Merri-bek City Council

Children, Young People and Families Strategy 2026—2029

Acknowledgement of Country

Merri-bek City Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways in the area now known as Merri-bek. We pay respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging, as well as to all First Nations communities, who significantly contribute to the life of the area.

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Mayor's Foreword

We are proud to present the Merri-bek Children, Young People and Families Strategy 2026–2029, a strategy shaped by the voices, experiences and aspirations of our community. More than 1,400 children, young people, parents, carers, community members and service providers contributed to this work, and we sincerely thank everyone who shared their insights, ideas and hopes for our future.

Your contributions have directly informed these strategic priorities and will continue to guide our actions over the years ahead.

This Strategy marks an important step forward in how Council continues critical work to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. By setting clear priorities, supported by a two-year Implementation Plan – we will take practical actions to deliver meaningful change. This approach ensures we stay accountable, responsive and firmly grounded in what our community tells us matters most.

The priorities within the Strategy align with the Council Plan 2025–2029 and build on the community vision that Merri-bek leads and leaves no one behind. By strengthening partnerships, improving access to services, investing in learning and wellbeing, and supporting safe, inclusive and connected communities, this Strategy adds value across multiple areas of Council's work.

We know that improving outcomes for children and young people requires effort from our entire community. Council does not do this work alone - ongoing collaboration with families, the education and health sectors, community organisations, and local services remains essential. As we deliver and refine our actions, we will continue to listen, learn and seek opportunities to partner, innovate and adapt.

Thank you again to everyone who contributed to this Strategy. Together, we are building a Merri-bek where children, young people and families feel valued, supported and able to thrive.

Cr Nat Abboud

Mayor of Merri-bek City Council

Executive Summary

Vision

Merri-bek is a place where all children, young people and families feel safe, and valued and have the opportunities and support they need to learn, thrive and be healthy.

Strategic Priorities

Health and wellbeing

Connection and inclusion

Learning and thriving

Strategic Objectives

1. Play and physical activity
2. Being safe and feeling cared for
3. Access to health services and supports
4. Basic needs met
5. A clean and healthy environment

1. Inclusive and connected communities
2. Meaningful participation and influence
3. Inclusive spaces, services and activities

1. Early childhood development and learning
2. Developing skills for life
3. Support through life stage transitions

Principles of how we'll deliver this strategy

- Partnerships and collaboration
- Equity and inclusion
- Infant, child and youth centered
- Family focused
- Cultural safety

Introduction

The Merri-bek Children, Young People and Families Strategy 2026-2029 builds on the previous Children, Young People and Families Plan 2021-2025, which was Council's first integrated plan to support local children and young people from birth to adulthood. This Strategy aims to ensure Merri-bek is a place where every child and young person has the best possible start in life.

Our vision

Merri-bek is a place where all children, young people and families feel safe, and valued and have the opportunities and support they need to learn, thrive and be healthy.

Strategic Priorities

The priorities in this Strategy have been developed in response to the feedback we received from over 1400 members of the Merri-bek community who participated in community engagement activities from August to October 2025.

The priorities have also been informed by key state, national and international policies, strategies and evidence-frameworks, and have been shaped to align with the Merri-bek Community Vision, Council Plan 2025-2029 and other key Merri-bek strategies.

The Strategy has three key themes, reflecting what is most important for children, young people and families in Merri-bek:

> Health and wellbeing

> Connection and inclusion

> Learning and thriving

Guiding Principles

Our Guiding Principles outline the essential considerations that must underpin all Action Areas of the Strategy, including how Council and partners will work together—listening, learning, sharing and holding each other accountable as we strive to deliver better outcomes for all children, young people and families.

Partnerships and collaboration

Children, young people and families have complex and changing needs that cannot be addressed by any single organisation working in isolation. Strong, flexible and responsive partnerships are essential to achieving better outcomes. This Strategy is intended to guide Council and our partners as we work together to develop collaborative responses to the strategic priorities and objectives. It reflects a snapshot in time of the issues and priorities identified by the community and stakeholders as most important. We acknowledge that these priorities will evolve and that our collective responses must adapt accordingly.

We are committed to working collaboratively through both formal and informal partnerships that leverage strengths, share expertise and build capacity across Council and the wider systems that support children, young people and families, including education, health and community services. Central to this commitment is working directly with children, young people and families to understand their experiences, respond to their needs and build on the strengths they bring.

Equity and inclusion

We are committed to taking action to address social and economic disadvantage, exclusion and discrimination, and to working to support all children, young people and families to thrive. We are also committed to providing all children, young people and their families with accessible and inclusive services and support.

We recognise that achieving equitable outcomes for all children, young people and families starts at birth and requires us to focus on understanding and, when necessary, prioritising people who may be at greater risk of disadvantage and discrimination. In alignment with Council's Human Rights Policy 2016-2026 we are committed to responding to the needs of children, young people and families from the following groups:

> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

> People with Disability

> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual-plus, Transgender and gender diverse, Queer or Questioning, Asexual and Aromantic, and Intersex people (LGBTIQA+)

> Migrant, Refugee and Faith Communities

> Women, Girls and Gender Diverse Communities

> People experiencing poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage

> Other priority groups who may be identified in the future

Infant, child and youth centred

The needs and rights of infants, children and young people guide this strategy. Like adults, children and infants have civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. Additional rights enshrined for all children in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child include the right to protection from abuse and the right to be cared for.

