



Merri-bek
City Council

Early Years Infrastructure Plan 2022-2030

May 2022



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 all First Nations communities who significantly contribute to the life of the area.

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Executive Summary

Purpose

Local government in Victoria is a major provider, planner and coordinator of services and facilities for children and their families. The Early Years Infrastructure Plan (EYIP) presents a picture of Council's early years services and facilities and provides a framework for future infrastructure development to meet the increasing demand for early years services in Merri-bek.

Council's early years facilities are an average of 60 years old and the majority of centres built prior to 1960, with the age of buildings ranging from 1896 to 2017. While buildings may have undergone renovations and improvements over the years, it is evident there is a need to cater for growth through the expansion, improvement and modernisation of facilities, together with the development of new facilities to provide better outcomes for children and families.

The EYIP assesses the current provision and projected demand for early years infrastructure over a ten-year period. A list of capital projects is presented together with recommendations for addressing the identified needs in line with Council's *Community Infrastructure Plan* and *Children, Young People and Families Plan 2021-2025*.

Methodology

The EYIP considers Council's early years facilities providing Maternal and Child Health Centres, Playgroup Venues, Child Care Centres and Kindergartens.

The EYIP is based on the *Kindergarten Capacity Assessments* undertaken in 2019 and 2020, the *Community Infrastructure Plan and Needs Analysis and Infrastructure Audit report 2021*, the *Kindergarten Infrastructure and Service Planning (KISP)* report undertaken in 2021, and the *Merri-bek Children, Young People and Families Plan 2021-2025*, taking account of:

- demographic data and population projections
- legislative and policy directives
- emerging trends and impacts
- community and stakeholder issues and priorities, and
- the current provision and performance of Council's early years facilities.

Needs

Key issues and needs identified in the Assessment include:

- demand is increasing for early years facilities due to population growth and implementation of 15 hours of funded three-year-old kindergarten
- 60% of early years facilities are in 'moderate' condition and 30% are in 'good' condition
- approximately 70% of early years facilities are not well designed for their intended use; deficits include limited staff planning space, meeting, office and kitchen facilities, together with inadequate facilities for families, such as waiting areas and accessible toilets.
- some opportunities for improved integration between services, infrastructure and land uses are being missed due to the lack of a strategic planning approach.

Recommendations

Recommendations for addressing the identified early years infrastructure needs take four forms:

- Capital Project proposals to upgrade, expand or build new early years infrastructure in partnership with VSBA, DE and service providers.
- Undertake further exploration to expand and improve existing early years buildings.
- Investment provisions in Council's annual budget planning to undertake the required works, together with an adequate annual allocation of ongoing maintenance budget for cyclical maintenance and minor improvements in early years facilities.
- Work in partnership with service providers to ensure facilities operate and their optimal capacity to provide high quality early years program for Merri-bek children and families.

Definitions

3-year-old kindergarten – refers to government funded kindergarten programs for 3-year-old children operated by licensed early years education and care providers. In 2019 the State Government announced that they will subsidise 3-year-old kindergarten to, all eligible Victorian children from 2022, commencing with five hours of funded program increasing to 15 hours per child by 2029.

4-year-old kindergarten – refers to government funded kindergarten programs for children delivered by licensed early education providers. Council facilities host 24 approved education and care services delivering this program.

Child Care Centre/Long Day Care – refers to centre based child care delivered by licensed education and care providers. Babies through to school age children attend, delivered by qualified professionals. Centres also offer funded kindergarten within their programs which is delivered by a qualified kindergarten teacher, and this is referred to as an **integrated kindergarten program**.

Department of Education (DE) – State government department which implements government policy on early childhood services, regulates and provides funding to a range of early childhood programs, including kindergartens, kindergarten central enrolment and Preschool Field Officers.

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) – State government department which implements government policy on a range of family programs and funds Maternal and Child Health and Supported Playgroups.

Early Years Infrastructure – refers to Council owned/managed facilities that house services and programs which are accessed for children 0 – 6 years of age.

Facility – for the purposes of this report we are referring to Council assets which accommodate one or more early years education or support service. This includes the building, outdoor and carpark areas of each site.

Integrated Early Years Service – the intention of an integrated early years service is that it is a centre for families where they can access multiple services and referrals to specialist services. Integrated services can include care and educational programs, playgroups, maternal and child health services, parenting support and education. It is designed to strengthen community engagement with families and to strengthen health and educational outcomes by creating connection, reducing isolation and increasing social skills and learning.

Kindergarten/Preschool – these two terms are used interchangeably and refer to programs providing licenced educational programs for three and four-year-old children.

Maternal Child Health (MCH) – refers to the Council operated service which works with families to care for babies and young children. This service is a free service to all families delivered by qualified Maternal and Child Health nurses.

Playgroup – refers to a group of parents or caregivers with their children from birth to school age who get together regularly to learn and develop through informal play activities and social interaction. Playgroups help parents and caregivers build social and support networks that encourage and assist them in their valuable parenting role. Each parent or caregiver is responsible for the children they bring to playgroup.

Supported Playgroup – refers to playgroups organised by qualified facilitators for families with children from birth to school age. The facilitator leads these sessions where parents develop their skills and confidence to support their child's wellbeing and development. At Supported Playgroups, parents and children enjoy a range of play opportunities and activities together. Parents also find out about local services and support networks in the community. Eligibility criteria applies.

Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA) – a division of the Department of Education (DE) established in 2016 to oversee the design and construction of schools. In 2018 the VSBA's Early Childhood Division was established to deliver the infrastructure needs for the State's early childhood commitment enabling the provision of new early childhood infrastructure, together with the modernisation and upgrade of existing centres.

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Introduction

Purpose

This Early Years Infrastructure Plan (EYIP) presents a picture of Council's early years services and facilities and provides a framework for future infrastructure development to meet the increasing demand for early years services in Merri-bek. Considering key issues and policy directives, the EYIP assesses the demand for community infrastructure over a ten-year period. Capital projects are presented as recommendations for addressing the identified needs.

