipal Early Years Plan 2024-2027*".

As we face unprecedented growth and huge policy change, we must stay focused on achieving great outcomes for children and their families.

Baw Baw Shire is one of Victoria's fastest growing municipalities. Between the years 2021-2041, the population is projected to increase by 51.5%. and we know that the growth anticipated is disproportionately high for families with young children. Over the same time frame, the proportion of 0-4 year olds will increase by 67%. By 2041, there is projected to be approximately 14,000 children aged between 0-12 in Baw Baw. This is 5,400 more than in 2021 and will comprise 16% of the total population of the Shire.

Planning and managing such significant growth requires strategic thinking, and an outcome focused approach. Council needs to be agile and responsive and listen to what our changing community needs.

In addition to growth, we are facing some of the most significant policy changes in recent history. The Best Start, Best Life reform announced by the Victorian State Government in 2022 will introduce massive change for the community. By the end of the reform, three-year-old kindergarten hours will increase to 15 hours, while four-year-old will extend to 30 hours per week.

Changes to Maternal and Child Health Services will see increased access to Key Ages and Stages visits for babies and toddlers, as well as additional lactation consultancy support. This will require workforce and facility planning in order to scale up these services.

This plan articulates Council's role in early years, setting out key strategies, which will deliver against the

themes identified through our deliberative community consultation. It will make clear which areas we are delivering initiatives, partnering on work, or promoting strategies towards our planned outcomes. The plan sets out a solid, strategic path to respond to both growth and policy change.

I look forward to watching Council's progress against the strategy as we all work to make Baw Baw a wonderful place for our children.

Sincerely,

Cr Annemarie McCabe
Mayor of Baw Baw Shire





"It's a trampoline to do roly-polys and tricks. I can go on it with my brother and sister and neighbours. On the yellow slide you go up and oh, yeah, it totally goes fast! In the (green) swing, you put your body through. In my park there are flowers on the ground and love hearts for clouds."

Daisy (age 5)

The importance of Early Years.

Why an early years plan?

Over the last three decades, there has been a growing body of evidence demonstrating the importance of the first years of a child's life. These are the years when the brain develops at its greatest rate across all the lifespan stages. In fact, this brain development will create the foundations for all learning and development later in life.

The Centre for Community Child Health (a research group of Murdoch Children's Research Institute) delivered The First Thousand Days Evidence Paper in 2017. This key Australian publication showed that:

- Experiences in early childhood have a lasting impact. The best opportunity to build a strong foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing occurs between conception to the end of a child's second year
- The social and environmental conditions in which families are conceiving and raising children have a direct impact on a child's development
- It is never too late to make changes that improve health and wellbeing
- Raising healthy, happy children is a whole-of-community responsibility. A child's development is supported by positive relationships with friends

and neighbours, and access to things like playgrounds, parks, shops and local services including child care, schools, health centres and libraries.

- Safe, cohesive, child-centred neighbourhoods and communities are important for early childhood development

A Municipal Early Years Plan (MEYP) is a local area plan designed to provide a strategic direction for the development and coordination of early years programs, activities and other local community development processes

that impact on children (MAV, 2018). An MEYP is not a statutory obligation of local government. However, it is a critical strategy which defines Council's role in early years, and articulates the work undertaken on behalf of children and families in their municipal area. It ensures critical thinking, analysis and measurement of activities designed to improve outcomes for children.

This MEYP sets the strategy for Council's work in early years between 2024-2027. It was developed in partnership with Council's Early Years Advisory Committee.

"Understanding how important early experiences and relationships are to lifelong development is one step in supporting children and families. The next step is to apply that knowledge to current practices and policies".

Harvard University, Centre for the Developing Child (2023)



"My park has a green slide with holders to help you get down. The slide changes colour in the rain. There is a rainbow butterfly but there is a polar bear and a bug because it is an animal park."

Hudson (age 5)

Early Years Legislative and Strategic Policy Framework.

Victorian Legislation and Statutory Plans

Local Government Act 2020

Victorian Public Health & Wellbeing Plan 2023-2027

Education and Care Services National Law (2010)

Child Safety and Wellbeing Act 2005

Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011)

Baw Baw Shire Statutory Plans

Baw Baw Shire Community Vision

Council Plan 2021 - 2025

Municipal Public Health & Wellbeing Plan & Action Plan 2021 - 2025

Baw Baw Shire Non Statutory Plans and Policies

Council's Non Statutory Plans

Arts, Culture and Events Strategy 2017-2021

Environment Sustainability Strategy 2018-2023

Child Safe Policy 2022

Kindergarten Central Enrolment Policy 2023

Municipal Early Years Infrastructure Plan

Youth Policy 2018

Open Space Strategy 2023



"This is how a caterpillar works."