We recognise that infants and young children are dependent on the availability of consistent and responsive care from specific adults for the adequate development of their basic human capacities. We are committed to listening and responding to children and young people and to resourcing and empowering them to shape decisions on the issues that impact them.

Family focused

We recognise that families and supportive relationships provide the foundations that enable children and young people to thrive. Families provide children with the opportunities and experiences that shape their learning, development and wellbeing. To ensure that children and young people thrive, their parents, carers and families also need to be supported in their own wellbeing.

We are committed to working collaboratively with families to understand and respond to their needs and to support them to create the conditions in which their

children can learn, develop, be healthy and thrive.

We understand that infants' development depends on consistent, responsive care from specific adults and that the formation of new families is one of the most significant transitions people experience. We are committed to providing culturally appropriate support to parents and carers from pregnancy through the early years, and to actively supporting the development of strong social networks among families in our community.

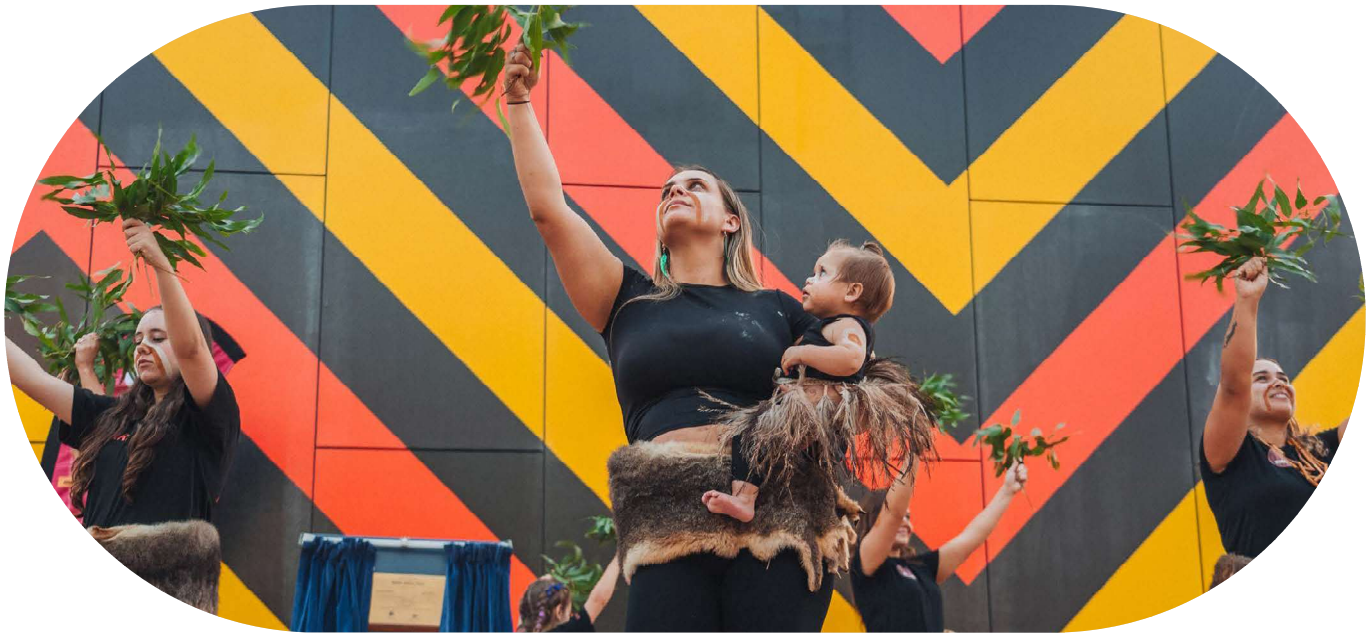
We recognise that all parents and carers benefit from support when caring for and raising children, including fathers, non-birthing parents, same sex couples, grandparent carers and kinship carers, and believe that services and programs should be designed to actively include and welcome all who care for children.

Cultural safety

We are committed to creating culturally safe environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families across all services and settings.

A strong sense of identity and culture is essential for wellbeing, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families. Cultural safety goes beyond awareness—it requires positive recognition, celebration of culture, and an environment where people can express their identity without fear of racism or discrimination. This is an important consideration in the way Council engages with and delivers services and programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.

We are committed to working in genuine partnership with Wurundjeri and local Aboriginal community controlled services to ensure our services and supports are culturally safe and self-determination focused.



Prioritisation, resourcing and advocacy

Council recognises that the needs and aspirations of children, young people and families exceed the resources available to local government, and that services, programs and supporting infrastructure cannot all be delivered or expanded at the same time. Transparent and consistent principles will be applied in prioritising, resourcing and advocating for action in regard to key priorities. Prioritisation decisions will be guided by a combination of factors, including:

> current and projected demand across different life stages

> areas of greatest service gap, vulnerability or disadvantage, and evidence of unmet need from service data and community engagement

> the effectiveness, accessibility and sustainability of existing service models and supporting infrastructure

> opportunities to improve outcomes through integration, co-location or shared use

> availability of workforce capacity, land, funding and delivery partnerships

Council will manage expectations by aligning service planning, infrastructure planning, engagement and decision-making with adopted strategies and implementation plans, and by clearly communicating the sequencing and staging of investment over time.