Importance of the Early Years

Learning starts from the day we are born and continues throughout our lives. It is recognised the early years of life are the most important for learning and where future foundations are laid for growth and development which leads into childhood, the teenage years and ultimately into adulthood.

The term 'early years' used in slightly different ways. To some it means the years from birth to eight years; to others it means the years before school entry; while others focus mainly on the first three years of life. All these periods are critical in every child's life, and it is important children are provided with meaningful opportunities to learn, develop and engage in positive interactions with their families and others.

Early childhood education and care is more than children's preparation for primary school; it acknowledges that families are central to the lives of children, and requires a holistic approach for Educators to work in partnership with families to provide the support they need to meet each child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development and needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

Council's Role

As stated in the *Merri-bek Children, Young People and Families Plan 2021-2025*, Council has a vision is to enable a community where children, young people and families are healthy, resilient, empowered, safe and belong.

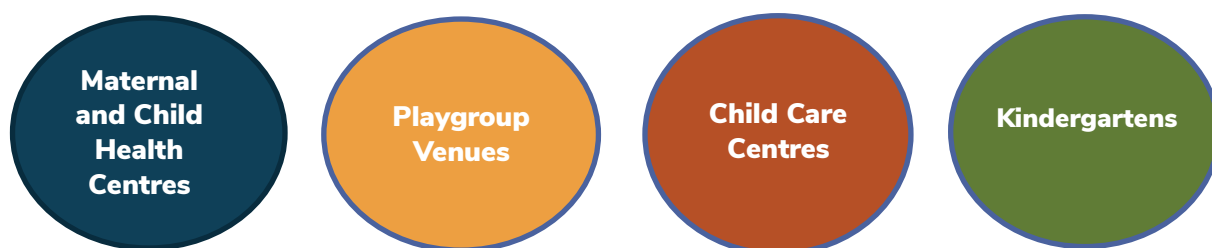
Council aims to facilitate this through the provision of services; provision of early years facilities and planning for future services and infrastructure; collaboration and support, including provision of professional development and network facilitation for early years service providers; together with collaborating and advocating on issues that impact children and families.

Council currently provides MCH and Supported Playgroup programs from a range of Council facilities, and provides facilities where community-based child care and kindergarten programs are managed by either Committees of Management or Early Years Management Groups.

Scope

The EYIP considers Council's early years infrastructure across four categories as represented below:

Early Years Infrastructure Categories



Methodology

The EYIP is based on the *Kindergarten Capacity Assessments* undertaken in 2019 and 2020, the *Community Infrastructure Plan and Needs Analysis and Infrastructure Audit* report 2021, the *Kindergarten Infrastructure and Service Planning (KISP)* report undertaken in 2021, and the *Children, Young People and Families Plan 2021-2025*, considering:

- the current provision Council's early years programs and performance of facilities
- legislative and policy directives
- demographic data and population projections
- community and stakeholder issues and priorities, and
- emerging trends and impacts.

Community Consultation and Stakeholder Feedback

Stakeholder and community feedback informed the EYIP. Feedback was received through meetings and discussions with service providers, DE, VSBA, and Council staff. A survey of service users was completed alongside assessments of each facility in relation to physical conditions, capacity, utilisation, current and projected future demand.

Community Infrastructure Vision and Desired Outcomes

Council's community infrastructure overarching vision and desired outcomes are outlined in the table below and provide the broad policy guidance for Council's early years infrastructure planning practices.

Community Infrastructure Vision
<p>A network of high-performing community infrastructure supporting the health, social wellbeing and economic prosperity of our community.</p> <p>Our community facilities will be welcoming, vibrant and loved by the community.</p>
Community Infrastructure Desired Outcomes
Integrated <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complimentary community facilities in community hubs, facilitating service integration and continuity, increased utilisation, and resource sharing.• A network of integrated community infrastructure co-located with other services in activity centres and close to public transport.
Accessible <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conveniently located community facilities and services close to where people live, shop and recreate.• Universally accessible and welcoming community infrastructure for the whole community including different age groups, cultures, genders, and abilities.
Place Based <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community infrastructure responsive to priority local community needs and desires.• Community infrastructure that enhances the identity of neighbourhoods, precincts, and sites.
Future Proofed <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resilient community infrastructure that can withstand the impacts of climate change and deliver on our zero-carbon emissions commitment.• Flexibly designed community infrastructure with the capacity to accommodate multiple uses, changing demands and innovations.
High Quality <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community infrastructure designed and maintained to support desired service standards and maximised community benefit.• Repurposed, consolidated, or rationalised community infrastructure where needed to respond to current or future needs.

The Community Infrastructure Policy Framework which sets Council's policy directions for planning and delivering community infrastructure and responds to the Merri-bek Community Vision which aligns with the *Children, Young People and Families Plan 2021-2025* and the EYIP.

Merri-bek Community Vision

The Merri-bek Community Vision was developed in 2021 by an Imagine Merri-bek Community Panel through deliberative engagement and is outlined below.

Community Vision

"Merri-bek is our home.

We respect and look after our land, air, waterways and animals.

We care for our people and celebrate our diverse stories, cultures, and identities.

Merri-bek is enhanced by all of us supporting our local businesses, arts communities and social organisations.

We work together proactively and transparently to continue to create a vibrant, safe, healthy, resilient, innovative, and regenerative community.

Many faces, one Merri-bek."

Community Vision Themes

- 1: Environmentally proactive
- 2: Moving and living safely
- 3: Healthy and caring
- 4: Vibrant spaces and places
- 5: Empowered and collaborative



Merri-bek Council Plan 2021-2025

The Council plan sets out Council's and community's vision for the future and sets out our strategic objectives to make progress towards achieving the Community Vision, it also sets out ways to achieve these objectives through delivery of major initiatives and priorities.

The EYIP aligns with the following two themes in the Council Plan - *A healthy and caring Merri-bek* and *Vibrant spaces and places in Merri-bek*. Strategic objectives, strategies and major initiatives are identified to be delivered over the next 4 years in response to the Community Vision.

Theme 3: A healthy and caring Moreland

Strategic Objective

3. To support Moreland to become a more inclusive, connected, healthy and caring community through providing equitable access to community facilities and services, facilitating local partnerships and programs, mitigating the effects of climate change and supporting the community to adapt and build climate resilience.