Mack (age 5)

Just like Mack's caterpillar, so do children develop. They go through cycles and stages of development, each requiring support and care to optimise the outcomes across the lifespan.

"How each level of government considers and responds to the early years life stage differs, but with these differences come opportunities to partner, strengthen and leverage overall capacity to amplify positive outcomes for children, families, and communities."

Municipal Association of Victoria (2023)

Early Years Strategy Submission in response to the
Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper April 2023

Council's role in the early years. What do we do?

The Municipal Association of Victoria articulates the role of local government in early years as falling under five key areas:

- Planning and coordination
- Service provision
- Facility planning
- Advocacy
- Strengthening community capacity.

Baw Baw Shire Council operates in all these areas.

1: Planning and coordination

Council has an integral and legislated role in the planning for services in the municipality, and the MEYP is a significant strategic planning document for Council. Through the planning process associated with developing, implementing and evaluating the MEYP, Council seeks to achieve the following benefits for the community:

- Provision of a long term strategic early years planning guide across all Council departments
- Articulation of Council's role in the early years
- Engagement of partners in planning for the future
- Support for Council in making informed decisions and maximising resources
- Providing a basis for partnership and negotiation with other levels of government

2: Service provision

Council's direct service delivery within the early years is through the Family and Children's Services (FaCS) department. This department operates predominately out of Council's facility at 144 Normanby Street, Warragul. The Maternal and Child Health service also consults from outreach offices in Trafalgar, Drouin, Willow Grove and Erica.

Baw Baw Shire Council's Family and Children's Services

- Universal Maternal and Child Health Service
- Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service
- Family Day Care
- Supported playgroups
- New parent groups
- Pre-school Field Officer Service
- Kindergarten Central Enrolment Scheme
- Family Friendly Baw Baw Program

3: Facility planning

This involves planning, providing and maintaining a range of early years infrastructure. Council provides the physical infrastructure from which several early years services operate:

- Seven kindergartens
- Four Maternal and Child Health Centres
- Several buildings which house community playgroups
- The Warragul Leisure Centre, which provides occasional care

In addition, Council has responsibility (through leases with the Victorian Government's Department of Education) for four early learning facilities on school sites:

- Drouin Primary Early Learning Centre
- Warragul Primary Early Learning Centre
- Trafalgar Primary Early Learning Centre
- Drouin West Early Learning Centre

4: Advocacy

Council regularly seeks and participates in advocacy opportunities in the early years. In recent years, Council has been actively advocating for increased funding for early years infrastructure required in Baw Baw Shire to service the rapidly growing population. Under the Advancing Baw Baw Advocacy Program, early years infrastructure investment is a Tier One Priority:

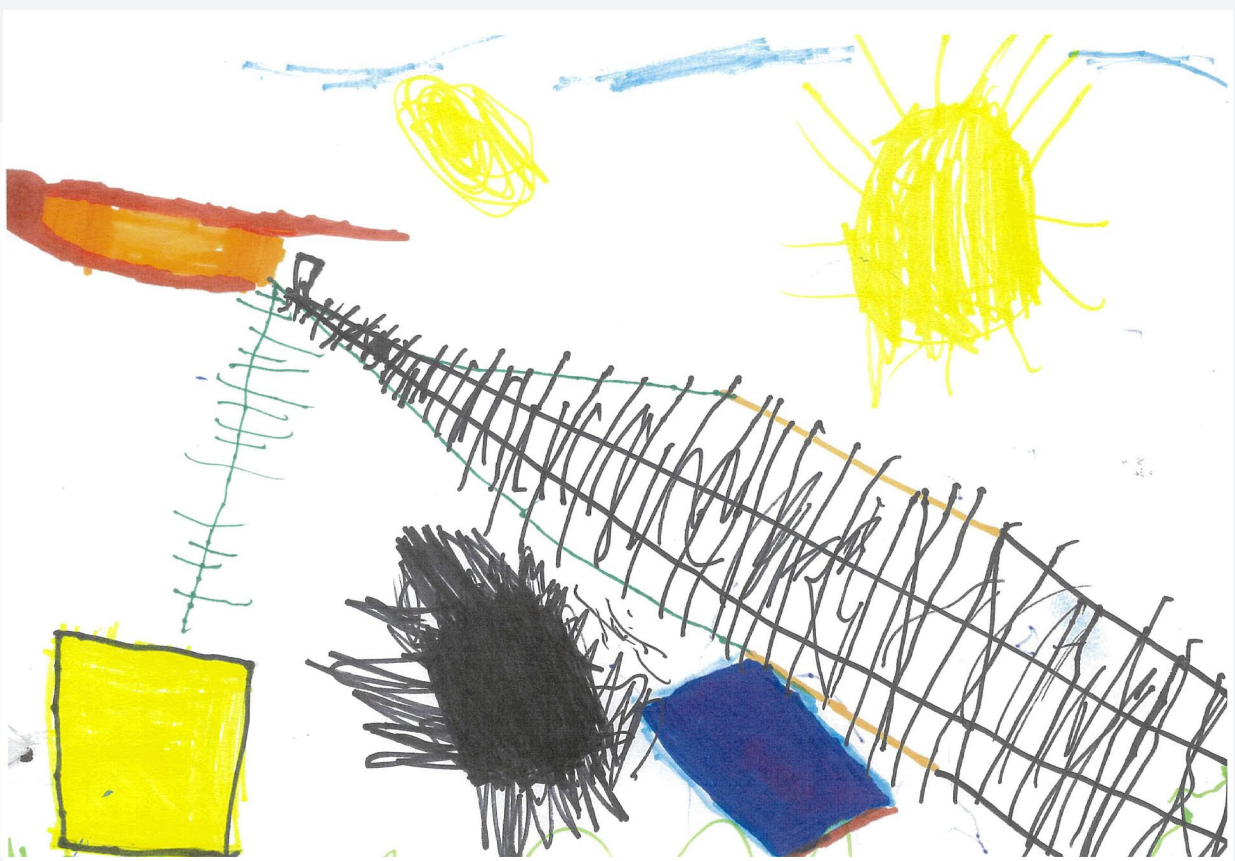
"Council is seeking commensurate funding and resources to respond to recent State Government early years sector reforms which place pressure on local kindergarten infrastructure and personnel."

Since 2022, Council has also been advocating strongly for the support and resources required to facilitate the delivery of the State Government Best Start, Best Life reforms.

5: Strengthening community capacity

All services and programs within the FaCS department are aimed at supporting and developing families' capacity to care for children, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability. This is undertaken through the delivery of multiple programs, including Maternal and Child Health, Supported Playgroups, and the Preschool Field Officer Service.

On a community-based level, one of the key capacity strengthening initiatives is the 'Family Friendly Baw Baw' program. This program aims to work with the community to continue to develop Baw Baw Shire into a safe and welcoming place for children and families.



*"I have a sandpit, and a trampoline and there's a pool.
There's a slide - a really big one."*

Jack (age 5)



"I'm in the park with Dad. It's a big slide with a ladder. And the trees have apples. The apples are for all of the people to eat."

Ava (age 5)

Baw Baw's Children.

Located 100 kilometres east of Melbourne, Baw Baw Shire is one of Victoria's fastest growing municipalities. Stretching across 4,027 square kilometres, the Shire offers a mix of farmland, national parks, and residential areas. The large geographic area the Shire covers presents some challenges for service and infrastructure provision, particularly in communities more remote from major townships. There is a high need for services and infrastructure in the major townships of Warragul and Drouin, but also in smaller townships and communities such as Trafalgar, Yarragon, Longwarry, Neerim South, Willow Grove, and Thorpdale.

