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Community Child Care Association

Early education service and infrastructure review: Murrindindi Shire Council

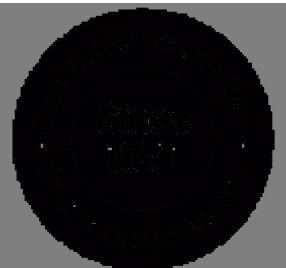
April 2023

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Introduction

Murrindindi Shire Council has engaged Community Child Care Association (CCC) to review future service and infrastructure requirements for early education and care in the Shire of Murrindindi (the “Shire”), with a particular focus on Yea and Alexandra/Eildon, and produce a report detailing short, medium and long term (5-30+ years) priorities to adequately meet service and community requirements.

This report was developed following consultation and observation visits with the early education services operating within the Murrindindi Shire on the 11th and 12th October 2022 and conversations with other relevant stakeholders. A statistical and literature review were conducted to gather evidence about population trends and current evidence about best practice governance in early education and care provision.

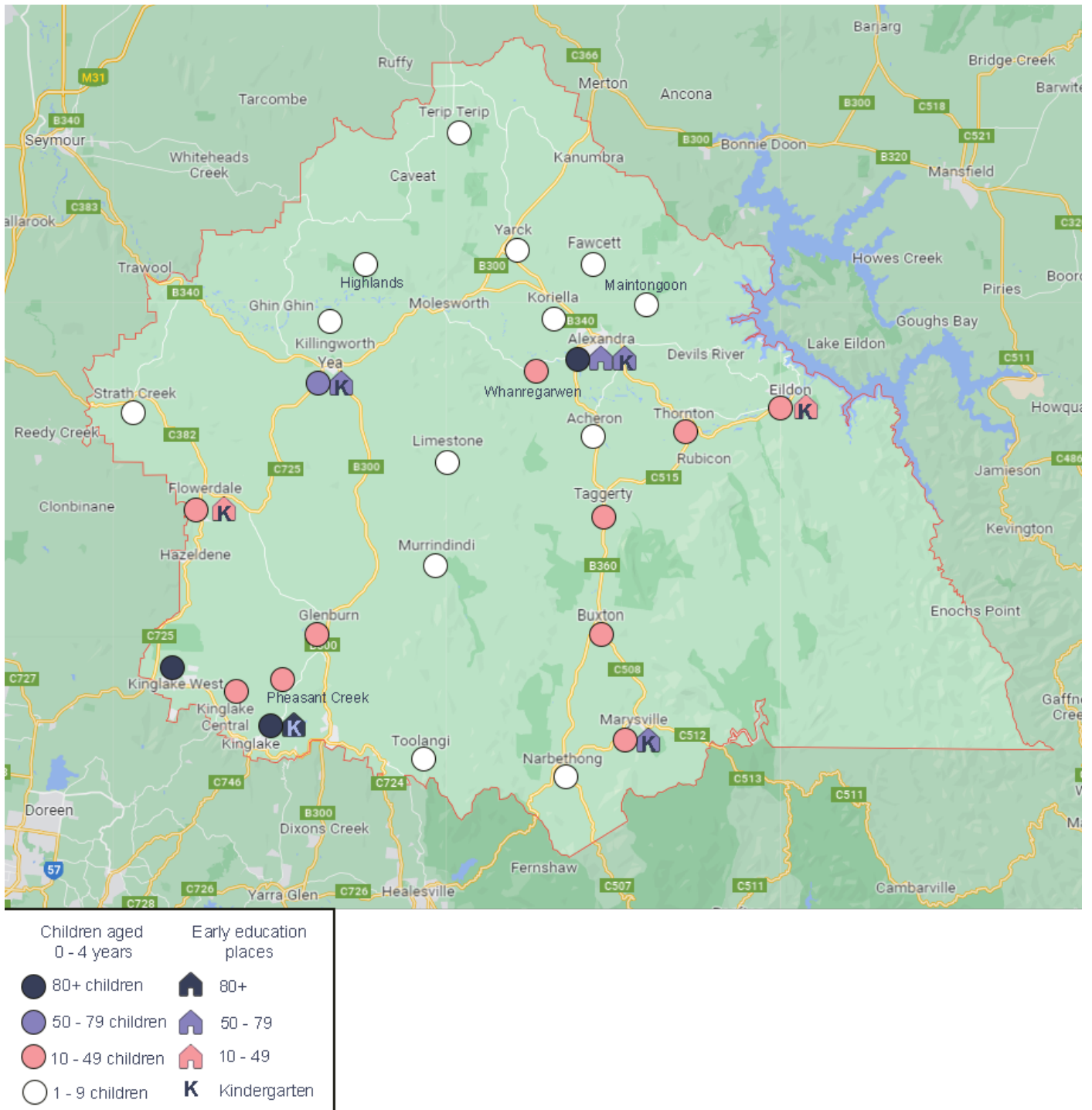
Murrindindi is a large shire geographically, with close to half of the 3,889 square kilometres being crown land. The distances between townships poses a barrier for families with poor access to their own transport as there is no public transport that offers services between towns. Consideration about distances should be given when requiring families to access kindergarten outside the town they live in.

Alexandra – Eildon	= 24.5 kilometres
Alexandra – Marysville	= 40.8 kilometres
Alexandra – Yea	= 31.0 kilometres
Yea – Kinglake	= 48.4 kilometres
Yea – Flowerdale	= 24.1 kilometres

Parts of Murrindindi were badly affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires, notably the towns of Marysville and Kinglake. The rebuilding and rejuvenation of the Shire has provided fire ravaged areas with outstanding community infrastructure in the areas affected by the fire however, other locations in the Shire including Eildon, Alexandra and Yea have older services that are at capacity in terms of the number of early education places they can provide for the community.

The synthesis of information gathered during our consultation and research has led to several recommendations about the course of action and direction that Murrindindi Shire Council will need to consider to provide accessible, high quality education and care for its youngest citizens.

Figure 1: Map of Murrindindi Shire, population of children aged from birth to 4 years and locations of early education and Kindergarten services