Strategies

- 3.1. Plan, deliver and advocate for services and good outcomes that meet the changing needs of Moreland's diverse and growing population 🍏

The delivery of the EYIP is included as a major Initiative and priority and the strategic indicator in to increase participation in MCH, playgroups and kindergarten.

Theme 4: Vibrant spaces and places in Moreland

Strategic Objective

4. To create welcoming, unique spaces and places across Moreland that attract and connect everyone, improving access to community facilities and affordable housing and encouraging vibrant artistic, social and economic activity.

Strategies

- 4.1. Improve and provide equitable access to council-owned community infrastructure by investing in needs driven, place-based, integrated services and facilities including developing precinct plans 🍏

The development and implementation of the Community Infrastructure Plan to support an integrated approach to the planning and investment of community facilities to meet community needs is listed as a major initiative and priority in the Council Plan.

Merri-bek Context

Location

The City of Merri-bek (Merri-bek) covers Melbourne's inner and mid-northern suburbs and is located between 4 and 14 kilometres north of central Melbourne. Bordered by the Moonee Ponds Creek to the west, Merri Creek to the east, Park Street to the south and the Western Ring Road to the north, Merri-bek encompasses a total land area of 50.9 square kilometres.

Merri-bek Map and Regional Location

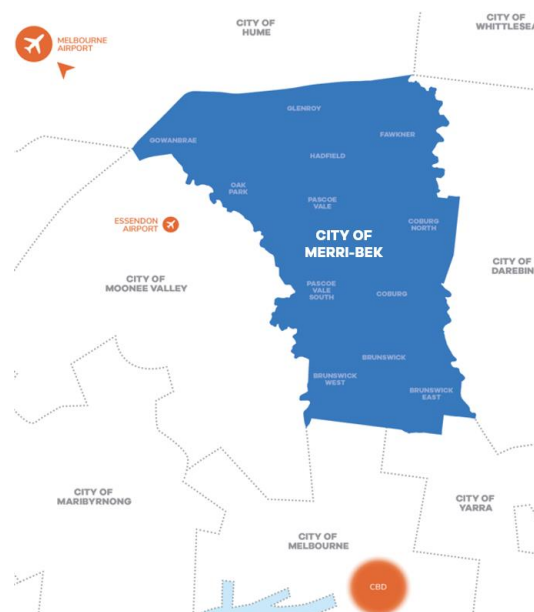
There are three main activity centres in Merri-bek, located on the train network: Brunswick, Coburg and Glenroy.

Other suburbs in Merri-bek are Coburg North, Fawkner, Pascoe Vale, Pascoe Vale South, Brunswick East, Brunswick West, Hadfield, Gowanbrae, and Oak Park.

Small sections of Fitzroy North and Tullamarine are also part of Merri-bek. With a density of about 36.5 persons per hectare (profile.id)

Merri-bek is a dense inner urban community relative to other urban areas in Australia.

For planning purposes, Merri-bek's suburbs are clustered into three districts: North, Central and South.



Merri-bek 0-4-year-old Data

Provided below is a snapshot of Merri-bek's current and future 0-4-year-olds population and developmental data.

Current 0-4-year-old population

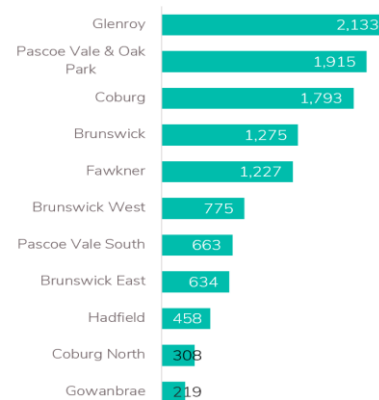
Total population of 0-4-year-olds living in Merri-bek is 12,338 (6.6% of population).

Highest number of 0-4-year olds reside in Glenroy (2,133) and Pascoe Vale and Oak Park (1,915).

Highest percentage of 0-4-years-olds reside in Glenroy (8.6%), Fawkner (8.0%), Pascoe Vale and Oak Park (7.2%).

0-4-year-olds by suburb (2019)

Suburb	Population	%
Glenroy	2,133	8.6%
Pascoe Vale & Oak Park	1,915	7.2%
Coburg	1,793	6.1%
Brunswick	1,275	4.5%
Fawkner	1,227	8.0%
Brunswick West	775	5.8%
Pascoe Vale South	663	5.8%
Brunswick East	634	4.1%
Hadfield	458	7.0%
Coburg North	308	3.5%
Gowanbrae	219	7.0%
Total	12,338	6.6%



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Estimated Resident Population 2019

Merri-bek's 0-4 -year-old population projections

Population for 0-4-year-old projected to increase to 14,626 in 2036, additional 4,362 children.

Highest growth projected in Brunswick (+1,054), Brunswick East (+755), Coburg (+754) and Glenroy (+567).

0-4-year-olds by suburb (2036)

Suburb	Population	Increase to Population	Percent change (%)
Brunswick	2,159	+1,054	+95%
Brunswick East	1,256	+755	+250%
Brunswick West	1,080	+302	+39%
Coburg	2,384	+754	+46%
Coburg North	709	+128	+22%
Fawkner	1,197	+75	+7%
Glenroy	2,152	+567	+36%
Gowanbrae	165	-64	-39%
Hadfield	603	+196	+48%
Oak Park	532	+102	+24%
Pascoe Vale	1,567	+375	+31%
Pascoe Vale South	823	+153	+23%
Total	14,626	+4,362	+30%

Source: Forecast ID consulting 2017

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)

The AEDC is undertaken every three years and results provide a snapshot of children's development as they arrive at school. The census provides insights into preschool aged children's levels of developmental vulnerability and where that vulnerability exists within their community.

The most recent AEDC data from 2018 indicated:

- Higher rates of vulnerability in Merri-bek's northern suburbs.
- A decrease in rates of vulnerability from 2015-2018 in Fawkner, Hadfield and North Coburg.
- An increase in rates of vulnerability from 2015-2018 in Glenroy, Brunswick East and Brunswick West.