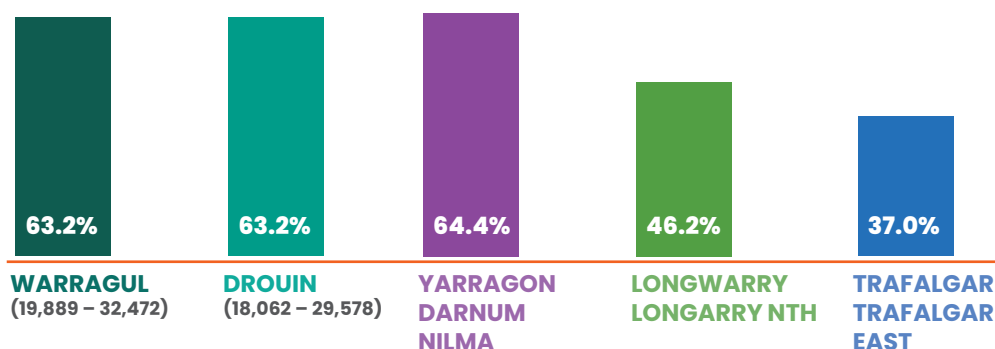
POPULATION GROWTH 2021 – 2041

Baw Baw Shire

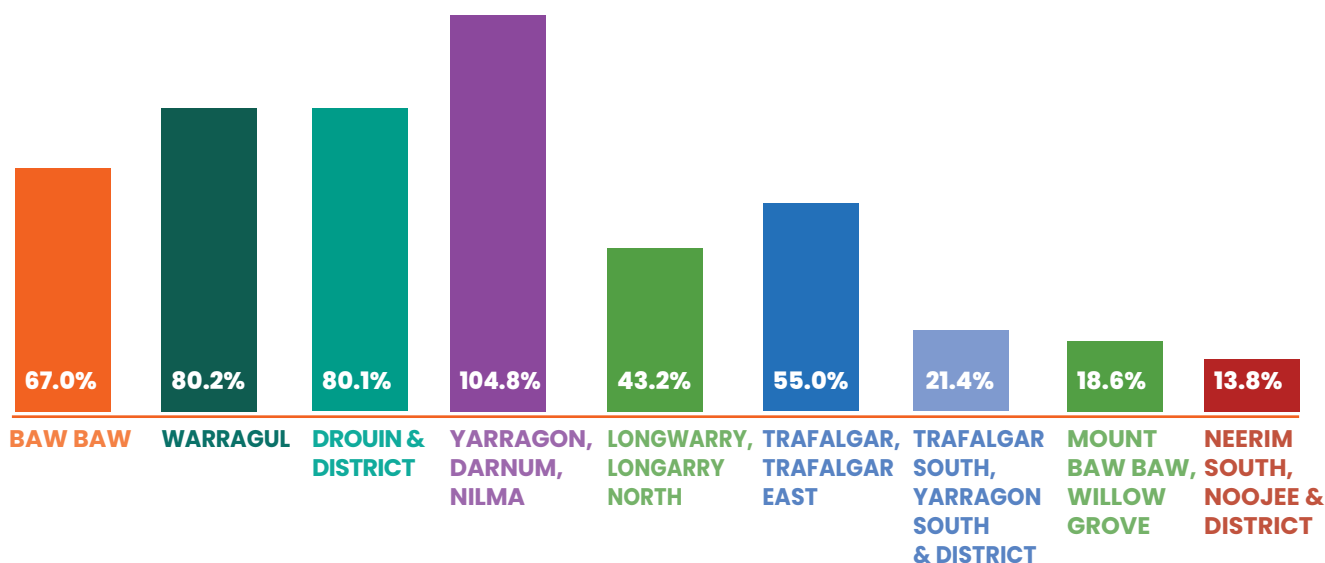
↑ **51.5%**

Highest growth
expected between
2021 and 2031

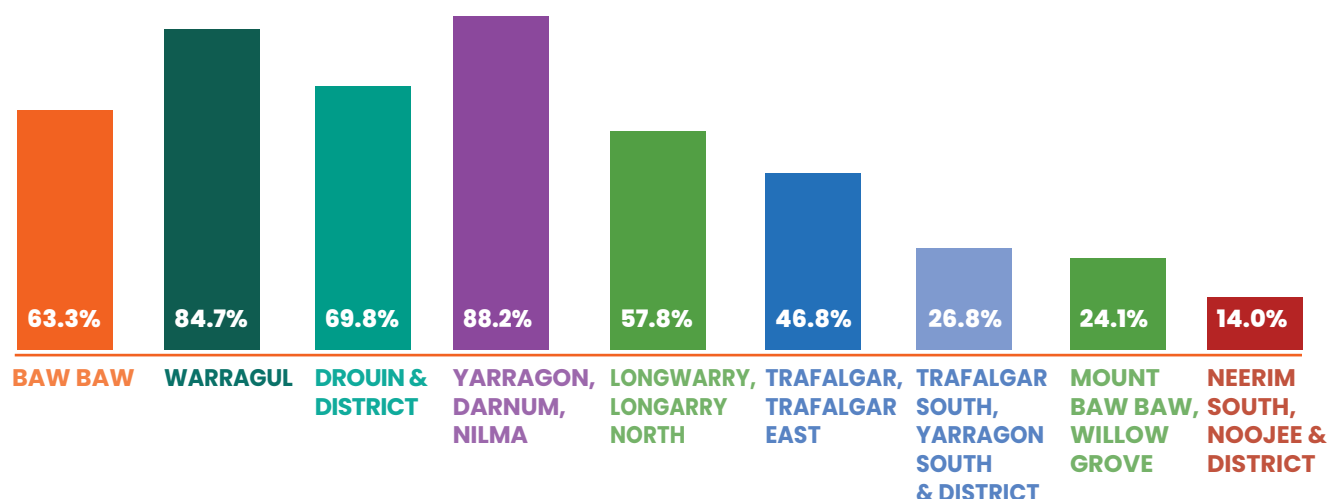
(57,626 – 87,281)