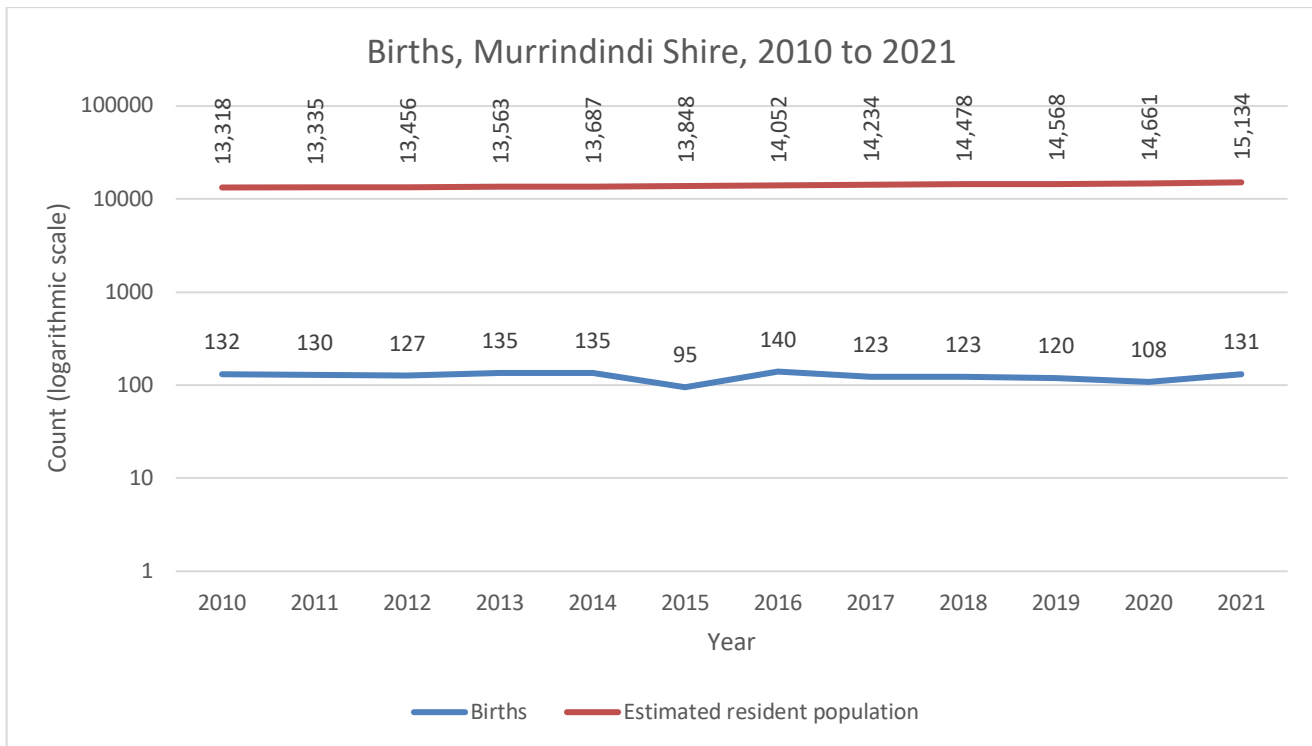
1 Early education in the Murrindindi Shire

This section examines the gap between current supply and projected need in terms of population demand and the need for quality early education in a rural location to support children’s lifelong outcomes.

Information from Birth and Population statistical collections, demonstrate a steady population growth since 2010. The birth rates in Murrindindi Shire have been steady since 2010, however population in the Shire has increased by over 1000 over the period, due to migration into the area. In 2021, there was a jump in the number of births from 108 in the previous year to 131 (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2). According to the 2021, ABS Census of Population and Housing (ABS 2022) there were 641 children aged from birth to 4 years in the Shire on Census night. In Victoria at this time the State was in pandemic lockdown and migration into Australia was halted. This accounts for why the population is slightly lower than the projections that were developed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The original projections, based on the 2006 Census, may be realised when migration and general State population movement returns to normal. These data projections indicate that the number of children in the Murrindindi Shire is expected to increase slowly (between 2% and 3% every 5 years to 2036) (see Table 1.3).

Table 1.1 Births and Estimated Resident Population in Murrindindi Shire, 2010 – 2021



Source: ABS (2022) Births Australia

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/births-australia/latest-release#data-download>

Table 1.2 ABS Census of Population and Housing, count of children aged from birth to 9 years, 2021

Age	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Count	136	117	118	135	135	142	130	140	158	146

Source: ABS (2022) Census of Population and Housing, Census Table Builder.

Table 1.3 Murrindindi projected population (based on 2017 Estimated Resident Population)

	Persons 0-4	Persons 5-9	Early education capacity (count)
ERP as at 30 June 2021	684	726	427
ERP as at 30 June 2026	704	736	427
ERP as at 30 June 2031	719	758	427
ERP as at 30 June 2036	746	780	427

Source: Victoria In Future, Data Tables

<https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/land-use-and-population-research/victoria-in-future/tab-pages/victoria-in-future-data-tables>

1.1 Current early education supply

Eight early education services operate in the Shire with a capacity for 391 children per day. Murrindindi Family Day Care currently supports the provision of 5 educators with a capacity for 24 children on Monday and Friday and 42 children on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. This averages out to 36 children per day. All services are rated Meeting the National Quality Standard (NQS).

Table 1.4 Early education and care services in Murrindindi Shire, Maximum total daily places and service sub type

Service name	Maximum total places (daily)	Service Type
Alexandra & District Kindergarten	51	Kindergarten and long day care
Alexandra Baby Care	29	Long Day Care
Eildon and District Kindergarten	23	Kindergarten
Flowerdale Kindergarten	41	Kindergarten
Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre	120	Kindergarten and long day care
Marysville and District Kindergarten	60	Kindergarten and long day care
Murrindindi Family Day Care	36	Family Day Care
Yea Uniting Early Learning	67	Kindergarten and long day care

Source: ACECQA (2022) NQS Snapshots

Note: Kindergarten services are 15 hour a week programs for 3 year olds and 4 year olds, funded by the Victorian State Government, Long day care is funded by the Australian Government under the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) package.

Most services in the Shire are at functional capacity and several have waitlists. In a recent briefing to council (9 March 2022) it was noted that Council's FDC service receives, on average, 2 calls per week from families looking for care. During our consultation visits, service managers provided the following details about their current wait lists:

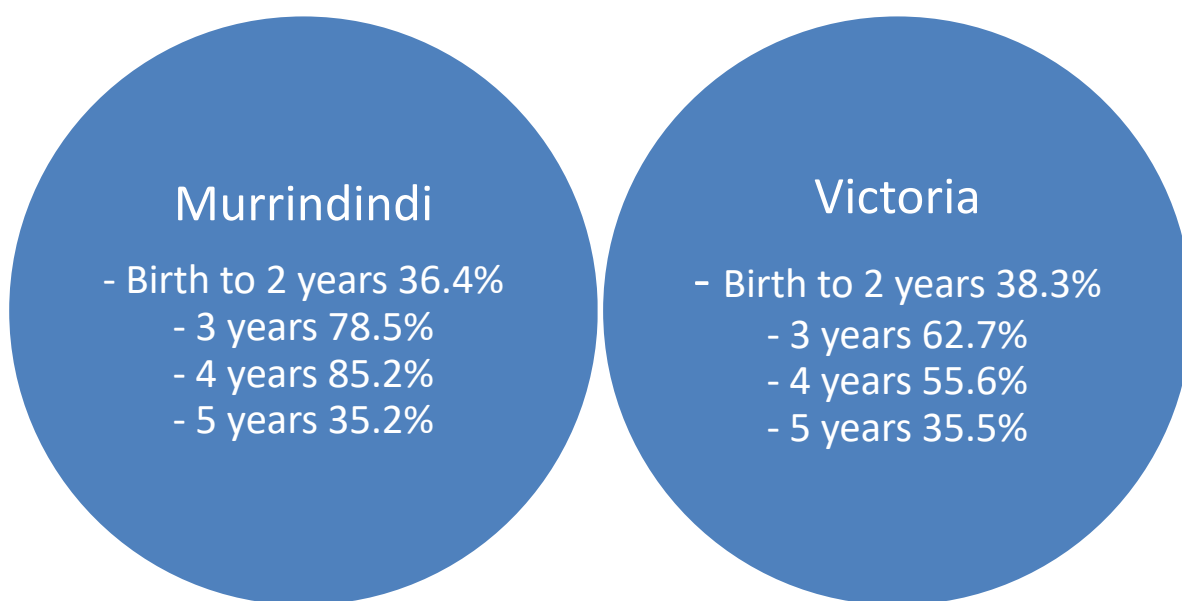
- Alexandra Baby Care have 13 children aged from 6 weeks to two year olds, and 2 children aged 3 years on their waitlist.
- Eildon has 5 children on their waitlist for their 3 and 4 year old kindergarten program.
- Kinglake has 10 children under 2 years of age on their waitlist, 3 children aged 3 years, 2 children aged 4 years and 1 child aged 5 years. Kinglake are running a waitlist for the first time since the service opened in 2011. They have more licence capacity but can't attract and retain Early Childhood Educators to meet ratio requirements.