Where identified needs cannot be addressed through Council services, programs or infrastructure alone, advocacy to other levels of government and system partners will be a key mechanism for responding. Council will use evidence from service delivery, community engagement and planning to advocate for funding, access to services, workforce capacity, policy change and system reform that support improved outcomes for children, young people and families in Merri-bek.

Key frameworks

This Strategy will be guided by a holistic and evidence-based approach to children and young people's wellbeing and development. In developing this strategy, we have drawn on several key frameworks that help us to understand and respond to children and young people's needs comprehensively and holistically. Our key frameworks and reference points include:

The Nest Wellbeing Framework

Developed by leading Australian academics through the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), the Nest Model, outlines six connected areas that cover the essentials that children and young people need for the best start in life:

- **Valued Loved & Safe.** Ensuring children feel valued in loving and secure environments.
- **Healthy.** Promoting good physical and mental health.
- **Identity & Culture.** Supporting a strong sense of self and belonging, including cultural identity and values.
- **Material Basics.** Providing access to essential material needs like food, housing, transport and other essentials.
- **Participating.** Engaging children and young people in decision-making processes that affect them.
- **Learning.** Encouraging effective learning and development opportunities from early childhood through to adult life.

The First 1000 Days

The period from conception to a child's second birthday, known as the first 1000 days, is firmly established in national and international health policy as the most critical window for human development. During this period, brain architecture is established at a pace never repeated in later life, the foundations of physical and mental health are laid, and the caregiving relationships that shape a child's social and emotional development are formed.

This framework underpins Council's Maternal and Child Health (MCH) service and informs how we approach immunisation, infant nutrition, perinatal mental health and new family support.

Infant Mental Health

Infant mental health refers to the social and emotional development of children from birth to three years of age. It is not a clinical concept but a developmental one: the capacity of very young children to experience, regulate and express emotions is shaped above all by the quality and consistency of their caregiving relationships.

When parents and carers are emotionally, practically and socially supported, infants develop secure attachment, healthy stress regulation and the foundations for lifelong learning and resilience. Conversely, when caregiving relationships are disrupted by perinatal depression or anxiety, family violence, trauma, poverty or isolation, the effects on infant development can be profound and lasting.

This framework informs Council's approach to perinatal mental health, family support, new parent group programming, and our partnerships with specialist services. It also reinforces why supporting parents is not separate from supporting children – it is the same work.

Maternal and Child Health (MCH) framework

The Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Service is a free, universal primary health service available to all Victorian families with children from birth to school age which aims to promote and optimise health, wellbeing, safety, development and learning outcomes for all children and their families.

The MCH Framework is underpinned by 10 guiding principles. The first and central principle is: Child, maternal and family-centred practice. This principle places the needs and experiences of the child, mother and family at the core of all service delivery. The other nine principles support this principle and promote holistic, responsive and accountable care:

> Universal access

> Victorian Aboriginal communities' cultural safety

> Equitable and inclusive

> Diversity responsiveness

> Health promotion, prevention and early intervention

> Collaboration and partnerships

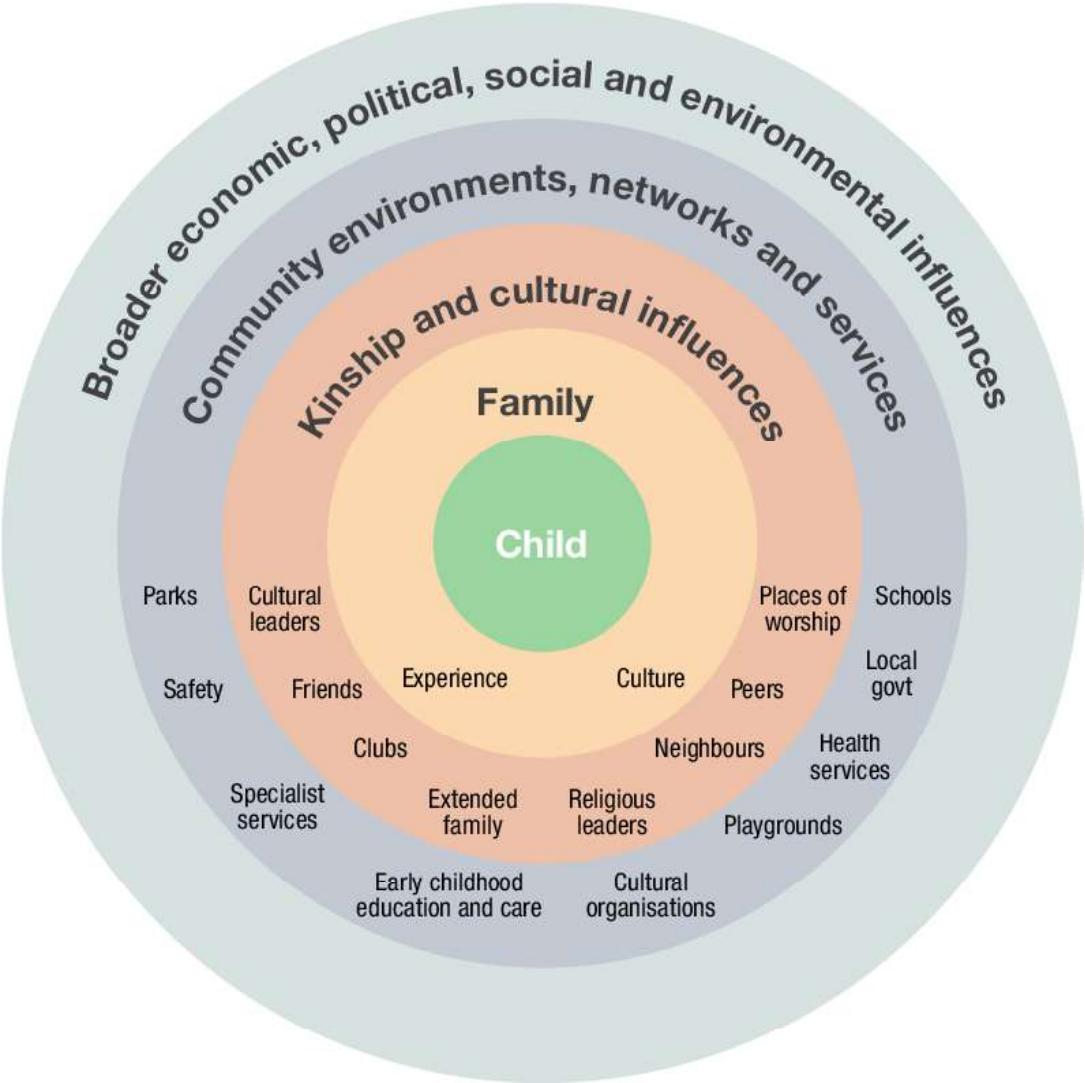
> Quality and safety

> Evidence informed

> Reflective practice and continuous improvement

Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)

The VEYLDF outlines a comprehensive approach to children's learning and development from birth to eight years of age, which recognises the crucial connections between wellbeing and learning. The framework is underpinned by an ecological model that acknowledges the influence of family, community, culture, experience and broader economic, political, social and environmental factors on children's wellbeing, learning and development.



Source: Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (Ecological Model adapted from Bronfenbrenner 1979)

Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Councils approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families is informed by the Social and Emotional (SEWB) framework, which understands wellbeing as holistic and inseparable from connection to Country, culture, family, kinship and community.

The SEWB Framework, developed through the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities and embedded in national Aboriginal health policy, provides a holistic understanding of wellbeing that recognises the individual as embedded in relationships and community — not as an isolated unit.

For children and families, this means that concepts such as attachment, caregiving, family formation and community belonging must be understood within extended kinship structures and cultural frameworks. It also means that culturally safe services are designed in genuine partnership with Aboriginal community organisations and grounded in self-determination.

Council's approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families is also informed by the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing, and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UNCRC outlines the universal civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that every child is entitled to and explains how adults and governments should act to ensure all children can enjoy all of their rights.

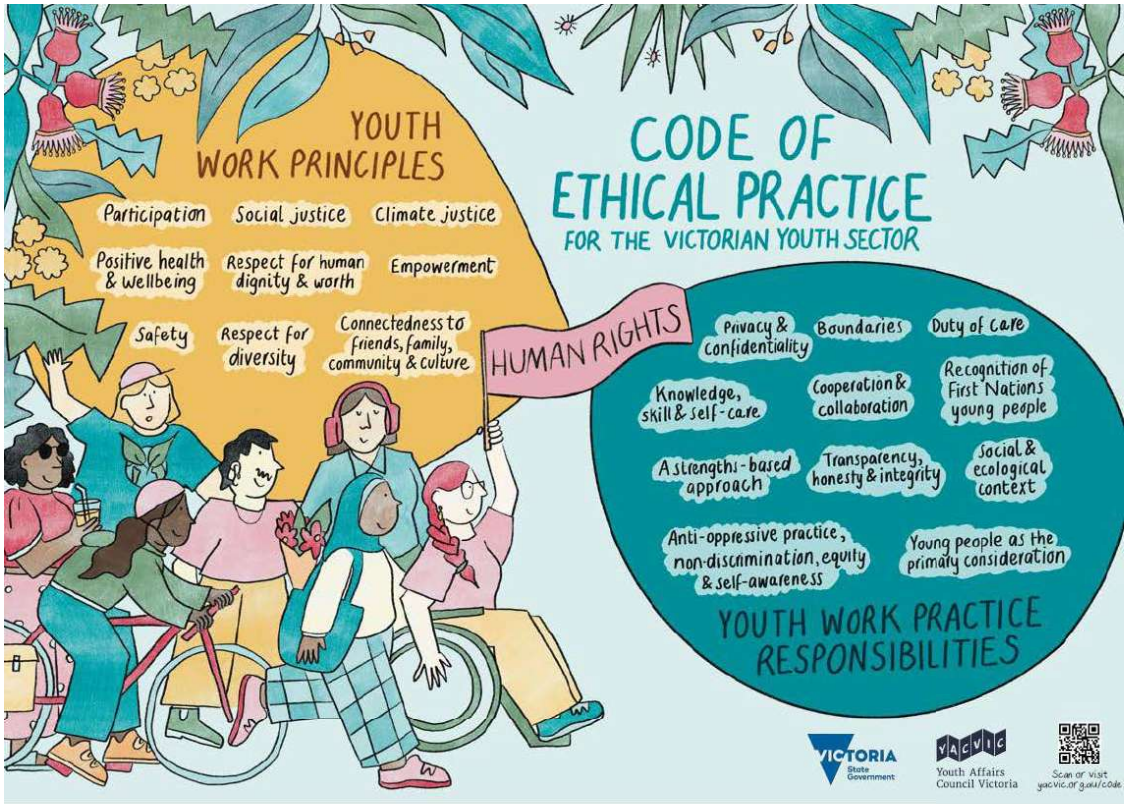
The 54 articles of the UNCRC cover all aspects of a child's rights. The rights enshrined in the UNCRC include the rights of every child to:

- Relax and play
- Freedom of expression
- Be safe from violence
- An education
- Protection of identity
- Sufficient standard of living
- Know their rights
- Health and health services.

Youth Services Frameworks and Principles

Merri-bek Youth Services is guided by the principles and priorities set out in Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022–2027: Our Promise, Your Future and the YACVic Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector. The Victorian Youth Strategy provides a statewide framework for improving outcomes for young people through genuine partnership, participation and inclusion. It recognises that young people are leaders, contributors and experts in their own lives and calls for services to work alongside young people to ensure their voices shape decisions, policies and programs that affect them. The strategy is built on a commitment to equity, wellbeing, participation and improved opportunities for all young Victorians, particularly those who may experience disadvantage or barriers to participation.

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) Code of Ethical Practice translates these values into day to day youth work practice. Grounded in a human rights framework, the Code places young people's interests, safety, wellbeing and self-determination at the centre of service delivery. It promotes key youth work principles including empowerment, participation, social justice, respect for diversity, connectedness, positive wellbeing and culturally safe practice. The Code also outlines professional responsibilities such as maintaining appropriate boundaries, protecting privacy and confidentiality, advocating against discrimination, recognising the rights and perspectives of First Nations young people and taking a strengths-based approach that builds on young people's capabilities and aspirations. Together, these frameworks underpin Merri-bek Youth Services' commitment to working collaboratively with young people, promoting inclusion and equity and supporting young people to thrive within their communities.



Merri-bek City Council context

The Children, Young People and Families Strategy aligns with the aims and priorities of the Merri-bek Council Plan and other key strategies and plans.

The **Merri-bek Council Plan 2025-2029** responds to the Merri-bek Community Vision for 2035:
Merri-bek leads, and leaves no one behind.

The Council Plan outlines five key strategic directions for Merri-bek over the next 4 years:

- Care for nature and climate resilience
- Healthy and inclusive communities
- Beautiful and liveable city
- Thriving economy and culture
- Engaging and responsible Council

The Council Plan also integrates five health and wellbeing priorities and two additional focus areas within the directions and initiatives of the plan:

- Improving mental wellbeing and social connection
- Increasing active living
- Tackling climate change and its impacts on health
- Preventing all forms of violence and discrimination
- Improving food systems
- Other areas
  - Reducing harm from tobacco and e-cigarette use
  - Increasing immunisations

The **Merri-bek Human Rights Policy 2016-2026** (revised in 2022) outlines Council's commitment to specific priority groups which are recognised as being at greatest risk of exclusion from social, economic and political life because of access barriers and discrimination:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- People with Disability
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual-plus, Transgender and gender diverse, Queer or Questioning, Asexual and Aromantic, and Intersex people (LGBTIQA+)
- Migrant, Refugee and Faith Communities
- Women, Girls and Gender Diverse Communities.

In the 2022 refresh of the Human Rights Policy, Council identified the following additional priorities when considering human rights:

> An age and lifespan lens, with attention to children, young people and older people

> Poverty, inequality and socioeconomic status

> Climate change and climate justice

> Issues exacerbated by COVID-19

> Carers, volunteering and civic participation (unpaid caring/contributions).

Other key Council strategies and plans

A range of other Council strategies and plans outline commitments and priorities that support children, young people and families to thrive. Some of the key plans and strategies that support the priorities of this strategy include:

> Disability Action and Inclusion Plan 2022-2026

> Early Years Infrastructure Plan 2022-2030

> LGBTIQA+ Action Plan 2023-2026

> Library Strategy (new strategy due for endorsement in 2026)

> Nature Plan 2025-2029

> Open Space Strategy 2024-2034

> Social Cohesion Plan 2020-2025

> Living and Ageing Well Implementation Plan 2025-2029

> Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2020-2030

Council services and supports for Children, Young People and Families

Council works in multiple ways to support children, young people and families. This includes:

> Service delivery

> Planning and coordination of services and infrastructure

> Advocacy on behalf of children, young people and families to other levels of government and other key stakeholders

> Engaging with children, young people and families to build their capacity and facilitate their influence over the issues and decisions that impact them

Council's services accompany families on a journey from the earliest days of a child's life through to young adulthood. This journey is not a linear progression through discrete services, it is a series of relationships, touchpoints and transitions, each building on the last. The aim is that families experience Council's services as a connected system providing support across a child's life, with universal services and targeted supports working together.