GROWTH 2021 – 2041 [0-4]



GROWTH 2021 – 2041 [5–9]



DISADVANTAGE & VULNERABILITY

Area	SEIFA	
Baw Baw	1003.0	<p>Baw Baw Shire has lower levels of disadvantage than Regional Victoria and the Gippsland Region, but some communities experience higher disadvantage including Longwarry – Longwarry North, Drouin South and Mount Baw Baw – Willow Grove and District</p> <p>↑ developmental vulnerability amongst children in their first year of school especially in: Drouin, Longwarry, Trafalgar / Yarragon and surrounds and Warragul.</p>
Longwarry – Longwarry North	966.9	
Drouin South	985.4	
Mt Baw Baw – Willow Grove District	989.6	
Regional Victoria	985.0	
Gippsland Region	872.0	
Greater Melbourne	1018.0	

DIVERSITY

An increasing number of people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander up from 1.0% in 2016 to 1.3% in 2021

Low but increasing levels of cultural diversity. 12.1% of the population born overseas in 2021, up from 10.8% in 2016

Need for assistance in daily life

- Overall increase from 6.0% in 2016 to 6.6% in 2021 across the population.
- While the numbers are low, there has been a significant increase in 0 – 4 year olds (45%) and 5 – 9 year olds (63.3%) with a need for assistance in their daily life.

Child Safe Standards and Children's Voice

Baw Baw Shire Council is committed to the safety of all children and recognises it's legal and moral obligations protect children.

This Municipal Early Years Plan has been developed within the boundaries and expectations of Council's Child Safe Policy and Statement of Commitment. The policy is available to view at the following link www.bawbawshire.vic.gov.au/About-Council/Statement-of-Commitment-to-Child-Safety

The Victorian Government's Child Safe Standards state that organisations must have strategies to promote the participation and empowerment of children. Encouraging children to speak up on matters that impact them supports their developing sense of agency and impact, and also critically demonstrates that adults listen when children speak. This is essential messaging for children, who may need to reach out to adults to seek protection. In order to involve children in the development of this strategy, a specific consultation plan was developed. Information about the children's consultation and what they told us is outlined in this plan.



"This is a big house playground to climb on with really big slides. It's high and it's fun to go fast. It has a rainbow, a swing and a slide. The slide has two ladders for climbing. The slide goes down into the ocean."

Myah (age 4)

Developing the plan

The development of this plan was a multi-step process:

1. Review of past MEYP (2019–2023)
2. Review of other MEYPs and relevant legislation and policy
3. Consultation
4. Drafting of plan
5. Review of draft by Council's Early Years Advisory Committee
6. Review and endorsement by Council

The plan has adopted a 'PPP' approach in articulating Council's role across strategies. This clearly defines the how each will be delivered.

The PPP Model

PROVIDE:

Council is responsible for the delivery of the strategy and associated actions

PARTNER:

Council will work with key stakeholders and partners to deliver the strategy

PROMOTE:

Council will share information about strategies and work being delivered by other organisations and partners.