- Marysville has 2 children under 2 years of age on their waitlist.
- Yea has 27 children aged under 2 years, 3 children aged 3 years and 2 children aged 4 years on their waitlist. Their waitlist is closed for 2022 and has been since July 2022. Many children on the waitlist for 2022 & 2023 are not expected to be offered a place until 2024 or later.

Contrastingly, Flowerdale has 7 places available in their combined 3 and 4 year old Kindergarten program.

In the Murrindindi Shire, rates of enrolment in early education and care are high compared to State averages, except for children aged from 6 weeks up to 3 years of age. The Productivity Commission Report on Government Services (ROGS) provides the rates of enrolment in CCS funded services across Victoria in 2021 (see Table 1.6). These rates are compared with data we collected for this consultation as follows:

Figure 2: Rates of enrolment in CCS funded services, Murrindindi Shire (2022) and Victoria (2021)



Source: The Productivity Commission, Report of Government Services (2022) and consultation data from services.

In both datasets children may be counted twice if they attended more than one service. We understand that many children aged 3 to 5 were also enrolled in Kindergarten programs at their service or at another site. These data exclude services that only provided Kindergarten programs.

Given the high rates of enrolment compared with State averages, the level of children on waiting lists and our feedback from service managers about children attending education and care at more than one service we conclude that:

- Education and care in the Shire is in high demand from families. It is not just Kindergarten programs that are required, families require long day care options.
- Families living outside the Shire are likely to also be utilising services and planning needs to accommodate for population levels above those residing in the Shire.

Table 1.5 Enrolment of children aged 6 weeks to 5 years in Murrindindi Shire education and care services, October 2022

Current enrolments (October 2022)	6 weeks to 1 year	1 year	2 years	6 weeks to 2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years
Alexandra & District Kindergarten					31	43	2
Alexandra Baby Care	2	11	5	18	13	9	5
Eildon and District Kindergarten					4	3	
Flowerdale Kindergarten					4	7	5
Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre	3	11	14	28	25	27	19
Marysville and District Kindergarten	6	3	9	18	35	43	1
Murrindindi Family Day Care				24	11	5	5
Yea Uniting Early Learning				47	22	31	20

Table 1.6 Victorian children attendance in CCS approved child care services

0 years old	10.1%
1 years old	46.1%
2 years old	58.6%
3 years old	62.7%
4 years old	55.6%
5 years old	35.5%

Source: ROGS 2022, Table 3A.14

1.2 Provision and supply of kindergarten programs

Increased demand for kindergarten places is expected in response to the roll out of Best Life, Best Start which aims to provide free kindergarten to both Three and four year old attending kindergarten programs. Over the next decade, Four-Year-Old Kindergarten will transition to 'Pre-Prep' – increasing to a universal 30-hour a week program of play-based learning for every four-year-old child in Victoria. Murrindindi Shire have been included in the roll out for 2025. This means that the funded kindergarten hours for Four-year-old children will double. Service capacity will also be stretched with the expansion of Four-Year-Old Kinder. In the Victorian Kindergarten Capacity Assessment Program report for Murrindindi Local Government Area, findings suggested that:

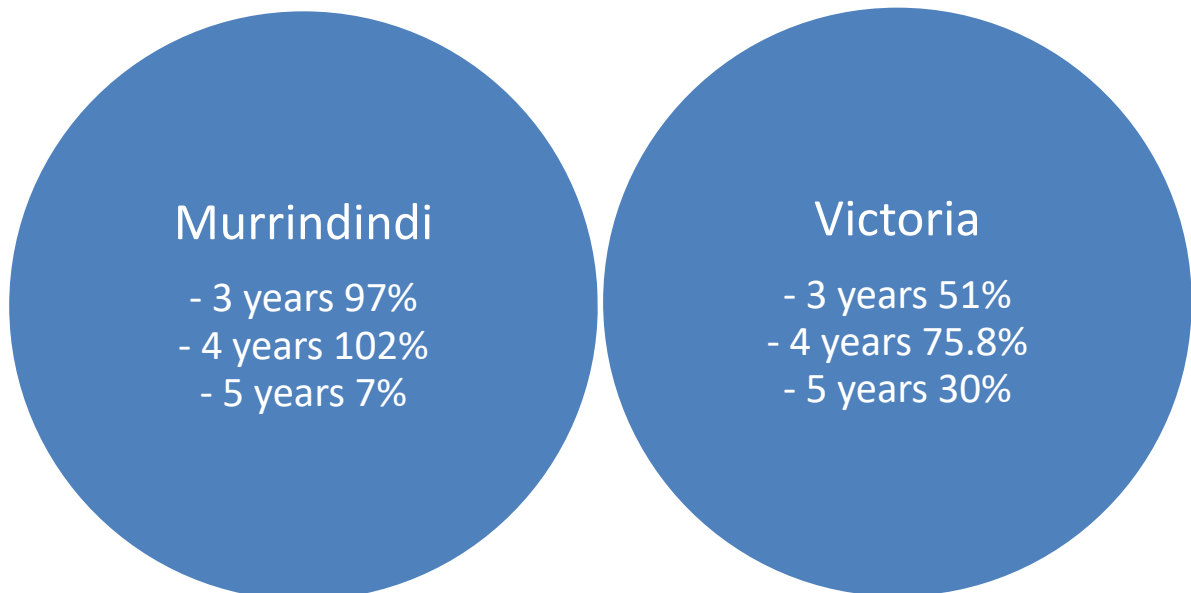
“Victoria in Future (VIF) 2019 projects that the three and four-year-old population in the Murrindindi Shire will increase from 282 to 300 children over the reform roll-out period (2021-2029). The Department estimates that this growth, in combination with the rollout of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten, will cause estimated demand for kindergarten places to increase over this period.

It is estimated that the Murrindindi Shire has sufficient existing capacity to deliver 15 hours of funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten to meet demand throughout the reform. (p.3)”

Whilst the infrastructure meets the capacity requirements there was evidence during our consultation visits that the current utilisation of kinder places could be shifted to accommodate more children by offering two 7.5 hours sessions rather than three 5 hour sessions in some services. However, many services reported that recruitment was currently a lengthy and difficult process and in one service they needed to operate below their licenced capacity due to not being able to recruit an Early Childhood Teacher for a length of time. Currently the provision of Kindergarten meets the population requirements. There were 274 children enrolled in Kindergarten across the region which is similar to the number of children in the Shire.