Emerging Trends and Impacts

Key trends impacting demand and provision of early years infrastructure are summarised below:

Population Growth and Demographic Change

The population of children and young people is increasing in Merri-bek. As the population grows, additional early years infrastructure will be required to meet the demand for maternal and child health centres and early childhood education and care, such as childcare, kindergarten and playgroups. In particular, the roll-out of funded three-year-old Kindergarten from 2022 will increase pressure on these services. Over the past decade, Merri-bek has seen an increase in the number of babies and children.

Merri-bek has experienced a significant growth in birth notifications in recent years and this has stabilised over the past two years with an average of 2700 births per year.

Equity

Analysis of demographics highlights differences in socio-economic disadvantage and developmental vulnerability. In the Northern suburbs of Merri-bek, there are areas with higher concentrations of socio-economic disadvantage and higher rates of developmental vulnerability. An

equitable approach to infrastructure, services and programs will be needed to ensure there are opportunities for children and families across Merri-bek.

Climate Change

Merri-bek has already started to experience impacts from climate change and while climate change affects everyone, some populations will be more vulnerable than others. Climate change is likely to increase demand on Council's facilities and resources. Environmental sustainability will be considered in any future early years infrastructure projects.

Funding Change

The State Government has commenced the implementation process for the roll out of funded kindergarten for all 3-year-old children. The aim is to ensure that from 2022 all 3-year-olds will have access to five hours in a kindergarten program led by a teacher. The hours from 2023 will then progressively increase up to the full 15-hour program by 2029.

DE engaged Ernst and Young Consulting to undertake a state-wide kindergarten capacity assessment process which was completed recently. All Merri-bek kindergartens and long day care services (both Council and privately owned) which provide a funded kindergarten program were assessed as part of this process. Council officers participated closely in this capacity assessment process and gathered data from early years services to inform our infrastructure planning.

Challenges

Most existing early years facilities are at capacity and have limited scope for expansion, particularly in the southern parts of the municipality. Council is currently in discussions with the VSBA and DE undertaking joint planning to expand early years facilities to accommodate the additional places required. Our kindergarten central enrolment program will also require review to change the model of service to enrol families for 2 years of funded kindergarten. The State has recently provided additional funding to support Council's kindergarten central enrolment program.

Opportunities

The roll out of 3-year-old kindergarten provides a catalyst to assess and review the capacity and future options for all of Merri-bek's early years facilities. Council has for some years adopted an integrated model of early years' service delivery with co-located MCH and kindergarten as a minimum provision. The roll out of 3-year-old kindergarten provides an opportunity to look for opportunities to co-locate services, including the possibility of this occurring on school sites which has proven to be both cost effective and popular with families.

Human Rights and Gender Equality

Adoption of the EYIP aims to improve access to early years services and programs in Merri-bek and result in positive outcomes for children and families supporting access to early childhood education and care and enabling families' workforce participation.

COVID-19 Impacts

The short and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Merri-bek community are still largely unknown. Lifestyle implications of COVID-19 may include the elevated role and importance of local centres and the role, use and design of community infrastructure.

As future pandemics may occur, the importance of community infrastructure in mitigating impacts is increasingly recognised.

Early Childhood Reform

The Victorian Government's vision for early childhood, and a number of reforms undertaken to create a higher quality, more equitable and inclusive early childhood system is outlined in the *Education State Early Childhood Reform Plan*.

The State is undertaking these reforms due to the overwhelming evidence of the importance of the early years.

Over the last three years, the State has been working closely with the early years sector to strengthen early childhood services, and is working in close partnership with local government, sector and community partners to deliver the reforms under the following four key directions:

- **Supporting higher quality services and reducing disadvantage in early education** – including the Building Block Grant funding opportunities to deliver more early childhood facilities and encouraging the development of kindergartens on school sites.
- **Providing more support for parenting** – including expanding access to the Enhanced MCH Service to 15 per cent of families until their child turns three, initiatives to attract new MCH nurses to the Service, including through scholarships, and providing professional development for all MCH nurses. the expansion of supported playgroups, and improving connections between First Time Parent Groups and community playgroups.
- **Making early childhood services more accessible and inclusive** – including increasing the Preschool Field Officer and Early Start Kindergarten Programs.
- **Building a better system** - including supporting Council to expand and enhance kindergarten central enrolment, and the introduction of joint early years planning between Council and State Department with the development of the Kindergarten Infrastructure and Service Plan (KISP) and Building Block Partnership (BBP).

Implementation of 3-year-old kindergarten

From January 2022, it is expected that every 3-year-old child in Merri-bek will have access to five hours per week of State funded kindergarten, and access to 15 hours per week of State-funded kindergarten by 2029. The staged introduction of a second year of funded kindergarten is a major policy reform.

Council plays a number of roles in relation to kindergarten planning and provision, including:

- Infrastructure provision
- Municipal planner and advocate
- Kindergarten central enrolment, and
- Collaboration and support, including provision of professional development and network facilitation for early years service providers.

The staged introduction of a second year of funded kindergarten is a major policy change that creates the opportunity for all children to engage in State-funded teacher-led early education and care programs in the two years prior to school entry.

3-year-old kindergarten will require a large expansion in workforce and infrastructure capacity across the State. The Victorian Government has collaborated with all 79 Victorian Local Governments to develop a local Kindergarten Infrastructure and Services Plan (KISP) for their Local Government Area (LGA).

Principally the KISP aims to estimate the growth in demand for kindergarten places within the LGA. The KISPs will assist kindergarten providers meet demand and provide a clear picture of

infrastructure need across the State. While a KISP is not a funding document and does not define required infrastructure projects or commit any party to funding specific projects, it is expected that future investment requests through the Building Blocks Partnership Program and funding decisions about Local Government and not-for-profit provider projects will be informed by and align with the relevant KISP.

Merri-bek Kindergarten Infrastructure and Services Plan (KISP)

During 2021 Council worked with VSBA and DE representatives to develop the Merri-bek KISP. Principally the KISP aims to estimate the growth in demand for kindergarten places within the LGA. The Merri-bek KISP will help kindergarten providers meet demand and provide a clear picture of infrastructure need across the municipality.