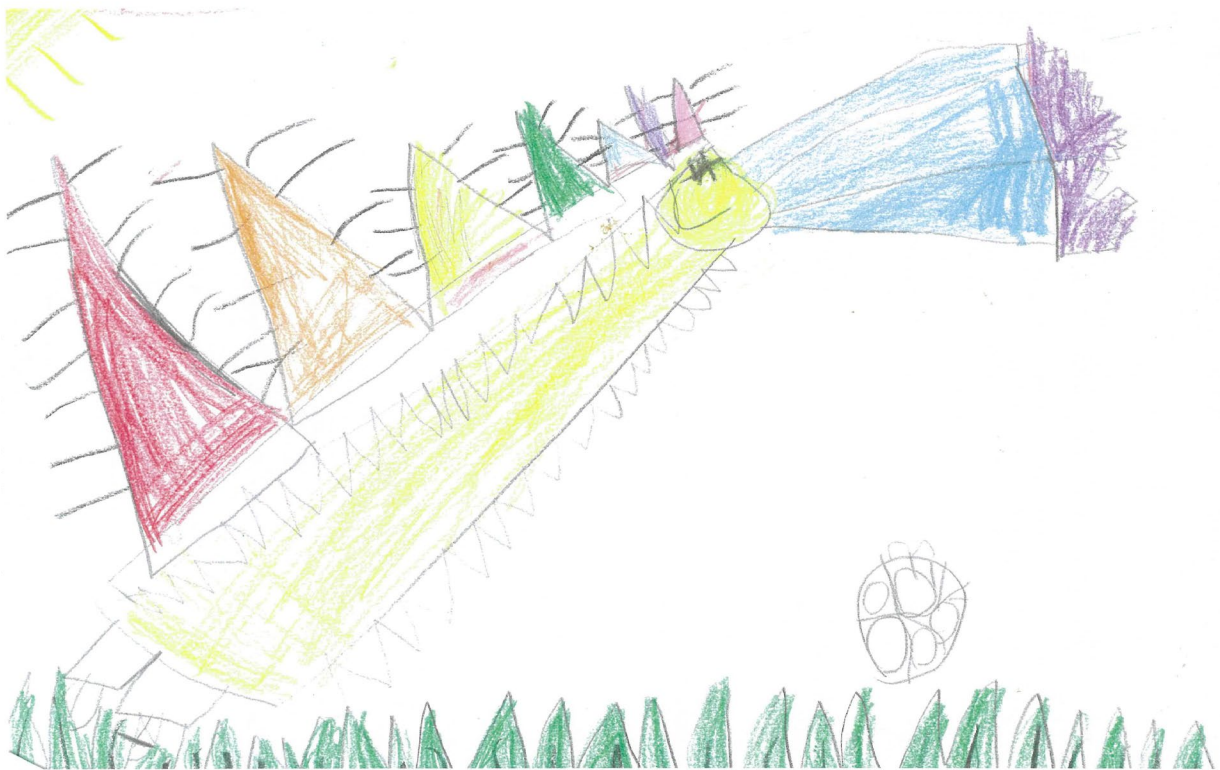
"This is a raspberry tree, you can pick them and people eat them in the park. It's a shady tree."

Scout (age 4)

Consultation and engagement

A substantial consultation process was undertaken in preparation of this MEYP. The consultation and engagement program sought to capture a wide range of voices and perspective. Engagement tools used included:

- An online survey, open to all community members and available through Council's online engagement platform 'Have Your Say'.
- A postcard survey which was made available in key locations including community centres, Libraries, MCH sites, kindergartens, playgroups etc, and through pop up engagement activities.
- A series of pop-up engagement activities to encourage people to complete the online or postcard survey. In total pop-up engagement activities occurred in 4 locations.
- In depth interviews with six parents of children with additional or different needs
- A workshop with Council's Early Year's Advisory Committee.
- Site visits and interviews with key stakeholder organisations.
- Interviews and workshops with Council officers



"This is my dragon park. You can climb high."

Skyler (age 5)

Children's consultation

A specialised, targeted program of consultation was undertaken with children based on the guidelines and principles articulated in *Engaging Children in Decision Making: A Guide for consulting children* (2023).

All primary schools and kindergartens in Baw Baw Shire were invited to participate in the program.

Children's engagement summary

- 185 Children
- 8 schools
- 5 Kindergartens
- 1 Long Day Care Service
- 761 Individual responses recorded

Children took part in a variety of engagement opportunities, including group work, question and answer forums, workshops and brainstorming, and provided various forms of artwork to compliment their contributions. In total, 761 individual responses were recorded from children.

Children were invited to consider the following questions:

- What could be done to make where you live better?
- What have you seen in other areas that would be good to have in Baw Baw?

- If a genie could grant you one wish to do or change anything in your town, what would your wish be?
- What else would you like us to know about what children need in Baw Baw Shire?

Whilst these questions were used as discussion starters, children were not limited in scope or response. Children's commentary was noted verbatim, and collated and analysed for themes.