In Murrindindi Shire, rates of enrolment in Kindergarten programs are high compared to State averages. The Productivity Commission Report on Government Services (ROGS) provides the rates of enrolment in CCS funded services across Victoria in 2020 which is their most current data (see Table 1.8). It should be noted that in 2020 the rollout of 3 year old Kindergarten had not yet reached every region. These rates are compared with data we collected for this consultation as follows:

Figure 3: Rates of enrolment in Kindergarten programs, Murrindindi Shire (2022) and Victoria (2020)



Source: The Productivity Commission, Report of Government Services (2022) Table 3A.18 and consultation data from services.

The comparison of enrolment rates against State averages informs us that:

- The rollout of the 3 year old Kindergarten program has been highly successful in the Shire
- Families from outside the region are likely accessing services within the Shire and planning needs to accommodate for slightly higher than the residing population of children
- The demand for Kindergarten programs is high. This indicates that families are requiring both long day care options, as demonstrated earlier, and they also require the specialist education programs delivered through State funded Kindergarten programs.

Table 1.7 Enrolment of children in Murrindindi Shire 3-year-old and 4-year-old Kindergarten programs, October 2022

Kinder places	Current utilisation of 3 year old Kinder	Current utilisation of 4 year old Kinder
Alexandra & District Kindergarten	31 (15hrs)	45
Eildon and District Kindergarten	4 (15hrs)	3
Flowerdale Kindergarten	5 (15hrs)	11
Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre	32 (15hrs in a LDC program)	30
Marysville and District Kindergarten	30 (10hrs + wrap around care)	30
Yea Uniting Early Learning	29 (15hrs in a LDC program)	29

In addition to the current supply of early education services, there is also the possible development of a private 110 place early education service in Alexandra. A private developer brought the land and applied for a permit and has now offered the sale of the land and rent of a developed building. The permit for this proposed service was endorsed in August 2022 and expires if development has not begun after two years.

Currently Alexandra provides kindergarten programs for 79 children aged 3 to 4 years and long day care for 29 children per day with a need to support 8 additional infants. A service catering for 110 children per day would absorb the need for the other two services – which are both operating at capacity. The private provider in Alexandra is not sufficient to provide the level of long day care that the community requires. As the service is only licenced for 29 places it would require significant investment to upgrade the spaces to cater for Three and Four year old kindergarten. This would also then limit the services capacity to provide long day care to children under the age of three years which is in demand by the local community.

An ideal option would be for council or for a community owned enterprise to establish a combined Kindergarten and long day care program with on-site community services in Alexandra. There is also the option – being so close to the primary schools that it could also provide outside school hours care. During our consultations in Alexandra and surrounding towns we heard from educators about the need for heightened community support following the impacts on the community and families from the COVID-19 pandemic and now the flooding in October 2022. A community hub, similar to that provided in Yea could provide the linked up supports that families need. This would support the need for wrap around care in the regional town. This is the model that seems to work the best in Marysville, Yea and many other similar regional towns.

If a new service is not built in Alexandra within 5 years there may not be long day care offered in the community of sufficient quality to maintain the trajectory of improvement that the community has seen over the past few years. Alternatively if the service is built and provided by a for-profit provider taking advantage of the development opportunity currently for sale, then they would likely need to charge fees at a level that would be unaffordable for the low socio-economic community or operate at bare-minimum levels of quality to keep their costs down.

The Victorian Government is investing \$9 billion over the next decade which includes building 50 government-owned early education centres. It is recommended that the Council begin talks with the Department of Education and Training to try to establish one of these services in Alexandra.

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RECCOMENDATION: Within 5 years, council and service providers to develop a long day care/Kindergarten and social services, maternal health hub in Alexandra. The best option can be determined with community consultation incorporating the needs of families and children.

RECCOMENDATION: Continue to support and expand Family Day Care in the Shire to support the care options for very young children, infants and families who would prefer this model of care.

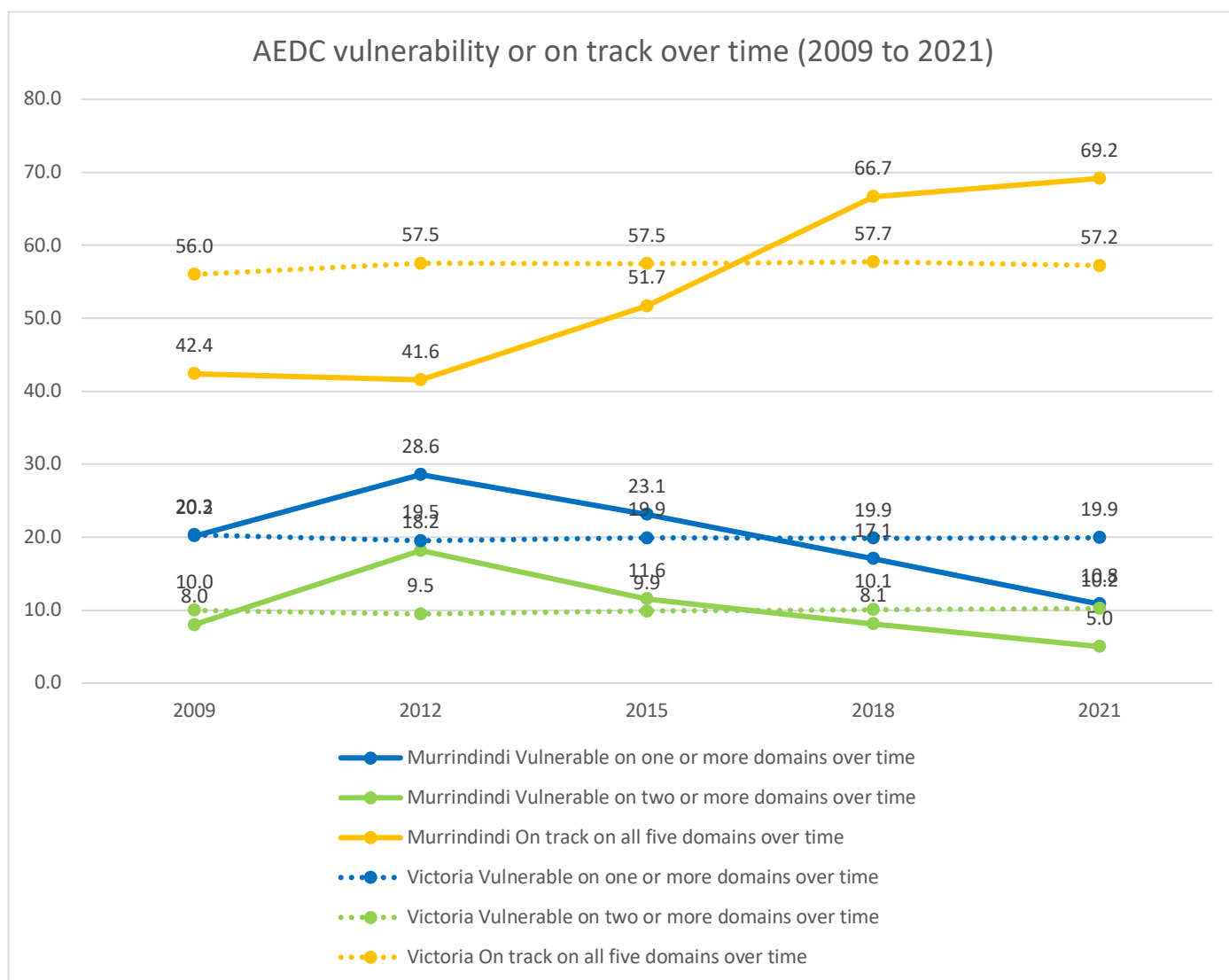
2 Best practice support options

This section examines recent research on best practice service delivery, highlighting the need for community owned and not-for-profit models, strong educational leadership and strong connections to family and community services. This should also address ratio, spatial (room size and access to outdoor areas), technological (NBN, software, hardware) and other resources.