> Council's first contact with a new family is through the **universal Maternal and Child Health (MCH) service**, commencing with home visit in the first two weeks of a child's life and including ten structured visits at key ages and stages from birth to 3.5 years. MCH nurses provide evidence-based anticipatory guidance, the right information at the right time, on infant feeding, sleep, development, play, and family wellbeing.

> For families with additional needs, the **Enhanced MCH service** provides more intensive, targeted support from birth to three years.

> Council's **Immunisation service** provides the National Immunisation Program schedule from birth, recording vaccinations on the Australian Immunisation Register and supporting families to maintain their child's immunisation status. Immunisation is a whole-of-life program, with the schedule continuing through childhood and adolescence and then across the life course for priority populations.

> **First Time Parent Groups**, facilitated by MCH nurses, provide structured peer support and connection for new parents from the earliest months of their child's life. These groups are both a health and development resource and a community-building mechanism.

> As children move through the toddler and early childhood years, Council supports families through **Supported Playgroups** and **Family Day Care** and facilitates access to early learning services through **Kindergarten and Early Years Service registration, resourcing and support for early years services, and early years infrastructure planning and delivery**.

> The **Kindergarten Outreach Program** provides targeted support for families who may face barriers to kindergarten participation, including CALD families, Aboriginal families, and families experiencing disadvantage.

> Council maintains connection through **library programs and activities, partnerships with primary schools**, and civic participation initiatives such as **Children's Reference Group activities** and **Principals' Forums**. These touchpoints support learning, community connection and the development of young people's voice and agency.

> Council's **Youth team** provides free programs, activities and support for young people aged 12–24, offering over 15 weekly programs at the Oxygen Youth Space, and the Fawkner Community Sports Hall.

Oxygen Youth Space is the only dedicated youth facility in Merri-bek and is a welcoming place to drop in, connect with youth workers and access support Mon - Fri 9.30-5pm.

The youth team offers unique opportunities for young people to step into leadership roles and have a say in their community. Through Youth Ambassadors, young people contribute ideas, lead projects and help shape Council decisions, while Amplify gives young people hands-on experience planning and delivering local events and festivals. These programs provide meaningful opportunities for civic participation, while building leadership skills, confidence and real-world experience.

> At every stage of this journey, Council works in partnership with the broader systems that support children and families as a core part of our approach to providing holistic and comprehensive support.

Children & Young People in Merri-bek Demographic overview

Merri-bek City Council

Your neighbourhood → Your facts

Did you know?

Current population and forecast for 2024-2034:

47,178 people (27%) are 0-24 years old. By 2034, this is expected to increase to 63,969 (29%).

Merri-bek First Peoples current population 0-24 year olds:

38% of First Peoples residents are aged 0-24 years old.

Languages children and young people speak at home:

64% speak English only and 30% speak another language in addition to English.

*Children & Young People includes those aged 0-24 years

Health & Wellbeing

Developmental Vulnerability

19% of children are reported as vulnerable in one or more area of development, lower than the Victorian average (22%). Developmental vulnerability is highest in Glenroy (34%), Brunswick East (24%), and Fawkner (24%).

Health of Children & Young People

19% of 0-17 year olds reported asthma as the most common long-term health condition, compared to 18% in Greater Melbourne. 14% of 18-24 year olds reported a mental health condition as the most common long-term health condition, compared to 11% in Greater Melbourne.

Immunisation

At 5 years of age, **94%** of children were fully immunised.

Key Ages & Stages

69% of children at school entry had attended a Maternal & Child Health Centre for their 3.5-year-old check. This was slightly higher than the average for Greater Melbourne.

Education

Kindergarten participation

97% of eligible children participate in 4-year-old kindergarten and 91% participate in 3-year-old kindergarten, slightly higher than the Victorian average.

Work

Youth Unemployment

11% of young people aged 15-24 are unemployed, slightly lower than Greater Melbourne, although unemployment was higher in Coburg North (14%) and Fawkner (14%).

Youth Disengagement

7% of young people aged 15-24 are disengaged from employment and education, slightly higher than Greater Melbourne. Disengagement is highest in Hadfield (11%), Fawkner (10%) and Glenroy (8%).

How this Strategy was developed

This Strategy was informed by a community and stakeholder engagement process that engaged approximately 1,400 members of the Merri-bek community.

The engagement activities included:

> Surveys for different groups and ages, available online and in hard-copy

> Art activities for children aged 2-12

> 7 pop-ups at local community spaces and events around Merri-bek

> 3 workshops with multicultural families, and parents and carers of children living with disability

> 8 Focus Groups with community or stakeholder groups

> 4 briefing and feedback discussions with key stakeholder groups

> A workshop with Council staff from the Early Years and Youth Branch

The purpose of this engagement process was to:

> understand the key issues and challenges facing children, young people and families

> understand what is working well for children, young people and families and what Council could do better

> reach a diverse mix of local communities and provide opportunities for the broader community to provide feedback.

Demographic data collected during the engagement activities showed a strong representation of children and young people (70% aged under 18), a predominance of female participants (71%), and contributions from a wide range of suburbs, cultural backgrounds, and language groups. The engagement process included a focus on reaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, people with a disability, LGBTQIA+ communities, migrant and refugee families, and service providers.