The voices of all children are important to Council, and dedicated effort was invested in understanding the different perspectives of

children and families with additional or different needs. Six in-depth interviews were held with parents of children with additional needs. The aim of this engagement was to understand Council's role in providing support, and how it can differ from supporting children who are typically developing. The results of these interviews were collated and themes represented in the MEYP strategies.

"Research shows that children and young people want to contribute to the decisions being made about their lives. Not only do they have the capacity and willingness to participate, they have the right to participate; both as children and as equal citizens."

Paterson (2020)

Key findings

The results and outputs of the community engagement work were collated, and the following themes were evident:

Community and stakeholder consultation

- Spaces and places are important to families (parks, playgroups, swimming pools, libraries).
- Nature based play opportunities are highly valued.
- Community events are valued by families, and viewed as a key way of connecting to others
- Outdoor play spaces often lack shade, diversity and are not inclusive of children with additional needs.
- Operating days and hours can be a barrier to accessing services and programs
- Information and awareness of services and programs is vital for parent access

Children's consultation

- Outdoor play spaces are important to children, particularly those that encourage active/interactive play
- Parks and playgrounds need to include challenge and risk (“bigger, higher, faster”)
- There is little diversity in our outdoor play space. Aside from the two Civic Parks, all of the playgrounds are considered the same
- Connection to people and places (‘community’) is important to children.
- Children enjoy engaging with gardens, parks, nature and open, free (unstructured) space

An interesting focus point that emerged from the Children's consultation was an increased focus on social and environmental issues. This covered topics such as

- food security
(e.g. "plant fruit trees so everyone has enough to eat")
- supports for mental health
(e.g. "we need more psych wards")
- care of environment
(e.g. "soft plastic bins for less pollution")
- homelessness (e.g. "we need more homeless shelters nearby")

This trend has not been strongly evident in previous children's consultation work.



LACEY



"This is a swing. There is a climbing frame that you go up and down on. There is a road that leads to the rainbow flowers to pick. You pick some flowers to give to people on their birthday."

Lacey (age 5)

Municipal Early Years Plan 2024 – 2027

The following principles underpin the Municipal Early Years Plan. They are statements of commitment helping to inform, guide, and prioritise decision making. They articulate what is important to Council, it's partners, and the community in planning for children and families.



Principles

INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

We are inclusive of all children and families, embracing and celebrating the diversity of our community.

This means we actively foster First Nations children and families; we are committed to ensuring services, places and spaces are culturally safe; and support children and families of all abilities and backgrounds.

PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

We will always look for and pursue opportunities to partner and collaborate, because we know that by working together, better outcomes can be achieved for children and families.

THE VOICE OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

We will ensure children and families actively inform decision making which impacts upon them.

This means we will consult regularly with families and children and actively involve them in planning for services, programs, places, and spaces that impact upon them.

CHILD SAFETY

We are committed to keeping all children safe from harm because every child has the right to feel safe and grow up in environments that build confidence, friendship, security, and happiness.

Municipal Early Years Plan

2024 – 2027

Family Friendly Spaces and Places

Theme (what we want):

Objectives (What we will do)	Strategies (How we will do it)		
	PROVIDE	PARTNER	PROMOTE
Ensure play spaces offer inclusive, diverse, creative, and adventurous play experiences.	<p>Create a baseline of standards to underpin the design of spaces and places which support children and families.</p> <p>Provide a mobile Feed and Change facility (available on request) at community events.</p> <p>Increase shade options (built and natural) in outdoor play spaces</p>	<p>Ensure that new outdoor spaces are designed and constructed to applicable standards and include consideration of shade, appropriate developmental stages and levels of ability as well as future maintenance. This will be for all spaces delivered, inclusive of those through land development or capital works</p>	<p>Promote and share ideas from within and outside Baw Baw which showcase diverse play experiences for children</p>
Facilitate opportunities for children and families to be engaged in the design of public spaces and community facilities.	<p>Develop a tool kit for Council use which assists Council teams to engage with children on projects</p>	<p>Support the Open Space Maintenance Team with their playground renewal program, through opportunities to engage with children on design</p>	<p>Promote opportunities within the Shire that invite engagement for children and families</p>
Collaborate with the private and business sectors to be FF	<p>Continue to grow the Family Friendly Businesses program</p>	<p>Work with individual businesses to establish spaces and places that are family friendly</p>	<p>Promote the FFBB program through relevant channels, including local business networks</p>