In weighing up the decision to expand early education services in Murrindindi, thought needs to be given to how different options may best serve the community. This section examines recent research on the operating systems that are proven to be effective in delivering the best possible impacts for children, families and the community.

Data from the Australian Early Development Census (2021) demonstrate that the Murrindindi Shire has very positive outcomes for children compared with State averages, and has steadily improved over time. This is a testament to the quality provision of education, care and family supports that has been provided particularly since 2018. The trajectory of positive outcomes for children will continue through forward planning that understands the Murrindindi early education and care system well.

Table 2.1 Australian Early Development Census, Vulnerability or On Track, Murrindindi and Victoria, 2009 to 2021



Source: Australian Early Development Census, [https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/public-table-by-local-government-area-\(lga\)-2009-2021](https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/public-table-by-local-government-area-(lga)-2009-2021)

2.1 Workforce

Research tells us that positive learning experiences and nurturing relationships provided in education and care settings deliver lasting benefits for all children, and particularly for children experiencing disadvantage. When education and care is of high quality, it significantly reduces levels of developmental vulnerability and the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged that is evident at school entry (Goldfeld et al., 2016). Retaining quality staff is important for these nurturing relationships to develop.

Pay and conditions are key to retaining quality staff. Thorpe et al., (2020) state that educators in the education and care sector, including those with degree qualifications are the most poorly paid in the education workforce. They concluded that to address the shortage of ECEC Educators, remuneration that is commensurate with the level of responsibility of their roles is required. While it is not within council's responsibility to determine pay and conditions within services, it helps to understand that community owned not-for-profit models of governance are more likely to provide above award pay and conditions. These are also the models of governance which are more likely to provide staff with greater self-agency in their role and support team development and service wide communication.

Providing high quality care requires the ability to generate ideas that support children's ever evolving and unique needs. However, idea generation (or innovation) only becomes practice through collaboration with others. Research has found strong correlations between innovation and employees reporting they feel supported by their team, being able to contribute to decisions and feeling comfortable to talk about their ideas (Nislin et al. 2016). Self-agency, collegiality, pay and conditions are key elements in retention and current workforce shortages mean that every effort is needed to retain staff and maintain their ongoing interest in the sector and their wellbeing.

Current vacancy and job ads data tell us there are not enough teachers and educators to meet demand at present and this problem is particularly acute in regional and rural locations, let alone with the anticipated increased demand. For example, The National Skills Commission Internet Vacancy Data shows more than a doubling of vacancies from pre-pandemic levels in Victoria, with recent figures showing 1,700+ vacancies in our sector. Early education workforce shortages are being experienced nationally (see Table 2.2). Across Australia, the National Skills Commission anticipate that the sector will require 14,500 additional Kindergarten teachers and 7,400 additional child care staff (National Skills Commission 2022).

Within Victoria scholarships and incentives are currently being provided by the Victorian Department of Education at: <https://www.vic.gov.au/financial-support-study-and-work-early-childhood>

One of the issues for Murrindindi Shire early education services is to remain competitive in being able to attract potential staff from a small pool of applicants. A workforce plan or strategy is highly recommended including a Shire wide focus offering:

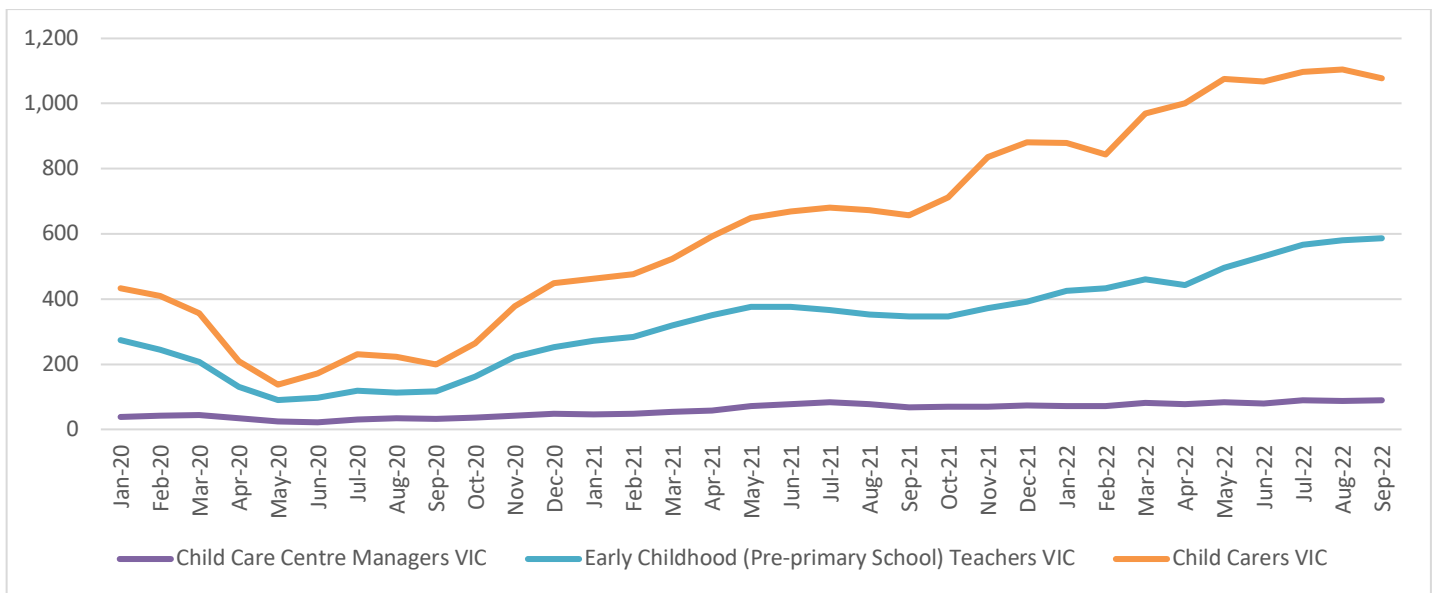
- Longer supported induction programs
- Continuing to provide the workforce with engagement in professional networks (Murrindindi Children's Network) This can also be extended to wider professional networks such as Early Childhood Australia annual conference.
- Strengthening retention through offering wellbeing opportunities
- Strengthening the value of early education in the wider community including celebrating the achievements and milestones of staff and services

- A mix of online and face-to-face professional development and accredited training opportunities (this can be achieved through partnerships with training organisations such as TAFE or a Victorian University)
- A marketing program communicating the appealing benefits of working in early education in the Murrindindi Shire

These options should be explored further in the coming year to utilise the opportunity of the Victorian Government financial supports.