The KISP provides demand estimates in terms of where, when and how much demand for kindergarten places will grow within Merri-bek. It also estimates where and how many kindergarten place providers can accommodate in existing facilities before new infrastructure is required to meet demand. The estimates can be used to inform decisions about where and when expansions of kindergarten program capacity and the construction of new or extended facilities are needed to meet demand growth.

Where there is an agreed KISP for the LGA, the Local Government and not-for-profit kindergarten providers seeking co-investments through the Building Blocks Capacity Building stream must refer to and align their proposed project with the infrastructure need identified in the KISP.

A key element of the reform process involves Council and DE working with existing providers to 'unlock' unused capacity within existing infrastructure. Optimisation of existing services can be challenging, it is highly time and cost-effective, compared to building new capacity through infrastructure projects. It also helps target infrastructure investment to the places that need it most and avoids over-supplying the market.

Council and DE will support services to maximise their kindergarten places through the following change management activities and practices:

- Providing additional programs.
- Using different timetables, including 7.5-hour days.
- Alternate delivery models, such as rotational models or mixed-age groups.
- Increasing the provision of degree-qualified kindergarten teachers leading integrated kindergarten - programs in long day care settings.

The table below indicates the total estimated three and four-year-old kindergarten places between 2021-29 (presented in 15-hour equivalent places), demonstrating a shortage of places in future years.

Merri-bek LGA level estimates	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
Total estimated demand for kindergarten places (three and four-year-old children)	2,271	2,995	3,317	3,638	3,917	4,378	4,666	4,954	5,316
Total kindergarten places that cannot be accommodated by existing services	0	30	43	78	154	530	751	996	1,330

Building Blocks Partnership (BBP)

Following the development of the KISP, Council has continued working with VSBA and DE to establish a framework to enable State co-investment into a pipeline of kindergarten infrastructure projects, through Building Blocks Partnerships (BBPs). The BBP will provide Council with the opportunity to develop a medium to long term, in-principle agreement with DE, for co-investment in the projects over a five-year period.

The objectives of the BBP are to:

- Provide greater long-term funding certainty for local government partners about co-investment for kindergarten infrastructure, which can also include integrated facilities with MCH, long day care and playgroup spaces.
- Support local government partners to forward plan their infrastructure budgets and deliver facilities in line with kindergarten capacity requirements, aligned with KISPs.
- Support the successful roll out of the three-year-old kindergarten reform by identifying projects that will facilitate the delivery of additional kindergarten capacity over a multi-year period. This includes projects led by Councils, as well as the opportunity to cohesively plan for State-led projects such as Kindergartens on School Sites and how these can complement the roll-out.

Description of Early Years Services included in the EYIP

Maternal and Child Health (MCH)

MCH provides families with ten Key Age and Stages visits up until the child turns five years. The service is a free, universal and a voluntary one. The service also offers New Parent Groups for all families which see a 6-7-week parenting support program, a sleep and settling education program, and outreach service to families who are vulnerable and need additional support.

MCH provides a service across the municipality throughout 16 centres. There are 27 consultation offices, over 40 nurses and an average of 2,700 birth notifications received each year.

MCH offers two breastfeeding open days for families to attend and get support around feeding. Breastfeeding support is overseen by MCH nurses who are also lactation consultants.

MCH also provide an Enhanced MCH service for families who are experiencing some form of vulnerability and need intense support with their child and parenting up to the child turns 3 years old. This is a referral program from our Universal MCH service supporting over 300 families in this program each year.

Service Description

Key Age and Stages consults (home visit, 2 week, 4 week, 8 week, 4 month, 8 month, 12 month, 18 months, 2.5 years and 3.5 years) plus if required additional consults to support parents in their parenting journey and to ensure the health of the baby.

Maternal and Child Health Nurses can:

- provide information, support and advice on a variety of topics (including parenting, development and learning, child health, family health and wellbeing, safety, immunisation, breastfeeding, nutrition and family planning)
- monitor a child's growth and development in a series of one-on-one consultations at specific times in a child's early years
- help with sleeping, feeding and behaviour problems
- organise parents' groups where they can get information and have the chance to meet other parents in the local area
- tell families about other local support services

- organise additional activities based on family's needs (for example, arranging home visits when you are unable to visit a centre)
- help to contact specialist services if necessary (such as early parenting centres)
- offer additional support and services to families experiencing difficulties
- refer families into our Enhanced MCH service.

Key challenges with existing facilities

Due to the age of many of the MCH Centres, there are several deficits in existing facilities, including:

- poorly laid out facilities, with limited space for consulting rooms, waiting areas and amenities for both staff and families
- some centres are stand alone and not co-located with other services
- limited or no space for parent groups or playgroups
- outdated facilities that need renewal and maintenance.

Key facility features required

The establishment of a new MCH Centre would be co-located with other early years and/or community services and include the following features:

- fitted out consultation rooms which are large enough to complete work and allow for up to 3-4 adults and a child in the room, good natural lighting and effective sound proofing
- a large waiting room and/or separate room for parent groups sessions and where possible a separate space for playgroups
- the centre needs to be inviting and welcoming and able to have space to display information, a child's area to read and play and space for clients to wait for appointment, mothers being able to breastfeed, change nappies and interact with other families
- adequate accessible staff toilets and toilets for families to use with nappy change facilities.
- kitchen/Kitchenette and adequate storage
- an intercom system for entry into the centre
- premium IT and Internet access – MCH data entry system is web based and nurses require a reliable system
- ideally a secure outdoor space accessible from the waiting area, parent group and/or playgroup space.

Playgroups

Playgroups bring young children, parents, families and communities together to learn and develop through informal play activities and social engagement. Playgroups help parents and caregivers build social and support networks that encourage and assist them in their valuable parenting role.

At playgroup children can:

- develop physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually
- make new friends
- have new experiences
- gain self confidence
- develop cooperation skills, and
- develop communication skills.