Connections to local community

Theme (what we want):

Objectives (What we will do)	Strategies (How we will do it)		
	PROVIDE	PARTNER	PROMOTE
Facilitate multiple opportunities for families to connect to their local community	Delivery of the Pop up Playgroup pilot project Deliver activities during Children's Week Work with Council teams to develop 'Welcome to Baw Baw' options for new residents		Share information about activities provided by other organisations which support families to connect with their community Share and promote activities being undertaken by the Kurnai Community
Support children to have a sense of belonging and connection	Continue to deliver the Walk to School program annually	Working with local schools, explore the opportunities to develop a Children's newsletter, aimed at Primary School aged children	
Support the development and delivery a range of family and child friendly events	Run the Family Friendly Christmas program annually	Support the WGAC to deliver a program of Family friendly events	Promote family friendly events being hosted by other organisations, including MYLI and private businesses
Increase opportunities for children to connect with nature	Ensure new Council facilities and spaces include nature-based play environments	Support local kindergarten providers to establish bush kindergarten programs	

Municipal Early Years Plan cont.

2024 – 2027

Access and Support

Theme (what we want):

Objectives (What we will do)	Strategies (How we will do it)		
	PROVIDE	PARTNER	PROMOTE
Advocate to the State and Federal Governments for funding to respond to the growing and changing needs the community	Develop Advocacy materials for dissemination to relevant stakeholders		Engage with Ministers, Shadow Ministers, MPs as appropriate to discuss the needs of the community
Ensure that infrastructure and service planning is responsive to the current and future needs of families and children	<p>Review population projections annually</p> <p>Review AEDC and SEIFA data once released to understand areas of vulnerability and disadvantage</p> <p>Undertake biennial satisfaction survey of families utilising Council services</p>	<p>In collaboration with Early Years Partners, develop a work force plan to meet the demand of the Best Start Best Life reform</p> <p>Continue to facilitate the Kindergarten Infrastructure Working Party</p>	
Support the access and inclusion of children with additional needs in programs and within the community	Work to ensure Council run family events include a quiet, low sensory space for children	Work with Council's planning team towards best practice design for accessible car parking	Cross promote the Wheely Serious Project across Council, utilising existing Family Friendly Baw Baw Networks and businesses
Provide families with up to date, accessible information on services and programs	<p>Conduct an annual review of all information on Family and Children's Services page of Baw Baw Shire website to ensure currency.</p> <p>Produce and disseminate a Families newsletter quarterly.</p> <p>Develop a listing of open space options for families, including details of accessibility, fencing, shade, age suitability/level of challenge</p>	In consultation with key partners, maintain and further develop Council's Family Friendly Calendar	Share information with families on the WGAC schedule of programs for families

Thriving children and families

Theme (what we want):

Objectives (What we will do)	Strategies (How we will do it)		
	PROVIDE	PARTNER	PROMOTE
Increase participation in MCH KAS visits	Return to service in outlying areas of the municipality Develop an outreach/ mobile MCH facility		
Support vulnerable children and children at risk of harm	Ensure all Baw Baw Shire Council staff are trained in Child Safe Standards Ensure all maternal and Child Health nurses are trained in Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) framework and the Child Information Sharing Scheme (CISS)	Partner with Early Years Managers to ensure all priority of access children are offered a suitable placement in kindergarten Participate in the High Risk Infant network at the West Gippsland Health Care Group	
Ensure literacy programs are available to children in Baw Baw	Deliver additional community book boxes through the Paint the Town Read Initiative		Work with with MYLI to cross promote literacy programs
Support families to participate in 2 years of funded kindergarten	Deliver and expand Council's Central and Registration and Enrolment Scheme Develop promotional material for families, for dissemination through the Maternal and Children Health Service and online	Participate in a bi annual meeting of kindergarten providers within the CRES system to encourage collaboration in future planning of kindergarten delivery	Promote the State Government Best Start, Best Life initiatives

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"In my dinosaur park there is one big slide. There is rope to play on and climb on. There are four stairs that go up. You climb up the rope and walk through it's mouth and go down the slide or fireman pole. To get up you climb up the rock climbing wall or stairs. What there is in the dinosaur park: Rock climbing, rope, stairs, slide, spikes. What's the extras: Sign, sandpit where you dig for eggs, tent, dinosaur chair, Dinosaur gate, path.

Avery (age 7)

“With thanks to the children whose words inspired this document, and continue to inspire our work”