An additional issue that Council needs to consider are the implications of the need for housing for workers moving into the region. The State Government’s Kindergarten Teacher incentives and additional relocation supplement of between \$2,000 and \$8,000 will go a part of the way to support regional movers, however, council may need to consider addressing this in their housing strategy. Kindergarten teachers may also qualify for Location incentives of between \$9,000 to \$50,000 are available for qualified early childhood teachers who secure a teaching role at selected services. Services will be notified if they are pre-approved for a location incentive. Some current Educators may upskill through early childhood scholarships valued at between \$12,000 and \$34,000.

Table 2.2 National Skills Commission, Early Education Staff Vacancies, January 2020 – September 2022



Source: National Skills Commission <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/topics/internet-vacancy-index>

Notes from consultation visits

Kinglake, Alexandra Baby Centre and Alexandra Kindergarten all spoke about hardship in recruiting staff at all levels. The casual workforce was severely depleted during the pandemic lockdowns in 2020-21 with casuals entering different career pathways or different sectors all together during this period.

Kinglake spoke about how student recruitment has been most effective although with students having a lack of experience in the field during their training, due to the Covid-19 restrictions, some potential staff were unprepared for the experience of educating and chose not to move forward with offers of employment.

Alexandra Baby Care maintained their staff during the lockdown and employed four trainees to scaffold into new positions. While it was intensive work to support their development, three trainees remained at the end of the traineeship and two are continuing on to do their Diploma of children's services.

Alexandra Kindergarten was concerned about their sudden need to employ a new 3 year old teacher and were anxious about the potential for new candidates from outside the area to find adequate affordable housing.

Flowerdale Kindergarten praised the recruitment and induction process of the Mitchell Shire who co-ordinates their service. The hiring process was quick and made use of online technology. The Mitchell Shire provides leaders of pedagogy which are available for staff to access and co-ordinate their induction which includes once a week visits for 3 weeks. They also provide ample resources and ongoing support. Flowerdale were concerned about recruitment for a possible option of a wraparound service in the school outside school hours care, which may potentially provide care for kindergarten children when they have finished their program. Shifting 3 and 4 year olds over to the school OSHC program is not something that CCC would recommend. If families require longer hours of education and care then Long Day Care or venue based family day care should be considered. This provides consistency of care within a setting that is more age appropriate for young children.

During our visits we heard that many educational and leadership staff had or were experiencing burn-out and symptoms of poor wellbeing. Some staff members talked about how moving to a new service within the shire helped them to re-new their passion, even though this may have been at a cost to their income. Using long-service leave to take a break and refresh was also mentioned as a solution by one service leader. There were a few staff members and service leaders who noted how achievements or milestones were unacknowledged.

It was acknowledged that the Murrindindi educators conference is of great benefit to the educators and that the services would like more events/professional development opportunities provided by council throughout the year.

RECOMMENDATION: Address workforce shortages and retain current early education staff in the region with a workforce plan. This should be completed within one year, in order to utilise the current scholarships and incentives being offered by the Victorian Government.

2.2 Governance

Governance refers to the formal structural and legal arrangements for managing a service. It is recognised that this can take a variety of forms depending upon the nature of the proposed service(s) and how these are funded.

Governance is the process by which an organisation is given its direction, its activities are monitored and its personnel are held to account. Governance is about how an organisation is run. It is a set of duties, responsibilities and liabilities that are outlined in the structures, systems and understandings of the organisation. They are critical to operating a successful organisation, ensuring it is well managed constitutionally, legally and financially. Good governance is a system of effective leadership, accountability, stewardship or sustainability and control that develops and protects an organisation in a way that ensures its purposes are met.

The governing body of an organisation is ultimately legally responsible for what the organisation does (and doesn't do). It is responsible for providing leadership and strategy to the organisation, ensuring the current and future direction is consistent with the organisation's aims and the interests and needs of its members and clients. The governing body must be clear about why the organisation exists, what it hopes to achieve and

how it plans to get there. The organisation's values guide decision-making and actions. It is about planning for the needs of clients and community this year, next year and five or ten years away.

The governing body has a duty to act in the best interests of the organisation. Good governance practices enable the governing body to make the right decisions and provide confidence in the organisation so that it continues to be viable and serve the community. The governing body is responsible for steering the organisation in the direction that will sustain the centre into the future and for managing the finances of the organisation well, making the best use of resources and managing risk.

The governing body is responsible for monitoring and overseeing the management and operations of the organisation, for making sure there are appropriate checks and balances so that the board meets its fiduciary duties, legal responsibilities and services are of high quality.

Good governance is achieved through sustained focus by the governing body on its governance responsibilities combined with effective management. Management *informs and supports* the governing body while *managing the day-to-day operations* of the organisation and *implementing the directions and decisions of the governing body*. The challenge for a governing body is to know enough about the organisation to fulfill its fiduciary duties while staying out of management and operational decisions and actions.

Governance structure

Operating a children's service requires a legal entity (governing body) to be An Approved Provider. The Approved provider is **the only one who has the authority to operate all preschool, family day care or long day care services**. Therefore, this can be an individual, a body corporate, an eligible association, a partnership or an entity such as a local council or church organisation. They are responsible for planning, building/repurposing and establishing all aspects of a service that meets with regulatory and funding requirements for education and care services as well as other relevant legislation, such as local government planning controls, food safety requirements, occupational health and safety on a suitable site. As the legal entity you will need to set up a governance and management structure to ensure ongoing viability, regulatory compliance, quality and accountability.

Governance and management

The governing body would be the approved provider (see *Education and Care Services National Law and Education and Care Services National Regulations* section below) of the education and care service and would be responsible for:

- Entering into significant contracts and agreements, such as leasing land, construction, funding, partnerships for additional services
- Employing staff and overseeing the management and operations of the service, ensuring sound and supportive management practices are in place that flow to high standards of operational practice
- Making sure appropriate checks and balances are in place to ensure compliance with fiduciary duties and legal responsibilities; accountability to statutory authorities, members, funders and others; and the service and children's program is of high quality
- Providing strategic leadership
- Planning for longevity
- Managing risks and making decisions in the best interests of the organisation.

Professional staff would manage the day-to-day operations of the service, informing and supporting the governing body through a robust reporting system and implementing its directions and decisions. A manager with early childhood qualifications would lead, manage and co-ordinate the service operations including the

service and programs; curriculum and pedagogy; people and performance; relationships; administration; and compliance.

Community based governance and management

Community based governance is common for Early Education and care services. Community based early childhood education and care service governance gives the service users the opportunity to participate in and govern the service they are using. It is based on the belief that the people who use the service are best equipped to determine the needs and priorities for the service. In Victoria two main types of becoming a legal entity is possible, becoming an incorporated association or a company limited by guarantee. Information on each and guides are available from <http://www.nfplaw.org.au/gettingstarted>.

A feature of community based governance and management in early childhood education and care is the partnership developed between the parents, the educators and the local community. This partnership enables the governing body to draw upon the knowledge, experience, skills and commitment of parents, educators and the local community to ensure quality education and care for the children attending the service. The service can also contribute to the broader community by identifying needs and developing a service that is responsive to the local needs.