The difference of community playgroups and Supported Playgroups

Supported Playgroups are run by facilitators who have early childhood, social work or MCH backgrounds. They are trained in *Small Talk Program* which is an evidence-based parenting

strategy to increase parenting confidence. It is for families experiencing vulnerability who meet an eligibility requirement. It is often more structured and has limits on the number of families in attendance.

Council receives funding from DFFH to facilitate ten Supported Playgroups across the municipality, and two-hour groups are provided each week during school terms.

Key challenges with finding suitable playgroup venues

There are several challenges finding suitable playgroup venues, including:

- lack of public transport accessibility
- the cost of hiring a venue
- lack of storage space in venues
- no or limited suitable outdoor space
- many family run playgroups have shut or are closing due to the challenges securing volunteers for committee or coordination roles.

Key facility features required for playgroup venues

When looking or establishing playgroup venues, ideal features include:

- co-location with MCH centre, child care, kindergarten, school and/or allied health service
- a venue should be easily accessible for families to walk to or access via public transport
- as groups are generally organised by volunteers, venues should be free or available at a minimal cost to participants
- a large light filled open space for activities to be set up in for the families and children to engage in, a carpeted area for baby play and soft areas and a hard floor for messy play
- adequate storage to store equipment for both indoor and outdoor play
- an outdoor space for children to play in, small garden for planting and sandpit
- nappy changing facilities and child appropriate toilets
- a kitchenette to prepare snacks.

Child Care Centres or Long Day Care

Available for children aged 0-6 years whose families are working, studying, or require some respite. Education and care programs are provided to meet the developmental needs, interests and experience of each child. Centres typically operate 11 hours a day from 7am to 6pm, Monday to Friday for a minimum of 48 weeks per year, children form relationships with their peers and educators and form an attachment to familiar people, spaces, sounds and smells, as well as developing friendships with other children.

Long day care services may also offer kindergarten programs, and this is known as an **integrated kindergarten program**. Some centres also provide sessional kindergarten where children can attend for the kindergarten program only, which is 15 hours per week for 4-year-old children and from 2022 five hours per week for 3-year-old children, with the option to increase up to 15 hours per week from 2023.

Kindergarten

Kindergarten (also called preschool) is an educational program for children aged three and four years of age delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher.

Kindergartens provide a range of learning experiences and activities that are both stimulating and encourage positive interactions with children's peers and teachers. Children's learning and curiosity is encouraged through experiences and activities, such as exploring the natural world, being exposed to new ideas and problem solving.

In Victoria 3 and 4-year-old kindergarten programs are funded by State Government and from 2023 both programs will be offered for up to 15 hours per week. In Merri-bek the majority of sessional kindergarten programs are operated from Council facilities.

Key challenges with Child Care and Kindergarten facilities

Council has 24 centres providing child care and kindergarten programs. The average age of buildings is 60 years, and while the children's areas and outdoor spaces provide suitable education and care environments for children and meet the legislative requirements, 60% of the early years facilities are in 'moderate' condition and 30% are in 'good' condition and require upgrades to ensure optimal learning environments for the children, and adequate facilities for staff and families visiting the centre.

Approximately 70% of early years facilities are outdated and do not provide the required spaces for contemporary early childhood education and care provision, and have several challenges, including:

- all centres are highly utilised and operate an average of ten hours each day
- 15 hours of 3-year-old kindergarten will result in reduced kindergarten capacity
- child care centres are in high demand and have long waiting lists
- limited staff planning, meeting room, office, minimal staff toilets and kitchen facilities
- inadequate facilities for families, such as waiting areas and accessible toilets
- require cyclical maintenance and investment to ensure facilities are fit for purpose
- inadequate facilities, need modernisation and transformations to be fit for purpose
- non-compliant ramps and entries, inadequate pram and bike parking
- inconsistent co-location and integration with other early years services or precincts.

Key facility features

Child Care Centres and Kindergartens are regulated under a scheme known as the National Quality Framework and services must meet the legislated requirements set out in the framework. For centres to meet service approval with the Department of Education they must comply with the National Education and Care Law and Regulatory requirements and adhere to the Building Code of Australia.

From an operational point of view, centres require the following:

- a welcoming environment for children, families and staff
- a well-kept enriching environment for children to learn and grow, light filled spacious internal spaces and linked to a safe and stimulating natural outdoor space
- adequate capacity to meet the growing demand
- space for staff to undertake their administrative duties when not working with the children, including space for planning, meeting, office, and adequate staff amenities
- short-term car parking areas at the front of the centre for families to drop off and collect their children, together with long term parking options for staff, bike and pram parking
- in line with Council's Community Infrastructure Plan vision and desired outcomes, centres ideally should be integrated, accessible, place based, future proofed and of high quality.

Infrastructure Planning

Early years infrastructure planning considers location, current and projected demand; family preferences; current capacity and opportunities to expand, improve or integrate; site assessments, concept designs, cost plans, detailed design and tendering processes; together with service planning with VSBA, DE, service providers and Council staff, grant applications, budget planning, procurement, project delivery and service approvals by DE.

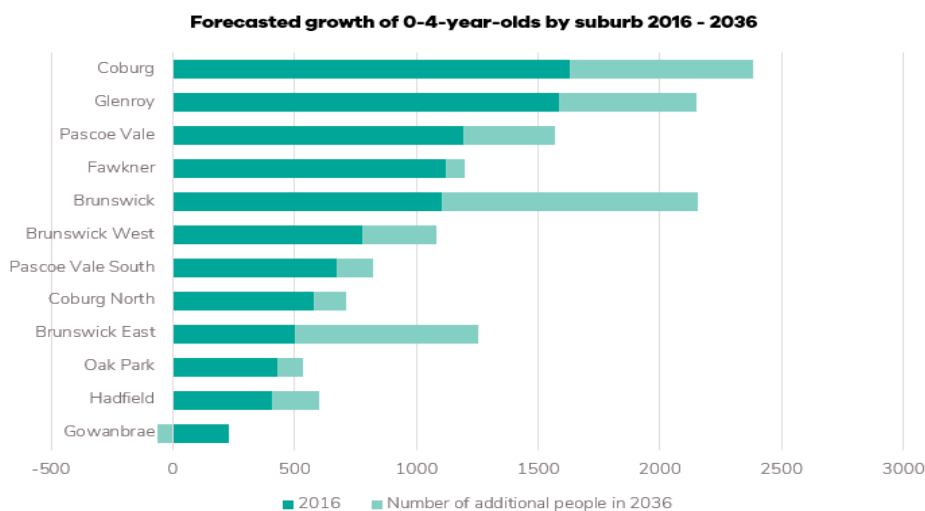
Increasing Demand for Early Years Services

Participation in early years services provides support to families and improves social capital by creating links with other families and the wider community. Children's participation in early

childhood centres fosters improved social, developmental and learning outcomes for children, and enables families' workforce participation and improves economic outcomes for Merri-bek.