Key findings from this process, which have been critical in shaping this strategy include:

Things Merri-bek is doing well

> **Places & Spaces:** Parks, playgrounds, sporting facilities, community hubs, schools and libraries are highly valued. Children and families appreciate the natural environment, recreational opportunities, and inclusive community events.

> **Inclusion & Connection:** Merri-bek's strong sense of community, social cohesion, and celebration of diversity are seen as strengths.

> **Health & Wellbeing:** Maternal Child Health services, sports programmes, and mental health support are appreciated.

> **Learning & Participation:** Early years services, playgroups, youth education, and community engagement initiatives are seen as strengths.

Issues and Challenges in Merri-bek

> **Health & Wellbeing:** Access to services, mental health issues, support for parents/carers, housing affordability and substance use are concerns.

> **Places & Spaces:** Cleanliness, safety, inclusive infrastructure, and availability of parks and playgrounds are important issues for the community.

> **Traffic & Transportation:** Road safety, congestion, accessibility, and cycling infrastructure are seen as needing improvement.

> **Inclusion & Connection:** Barriers to support and services for migrant and refugee families, discrimination, bullying, and support for women/girls were identified as issues.

> **Financial Hardship:** Cost of living and programs and services costs can be barriers to accessing services and participating in community life.

> **Education, Employment & Youth Services:** Access to services, employment pathways, school engagement, and resources are areas of concern.

Strategic priorities

Priority 1:

Health and wellbeing

We will support children, young people and families to have good physical and mental health, to feel safe and secure in their homes and communities, to have their essential materials needs met, and to have access to the services and supports they need to maintain their wellbeing.

Strategic Objectives

1. **Play and physical activity:**
   Support children and young people of all ages, backgrounds, abilities and genders to enjoy a wide range of opportunities to play and be active, and to access to community infrastructure that meets their needs.

2. **Being safe and feeling cared for:**
   Support children and young people to feel safe and cared for within their families and communities.

3. **Access to health services and supports:**
   Support children, young people and families to have access to affordable services and supports for their physical and mental health.

4. **Basic needs met:**
   Support children, young people and families to have access to secure, stable housing, nutritious food, essential services and other basic needs.

5. **A clean and healthy environment:**
   Support work to create cleaner and greener environments for children, young people and families to enjoy, and take action on climate change.

Community priorities this responds to

- Affordable and accessible health services including mental health services
- Affordable and accessible sports and recreation infrastructure and opportunities for all ages, abilities and genders
- Supporting women and girls' access to sports opportunities
- Safe, clean and accessible parks, playgrounds and open spaces, with facilities and infrastructure that is accessible and inclusive of varied ages and abilities
- Opportunities to be active outside – walking, riding and skating
- Safe roads, pedestrian safety, school crossings, cycling infrastructure
- Mental health needs of parents and families in a context of financial stress, isolation, and work/life balance challenges
- Cost of living, housing affordability, homelessness supports, food security, cost of services

Council strategies and plans this aligns with

- Council Plan 2025-2029 outcomes
  - Healthy and inclusive communities
  - Beautiful and liveable city
  - Health and wellbeing priorities
- Human Rights Policy 2016-2026
- Early Years Infrastructure Plan 2022-2030
- Open Space Strategy 2024-2034
- Nature Plan 2025-2029
- Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2020-2030

State, national and international frameworks and policy directions this aligns with

> The Nest domains: Healthy; Material Basics; Valued, Loved & Safe

> Early Years Learning Outcomes: strong sense of wellbeing

> Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures: Victoria's five-year action plan to support children and young people to be healthy, active and well

> Victorian Child Safe Standards

> Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM)

> National Agreement on Closing the Gap

> National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing

> National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy

> Wellbeing in Victoria: Strategy to Promote Good Mental Health 2025–2035

> National Perinatal Mental Health Guideline

> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: including children's rights to play and join a range of leisure activities, to be safe from violence, to have a sufficient standard of living, to have access to health care

> Victorian Maternal and Child Health Program Guidelines

> National Immunisation Strategy for Australia (2025-2030)

> Victorian Early Years Compact

Priority 2:

Connection and inclusion

We will support children, young people and families to feel connected, included and supported, to participate in their communities, and to have a say over the decisions and issues that impact their lives.

Strategic Objectives

1. **Inclusive and connected communities:**
   Support children, young people and families to connect with each other and with the broader community through inclusive and accessible community activities that build connection and inclusion.

2. **Meaningful participation and influence:**
   Provide children, young people and families with opportunities for meaningful participation and influence over decisions and issues which impact them.

3. **Inclusive spaces, services and activities:**
   Support children, young people and families to access welcoming, inclusive and culturally safe public spaces, services and activities.