Governance recommendations

Each service raised the issue of recruiting a committee and their level of involvement. Council could support each service to ensure they retain strong governance and remain community not for profit services as we know this is the service type that provides the highest quality early education and care for children and families.

Option 1: Council could become an Early Years Manager

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation/Pages/eym.aspx>

Early Years Management (EYM) organisations are local government or community-based organisations that provide professional leadership and centralised management of kindergarten and Long day care services. Many Early Years Managers also operate Family Day Care Schemes and Outside School Hours Care Services. The Victorian Government provides a range of grants for Early Years Managers establishing and continuing to provide sessional Kindergarten and kindergarten in long day care services. A new provider grant is available up to \$75,000. Information about these grants can be found at: <https://www.vic.gov.au/kindergarten-funding-rates#table-3-%E2%80%93-early-years-management>

EYM organisations provide service delivery according to their regulatory, policy and funding obligations and are required to:

- assume all the responsibilities of an approved provider as specified in the Education and Care Services National Law and National Regulations
- establish and review effective governance practices that support professional leadership and management systems
- contribute to policy development, sector planning, policy reform implementation and service design.

This would support all services with reducing the burden that is placed on volunteers. The service could then have a parent advisory/fundraising group to support the service to raise funds for resources.

Option 2: Council could support a committee of management

Council could build a committee of management with parents and community members to oversee all services in relation to governance (1 committee to provide governance for all services). Council would need to

employ a manager to be available to services as needed and for them to have sound understanding of the early education sector. This group could also become an Early Years Manager.

Each service could continue to run with a director in place to manage the day-to-day operations with a parent advisory/ fundraising group to support the service to raise funds for resources.

Council would provide service delivery according to their regulatory, policy and funding obligations and are required to:

- assume all the responsibilities of an approved provider as specified in the Education and Care Services National Law and National Regulations
- establish and review effective governance practices that support professional leadership and management systems
- contribute to policy development, sector planning, policy reform implementation and service design.

Option 3: Council or external organisation could offer governance support

This could consist of a review of current practises and understanding the demands on both the committees and managers of the service.

Review the current hours allocated to administration and provide support services to reduce the burden to ensure that Volunteers are not working excessive hours. The workload can affect a member's willingness to stay on as a member due their own personal time constraints.

The committee of management would provide service delivery according to their regulatory, policy and funding obligations and are required to:

- assume all the responsibilities of an approved provider as specified in the Education and Care Services National Law and National Regulations
- establish and review effective governance practices that support professional leadership and management systems
- contribute to policy development, sector planning, policy reform implementation and service design.

Option 4: business/legal relationship between larger NFP and new entity

An existing not-for-profit organisation creates a new legal entity for the service with the purpose of governing and managing the early childhood education and care service. The new legal entity would be the approved provider and funded organisation and employ the service staff. The constitution and rules of the new entity would define the relationship with, or require some accountability back to, the original organisation. For example, a requirement that member(s) of the original organisation are on the committee of management of the new entity.

The service manager reports directly to the new governing body that is responsible for all decisions pertaining to the operation of the early childhood education and care service. This model supports community management and could provide for people with a particular interest in early childhood education and care from the larger not-for-profit organisation's board to participate and could support succession planning for the organisation through identification and participation of early childhood education and care service committee members who have the skills and interest to pursue a position on the larger not-for-profit organisation's board.

Option 5: Services continue with current structure.

There are number of different governance models at work currently in the Murrindindi Shire.

Each service spoke to the pros and cons with the current structure. Services enjoy the autonomy however find it difficult to recruit committee members. Without committee members the services will need to either close or explore other models.

During our visit to Murrindindi the not for-profit models were of a higher quality standard in the region. The not for profit models were resourced well and had inviting learning spaces both indoors and outdoors. . The service in Yea, governed by the Education and Care Management Service Uniting, was also experiencing difficulties with care environment resources, although the service was clean and well maintained. For-profit services and those managed by ECMS generally have lower re-investment of profits back into the resources of the service or providing care above the minimum required by law. To provide what families and children need we would advise that not for profit models are implemented moving forward. Council could consider supporting Yea long day care back to a community model where the Yea Kindergarten Association is supported to manage their revenue to the benefit of the service and the community. This would be achieved with options 1, 2 or 3.

We would recommend that all new services are also not for profit models to ensure council can offer high quality early education and care to families and children in their shire.

It is the position of Community Child Care that community owned not-for-profit early education models are superior in providing the highest quality of care for children and families. There is strong evidence for our position. In Victoria, close to half of early education services are operated by not-for-profit Approved Providers. The balance of not-for-profit models over for-profit (corporate) providers increases outside of metropolitan areas where the incentives for corporations to maximise their revenue decreases. Gallagher (2022), examining the marketization of early education in New Zealand – a similar market to Australia – demonstrated how corporate education and care has a priority on maximising profits for shareholders and owners, sometimes at the expense of quality care provision and the sustainability of the workforce. Not-for-profit services have been shown to have longer staff tenure, higher levels of quality and a greater focus on equipping staff with skills and knowledge leading to improved practice (Gallagher 2022; Warrilow & Graham 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria in particular, the problems beleaguering corporate child care provision were exacerbated.

Murrindindi Shire Council has demonstrated excellent governance across its early education provision and networking through the Murrindindi Children’s Network and other projects that have focused on the wellbeing of its young people from birth to being job-ready adults. This is particularly evident in the improvement in outcomes from the Australian Early Development Census results which demonstrate that children in Murrindindi have significantly higher levels of being on track in their development when compared to the state average. There are also economic benefits from having early learning service in the shire community owned and operated. The revenue that is collected is reinvested in the local economy and often back into the services themselves to the benefit of children and the workforce within the shire.

RECOMMENDATION: Further support around governance from council with the most preferred option for Council to be an Early Years Manager (EYM). Alternatively council examine outside options and partnerships with EYMs.

2.3 Leadership

In planning for expansion the Council must also pay consideration to the different leadership systems that lead to sustainable high quality care.

Early education service leaders are instrumental in driving quality improvement. In 2019, Harrison et al. conducted a study for ACECQA about services who improved from a NQS rating of Working towards NQS to Meeting NQS, and services who improved from Meeting NQS to Exceeding NQS. There were a number of common characteristics amongst these services.

- They were more likely to be not-for-profit services, and/or services operated by large providers.
- Services that improved to Exceeding NQS had philosophy statements that were detailed and involved all stakeholders in the philosophy revision.
- They were more likely to have had a strategic approach to creating a supportive workforce. This acted as an enabler for educators to focus on quality improvement and also supported a positive work culture. This in turn impacted positively on tenure, quality improvement, rating and teamwork and professional practice.
- Services that improved to Exceeding NQS had approved providers that supported the role of the Educational Leader with training, resources and time to ensure their responsibilities and their role was successfully implemented.
- They were more likely to have Educational Leaders that had high levels of pedagogical knowledge and skills, and were collaborative with all team members in planning and working towards quality improvement (Harrison et al. 2019).