The projected increase in population will increase the demand for all early years services, and the implementation of 15 hours of funded three-year-old kindergarten programs will also result in increased demand for kindergarten places.

The population of 0-4 year-olds in Merri-bek was 6.3% of the total population (ABS 2016), and the table below shows that the growth of 0-4 year-olds will continue to grow.



Together with the understanding of population trends, current capacity of existing buildings and audits of facilities enables the identification of service gaps, improvements and expansions required to ensure the adequate provision of service to meet current and future demand.

Facility Population Benchmarks

Early Years Facilities	Quantity Standards
Maternal and Child Health Centre	1 consulting rooms per 110 Persons aged (0 years)
Playgroup Space	1 group sessions per 110 Persons aged (0 to 4 years)
Child Care - long day care	30 enrolment capacity (places) per 100 Persons (aged 0 to 5 years)
3 and 4-year-old Kindergarten	99.3 enrolment capacity (places) per 100 Persons (aged 3 -4 years)

Consultation with Service Users

Council consulted with service users via an electronic survey to better understand the physical attributes families consider when selecting an early years centre.

These valuable insights coincide with Council's Community Infrastructure vision and desired outcomes, and highlights some of the important factors families consider when selecting and using the early years facilities.

Feedback from families and services users on the physical and service attributes of an early years centre and been listed below in order of priority.

Physical environment
Preference for a centre closest to their home
Clean/hygienic/neat environments

Large and engaging outdoor environment for children
Well maintained and welcoming physical environment/facilities/resources
Safe/secure environment
Ease of access/accessibility
Community based centre/not-for-profit
Sense of community and connection with other families
Cosy centre, with a caring and family feel
Ramp/pram access and storage for prams and bikes (both child and adult bikes)
Sustainable/environmental practices
Access to playgroups and parent groups on site
Access to parking
Centre located close to school where my child will attend to establish friendships with other children attending the same school and enable smoother transitions
Spacious Maternal and Child Health waiting room with space for children to play
Access to suitable and affordable Playgroup venues
Modern, light filled building and facilities
Nappy change facilities for families
Close to public transport, but not located on a busy road
Walkability
Adequate sleep facilities
Co-location of kindergarten with Maternal and Child Health Centre or School
Family friendly facilities
Space to gather with other parents and their children

Existing and Planned Early Years Infrastructure

This section provides a snapshot of Council's early years infrastructure within each of Merri-bek's three districts North, Central and South.

Merri-bek North - Including Gowanbrae, Glenroy, Hadfield, Fawkner and Oak Park

Maternal and Child Health Centres	Playgroup Venues	Child Care Centres	Kindergartens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gowanbrae Community Centre (co-located with Gowanbrae Children's Centre) Glenroy Hub Community Centre* Hadfield (co-located with H E Kane Kindergarten) Belle Vue Park (co-located at Belle Vue Park Primary School) Fawkner, Jukes Road Precinct (co-located with Merri Health) Lorne Street (Co-located with Lorne Street Kindergarten and Fawkner Primary School) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gowanbrae Community Centre Glenroy Community Hub* Northern Merri-bek Playgroup Venue (co-located with Moomba Park Kindergarten) Fawkner Community House Lorne Street Kindergarten 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Glenroy Hub Children's Centre* (opening in 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gowanbrae Children's Centre Glenroy Memorial Preschool (moving to Glenroy Community Hub*) H E Kane Kindergarten Moomba Park Kindergarten Lorne Street Kindergarten Oak Park Kindergarten

*Glenroy Community Hub is an integrated community centre opening in early 2022

Early Years infrastructure in the Merri-bek northern area are characterised by:

- A range of community services will be provided at the new Glenroy Community Hub in Wheatsheaf Road, Glenroy. The hub will include:
 - Maternal and Child Health Centre
 - Glenroy Memorial Kindergarten
 - Child Care Centre and playgroup space
 - Neighbourhood Learning centre
 - Glenroy library
 - Community Health service provider.
- Co-located MCH Centres and Kindergartens in Gowanbrae, Hadfield and Fawkner.
- Standalone kindergartens in Oak Park and Moomba Park.
- Limited community-based child care provision at only Glenroy Community Hub, and no community-based child care in Fawkner or Oak Park.
- No MCH Centre in Oak Park.

Merri-bek Central - Including, Pascoe Vale, Coburg North, Pascoe Vale South and Coburg

Maternal and Child Health Centres	Playgroup Venues	Child Care Centres	Kindergartens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merlynston, Bain Reserve • Pascoe Vale Community Centre • Newlands (co-located with Newlands Preschool) • Coburg (co-located with Coburg Children's Centre) • The Avenue (co-located with Kids on The Avenue Children's Centre) • Woodlands (co-located with Doris Blackburn Kindergarten) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pascoe Vale Community Centre • Newlands Community Centre • East Coburg Community House • Reynard Street Community House 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Derby Street Children's Centre • Anne Sgro Children's Centre • Barry Beckett Children's Centre • Coburg Children's Centre • Shirley Robertson Children's Centre • Kids on the Avenue Children's Centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lake Park Kindergarten • Newlands Preschool • Turner Street Kindergarten • Brentwood Kindergarten • Doris Blackburn Preschool

Early years infrastructure in the Merri-bek central area are characterised by:

- A range of stand-alone or co-located facilities in the Coburg, Newlands, Pascoe Vale and Pascoe Vale South.