Community priorities this responds to

- More inclusive and accessible community infrastructure.
- Addressing discrimination and racism - becoming a more tolerant, diverse and cohesive community
- Building a sense of community and belonging through opportunities to bring people together to celebrate and support each other
- Inclusive, culturally safe, and accessible programs and events, including for migrant, refugee, First Nations and LGBTQIA+ communities, women and girls, and people with disability
- Supports for parents and carers
- More activities, programs and events to support children, young people and families to participate and connect
- Ongoing and deep engagement by Council with the community
- More comprehensive and inclusive information sharing and promotion of Council services
- Addressing additional and specific barriers that migrant families face accessing services or connecting with community
- More youth-specific spaces

Council strategies and plans this aligns with

- Council Plan 2025-2029 outcomes
  - Healthy and inclusive communities
  - Thriving economy and culture
  - Engaging and responsible Council
- Human Rights Policy 2016-2026
- Social Cohesion Plan 2020-2025
- Living and Ageing Well Implementation Plan 2025-2029
- LGBTIQA+ Action Plan 2023-2026
- Disability Action and Inclusion Plan 2022-2026

State, national and international frameworks and policy directions this aligns with

> The Nest domains: Identity & Culture; Participating

> Early Years Learning Outcomes: strong sense of identity; connected with and contribute to their world

> Victorian Youth Strategy

> Victorian Child Safe Standards

> National Agreement on Closing the Gap

> National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing

> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: including children's rights to meet with other children and join groups, and to have a say over decisions that affect them and have their opinions taken into account.

> Victorian Maternal and Child Health Program Guidelines

> National Immunisation Strategy for Australia (2025-2030)

> Victorian Early Years Compact

Priority 3:

Learning and thriving

We will support children, young people and families to develop the knowledge, skills and capabilities they need to thrive throughout their lives.

Strategic Objectives

1. **Early childhood development and learning:**
   Support children and young people's learning and development from early childhood through to young adulthood.

2. **Developing skills for life:**
   Support children and young people to develop the skills and capabilities they need to thrive throughout their lives.

3. **Support through life stage transitions:**
   Support children, young people and families through their major life stage transitions, including transitions through the education system, entering the workforce, and becoming parents.

Community priorities this priority responds to

- Affordable and accessible early childhood services (kindergarten, early learning centres and playgroups)
- School engagement/engaging with learning
- School and family partnerships
- Better support for those struggling with school transitions
- Equipping young people to succeed through mentoring and life skills development
- Employment opportunities and pathways into local employment
- Inclusive lifelong learning including for parenting skill development

Council strategies and plans this aligns with

- Council Plan 2025-2029 outcomes
  - Thriving economy and culture
- Human Rights Policy 2016-2026
- Libraries Strategy

State, national and international frameworks and policy directions this priority aligns with and responds to

- The Nest domains: Learning
- Early Years Learning Outcomes: confidence and involved learners
- Victorian Best Start, Best Life reforms
- Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework revision and Early Years Learning Framework 2.0
- Victorian Youth Strategy
- National Agreement on Closing the Gap
- NDIS reforms and introduction of the Thriving Kids Program
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: including children's right to an education.

Delivery, monitoring and evaluation of this strategy

Implementation Plans

This Strategy outlines Council's priorities for improving outcomes for children, young people and families over the next four years. Delivery of this Strategy will be led through the development of Implementation Plans, beginning with an initial two-year Implementation Plan for 2026-2027.

The Implementation Plan will outline the actions that Council will take to progress the strategic objectives across each of the priorities in this Strategy. The Implementation Plan will be developed through a cross-Council process to identify actions that will be led by Departments across Council. It will include a range of actions that Council will take to deliver the strategic objectives, including actions related to service delivery, partnerships, community engagement and advocacy priorities.

Monitoring and Reporting

Council will review the progress of the Children Young People and Families Strategy annually.

The Implementation plan will also be reviewed and refreshed annually, and a report will be provided to Council outlining progress in implementing the key actions.

Appendix: Key references

Council's plans, strategies and policies

- **Merri-bek Council Plan 2025-2029**
- **Merri-bek Human Rights Policy 2016-2026** (revised 2022)
- **Disability Action & Inclusion Plan 2022-2026**
- **Early Years Infrastructure Plan 2022-2030**
- **LGBTIQA+ Action Plan 2023-2026**
- **Library Strategy** (new strategy due for endorsement in 2026)
- **Nature Plan 2025-2029**
- **Open Space Strategy 2024-2034**
- **Social Cohesion Plan 2020-2025**
- **Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2020-2030**

State and Federal policy, strategy and frameworks

- **Best Start, Best Life (BSBL) reforms**, Victorian Government
- **Early Years Learning Framework for Australia**, Department of Education, Australian Government (2022)
- **Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM)**, Family Safe Victoria (2018)
- **Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures: Victoria's five-year action plan to support children and young people to be healthy, active and well**, Victorian Government (2021)
- **Maternal and Child Health Service guidelines**, Department of Health, Victoria (2021)
- **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy**, National Indigenous Australians Agency (2021)
- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap**, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government (2020)
- **National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy**, National Mental Health Commission (2021)
- **National Immunisation Strategy for Australia 2025-2030**, Australian Centre for Disease Control (2025)
- **National Perinatal Mental Health Guideline**, COPE: Centre for Perinatal Excellence (2023)
- **National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander**

Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-23, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government (2017)

> **Our promise, Your future: Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022–2027, Department of Families**, Fairness and Housing, Victoria (2022)

> **The Nest Wellbeing Framework**, ARACY: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, (2013)

> **Victorian Child Safe Standards**, Commission for Children and Young People, Victoria

> **Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)**, Department of Education and Training, Victoria (2016)

> **Wellbeing in Victoria: A Strategy to Promote Good Mental Health 2025–2035**, Department of Health, Victoria (2025)

International agreements and frameworks

> **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**