This is also supported by research conducted by Sue Irvine and others, which explored the concept and practice of distributed leadership in family day care. Distributed leadership is founded on trust and provides professional autonomy and decision making. Distributed leadership has been linked to increased educator engagement, job satisfaction, shared learning and continuous quality improvement. In three Exceeding rated FDC services, distributed leadership was evidenced through:

- Rigorous selection and induction procedures that placed an emphasis on professional practice, extended induction for new educators and building trust and relationship.
- Two way communication that is timely, provision of multi-modal digestible information and an expectation for educator feedback.
- Tailored individualised support that identified resources and professional learning opportunities. Educators identified the expertise of the co-ordination unit and educators had confidence in the solutions the coordination unit models and their support in times of need.
- Building educator capability and confidence.
- Team approach (Irvine et al. 2022)

There are a range of entities that can support distributed leadership including Associations, Co-operatives, Companies and Indigenous Corporations. However, entities which have priorities that are contrary to building the autonomy and professionalism of educators are more likely to be those that require standardised processes across a large number of services in the interests of efficiency and consistency and those that have a focus on profit, for example large for-profit providers.

2.4 Physical environment

Indoor and outdoor environments are foundational to quality care and children's experiences of wellbeing, happiness, creativity and autonomy. Environments that are age appropriate, stimulating and functional are

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able to support calm as well as active play and health and hygiene (Mathers et al. 2014). Considerations of renovating or changing service provision need to accommodate the requirements from the National Quality Standard Quality Area 3. An occasional paper commissioned by ACECQA explains the NQS Quality Area 3 in more detail and explains physical environments include considerations about:

- *the amount of space and how it is arranged and used for different groups and ages of children*
- *access between indoor and outdoor environments*
- *the availability and access to a variety of appropriate furniture, equipment and resources*
- *internal and external noise levels*
- *visibility and design that facilitates effective supervision*
- *ventilation, heating and cooling, air quality, and access to natural light and shade*
- *access to a variety of materials, including natural materials, plants and vegetation*
- *flexible environments educators can easily adapt to respond to children’s changing interests and capabilities (ACECQA 2017 p.9)*

Care environments need to have the capacity for all relevant stakeholders to be enabled in taking responsibility for the space. The owner of the building needs to provide clarity and responsibility about maintenance or changes to the structure. Approved providers and service leaders within the care environment need to understand their responsibilities in ensuring the optimisation and functionality of physical environments (CCCC NSW 2013). There are also aspects which all team members in a service need to have clear policies and procedures around for instance materials and resources need to be able to be stored safely, organised and be readily accessible to educators. Organisation within spaces is a responsibility of the whole team. This can be a frustrating exercise when the owner of a building is too far removed from leadership, or that the process is unclear or too complicated, to ensure that maintenance or changes can be made promptly.

Notes from consultation visits

It was expressed by Eildon, Flowerdale, and Marysville’s kindergartens that the connections with the schools are beneficial. These support children with transitions, shared resources and incursions and excursions. It also builds positive long-lasting relationships for families who are still able to connect with the early childhood teachers to support their parenting and greater connections with communities.

The council supports the services operating in council buildings with ongoing maintenance and upkeep. Each service shared how that relationship works noting differing responses to request.

All council building were observed to be fit for purpose while the private centre did not allow for free flow from the babies sleep area to the play room. Uniting in Yea was observed to not have direct access to the outdoors for young babies which is not ideal. This could be remedied by renovating an access point from the babies room to the outside area. Yea would also benefit from renovations to allow for space for the Maternal Health Service to be more integrated in the building. Currently MCHN operate within the building between the service and the Library. This rural community would benefit from a Community Hub model where early education and care professionals and family and community services to work alongside each other.

In addition to renovating the Yea service, there is also the option of building a Kindergarten on the Yea Primary School site using Victorian Government Funding. By 2025, children in Murrindindi will have access to 1,800 hours of funded kindergarten before school, comprising 600 hours of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten and 1,200 hours of Pre-Prep. This would shift some capacity for families only requiring Kindergarten programs to a service that is connected with the school, allowing for more long day care options at Yea. Current grants available include:

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- Kindergarten facilities and capital funding grant provides funding to plan, build, expand and improve early years infrastructure across Victoria
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/capitalprogram.aspx>
- Building Blocks funding is available from the Victorian State Government
<https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/building-blocks-grants-improvement>

RECOMMENDATION: With the current EYM and Yea Primary School, investigate developing a Kindergarten service at the primary school. This option would be able to apply for grant funding under the Victorian Government Building Blocks stream.

3 Options and recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: Council and service providers to investigate and plan for infrastructure delivery requirements in Alexandra within the next 5 years.

In Alexandra, the long day care options for younger children are exhausted, low-quality and don't appear to have a long-term outlook. Further, the community owned Kindergarten is reliant on the private service for wrap around care. A new, well-supported service is required in Alexandra. Privately owned care options in this low-socio-economic and regional town would not address the need for high-quality care that is sustainable and long-term. Council should collaborate with the community and current providers to explore and develop the best options for Alexandra. Investigate a service could support a range of community and family services such as Maternal and Child Health, playgroup, and early years educator and family service professional networking. The Victorian Government is planning on building 50 government-owned early education centres by 2032 and Alexandra could potentially benefit from this initiative. Recommendation 3 should also form part of this scope.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Develop Yea into an early education and care service hub and build a Kindergarten service as part of the Yea Primary school

Renovating the service in Yea would increase the long day care and kinder places. The service could also be expanded to use the existing two maternal and child health centre (MCHC) rooms for care. Adding on multi-purpose spaces for Maternal and Child Health or other family and community services to the south of the building would allow these services to be more integrated. In addition to renovating the service. Within 2 years with the roll out of Pre-Prep there will be a need to provide more Kindergarten places due to the increase in hours. Building a Kindergarten on the Yea Primary School site using Victorian Government Funding will be the best option. The principal of Yea Primary School was amenable to the idea of having a Kindergarten on site. Recommendation 3 should also form part of this scope.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Further support around governance from council with the most preferred option for Council to be an Early Years Manager (EYM).

EYM providers outside the area absorb high fees and this would be better utilised by Council. Alternatively council examine outside options and partnerships with EYMs. The Victorian Government provides a range of grants for Early Years Managers establishing and continuing to provide sessional Kindergarten and kindergarten in long day care services. A new provider grant is available up to \$75,000.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Develop an early education workforce plan or support strategy to retain and attract staff in the Shire

A workforce plan is required to support services in the Shire to be an employer of choice to support retention and employee wellbeing. A workforce support strategy should include partnerships with training providers to provide accredited and professional development options locally, marketing to create appeal to join the profession and efforts to support retention through education and care staff wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Within 15 years establish a Kindergarten, Long day care and community services hub in Eildon.

This would support the infrastructure development needed in Eildon to support tourism and the need for staff in the aged care services in the town.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Continue to support and explore the expansion of Family Day Care within the Shire of Murrindindi.

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Family day care is an essential part of the early education sector in this regional area. It also serves as a vital part of service to accommodate shift workers and children with a need for small group care such as babies.

RECOMMENDATION 7: Expand the Children’s Support Unit in Council.

Council should expand the Children’s Support Unit to establish an EYM, and facilitate greater communication and support to early education services. The recommendations listed in this consultation report will require the efforts and resources of a concerted Children’s Support team with a broad range of administrative, program management and early education knowledge and experience.

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