Merri-bek South - Including Brunswick West, Brunswick and Brunswick East

Maternal and Child Health Centres	Playgroup Venues	Child Care Centres	Kindergartens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hartnett House (rented premises – co-located with Melbourne City Mission) • Victoria Street • Glenlyon Road (rented premises – co-located with Merri Community Health and relocating to Saxon Street) • Lygon Street 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denzil Don Kindergarten • Wylie Reserve Hockey Pavilion • Temple Park Senior Citizens Centre • Siteworks, Saxon Street 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merri-bek Community Child Care Centre – Tinning Street • Merri-bek Community Child Care Centre – Everett Street • Dawson Street Child Care Centre • East Brunswick Child Care Centre and Kindergarten • Park Street Child Care Centre and Kindergarten 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North West Brunswick Kindergarten • Denzil Don Kindergarten • East Brunswick Child Care and Kindergarten

Early years infrastructure in the Merri-bek southern area are characterised by:

- A range of early years facilities scattered across the southern areas of Merri-bek.
- There is little integration of services and need for the provision of an Early Years Hub to include MCH, child care and kindergarten, together with parent group and playgroup space.

Plans to Address Identified Needs

Addressing the identified early years infrastructure needs will occur through:

- **Capital Project** proposals to upgrade, expand or build new early years infrastructure in partnership with VSBA/DE and service providers.
- **Undertake further exploration** on the opportunities to expand and improve existing early years buildings.
- **Ensuing there are adequate budget** allocations each year to undertake the required works, together with annual allocations to maintain early years facilities in an ongoing basis.
- **Work in partnership with service providers** to ensure facilities operate and their optimal capacity to provide high quality early years program for Merri-bek children and families.

Prioritised Capital Projects

Council is working in partnership with VSBA, DE and service providers to ensure there is adequate capacity in early years facilities to meet the community's increasing demand for services.

The Building Blocks Partnership with VSBA and DE will provide Council with the opportunity to develop a medium to long term, in-principle co-investment plan for capital projects over the next five years.

A summary of capital projects, delivery time and estimated capital cost is provided in the tables below. The list of capital projects was informed by the *Community Infrastructure Plan's* strategic analysis of community infrastructure needs. The proposals are divided into northern, central and southern areas of the municipality.

Recommendations in Merri-bek North to expand, improve or investigate the expansion the following centres:

Facility	Delivery Timeline	Cost Estimate
Oak Park Kindergarten – additional kindergarten room and explore opportunities to develop at MCH centre in Oak Park	2022-2024	\$2m-\$3m
H E Kane Kindergarten and MCH Centre in Hadfield – expansion and redevelopment to provide additional kindergarten room, additional MCH consulting room and playgroup/parent group space	2022-2024	\$6m-\$7m
Belle Vue Park MCH Centre – update consulting room and improve waiting area (Co-located with Primary School and Kindergarten. The school provide the space rent free, however we are required to ensure the space is fit for use)	2022-2024	\$50k
Lorne Street Kindergarten and MCH Centre in Fawkner – additional kindergarten room	2022-2024	\$1m-\$2m
Moomba Park Kindergarten – additional kindergarten room and playgroup space	2025-2028	\$1m-\$3m
Explore opportunities to expand early years facilities in the Fawkner community precinct (C B Smith Reserve) to provide additional kindergarten room/MCH parent group room/consider provision of child care centre	2025-2028	\$1m-\$2m
Gowanbrae Children's Centre – additional kindergarten room and playgroup space.	2025-2028	\$1m-\$2m

Recommendations in Merri-bek Central to expand, improve or investigate the expansion the following centres:

Facility	Delivery Timeline	Cost Estimate
Doris Blackburn Preschool – additional kindergarten room and consider development of parent group space	2022-2024	\$1m-\$2m
Derby Street Children's Centre – redevelopment of existing kindergarten room to provide two kindergartens rooms	2022-2024	\$3m-\$4m
Kids on the Avenue Children's Centre – expansion of kindergarten room and Maternal and Child Health Centre	2022-2024	\$500k
Turner Street Kindergarten – undertake improvements, minor expansion of kindergarten room and explore opportunities for an additional campus	2022-2024	\$500k
Pascoe Vale Community Centre – upgrade children's room yard to convert into a kindergarten and provide an additional MCH consulting room	2022-2024	\$400k
Coburg MCH Centre – fit out third consulting room and expand waiting area by enclosing part of the courtyard	2022-2024	\$80k
Lake Park Kindergarten – provide an additional kindergarten room	2025-2028	\$1m-\$2m
Newlands Community Centre – provide an additional kindergarten room and increase the MCH waiting room provide space for parent groups and playgroups	2025-2028	\$1m-\$2m

Recommendations Merri-bek South to expand, improve or investigate the expansion the following centres:

Facility	Delivery Timeline	Cost Estimate
Saxon Street – development of a Maternal and Child Health Centre in new integrated development, include provision of space for parent groups/playgroup	2022-2024	Included in proposed Saxon St development
Merri-bek Community Child Care Centre Everett Street – provide an additional kindergarten room	2022-2024	\$1m-\$2m
North West Brunswick Kindergarten – undertake improvements and – provide an additional kindergarten room	2022-2024	\$1.5m
Victoria Street MCH upgrade or consider relocation to proposed new early years hub in Brunswick	2022-2024	\$180k
New Early Years Hub in Brunswick or East Brunswick – develop a new integrated centre with child care, kindergarten, MCH and parent group/playgroup facilities	2025-2028	\$8m-\$10m
Dawson Street Child Care Centre – undertake improvements and explore opportunities for an additional campus	2025-2028	\$1m-\$5m
Lyon Street MCH Centre refurbishment	2025-2028	\$500k

Adequate Annual Building Maintenance Budget

Due to the high utilisation of early years facilities, it is recommended an annual allocation of funds is made available for the ongoing cyclical maintenance and minor improvements of facilities.

Working in partnership with early years service providers

Continue to work in partnership with service providers to ensure facilities operate and their optimal capacity to provide high quality early years program for Merri-bek children and families.