



Horsham Municipal Early Years Plan

2024–2028





Horsham Rural City Council acknowledges the five Traditional Owner groups of this land – the Wotjobaluk, Wergaia, Jupagalk, Jaadwa and Jadawadjali people.

We recognise the important and ongoing place that all Indigenous people hold in our community.

We pay our respects to the elders, both past and present, and commit to working together in the spirit of mutual understanding and respect for the benefit of the broader community and future generations.



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Message from the Mayor

I have to agree with John F Kennedy who in July 1963 described children as “the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future”. It is with great pride and excitement that I introduce this plan which not only highlights the importance of our precious young residents, aged up to 10 years, but will help us all to provide the best hope for both their future and that of our whole community.

While families are often seen as parents, grandparents and children, we know that it is the whole village that raises our children. This is especially the case in our rural community where many people know each other, and each other’s family well and are interconnected through many aspects of life.

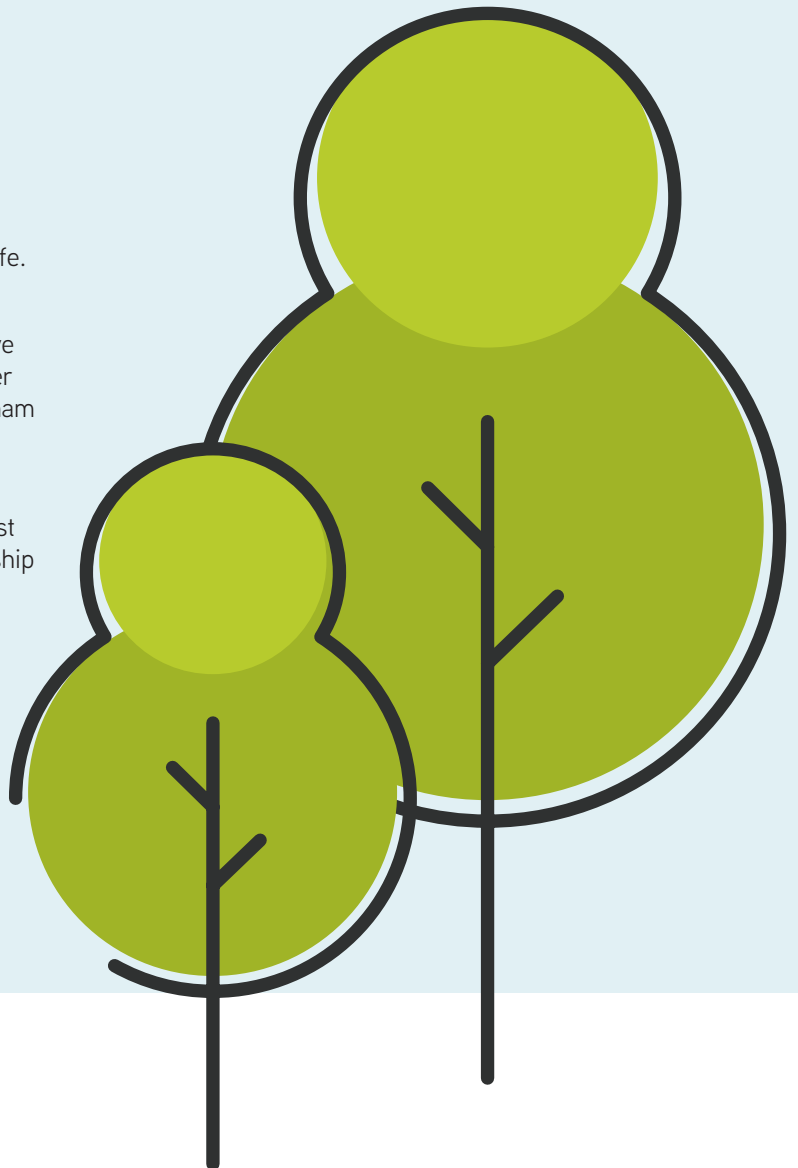
We also know that this community faces challenges of distance, retaining a skilled workforce and providing all the facilities and services needed for the best foundation for our children to thrive.

Horsham Rural City Council (HRCC) has specific and important roles to support children aged 0-10 and their families, but we are not the only players in these foundational years. It is critical that all members of the supportive community work together and strive to be a place where your young people can truly live their best life.

This plan acknowledges our diverse community which includes First Nations traditional owners, migrants who’ve arrived over the past 150 years and an increasing number of new residents who have more recently come to Horsham from both Australia and many corners of the globe.

We want all children, whether their families have been here for one month or many generations, to enjoy the best foundations in life and we hope that this plan, in partnership with the collective endeavours of our supportive community, will help us all to achieve that goal.

Mayor, Cr Robyn Gulline



1 – About the plan

Purpose and background

Early years is an important part of Council’s service offer. We provide Maternal and Child Health services, supported playgroup, library and immunisation programs. Council works on facility planning for early years use, can advocate for increased resources, services and infrastructure and is constantly working to help strengthen community capacity.

The Horsham Municipal Early Years Plan 2024-2028 (Early Years Plan) provides a strategic direction for the development and coordination of early years programs, activities and other local community development processes that affect children and their families and aims to ensure the best possible foundation for life success for both the children and families in HRCC.

As part of the plan’s creation we created a data snapshot of the lives of our children 0-10, and their families, which highlights our strengths as well as areas where there is room for improvement.

This plan’s development involved extensive consultation across the community of Horsham. We listened to parents, children, carers, agencies, grandparents and others who touch the lives of our children. We thank them for their time and honesty in providing this input.

We’ve used these valuable thoughts and responses to help draft priorities for the whole community in the Early Years. We know that the delivery of these important priorities will require a collective effort from all who dwell, work and play in this community.

History of the project

Municipal Early Years Plans foster a community-wide and whole-of-system approach to building community strength and addressing the underlying causes of inequity and vulnerability in children and families. They are place-based, with a focus on prevention, equity, health and long-term social and educational outcomes for children.

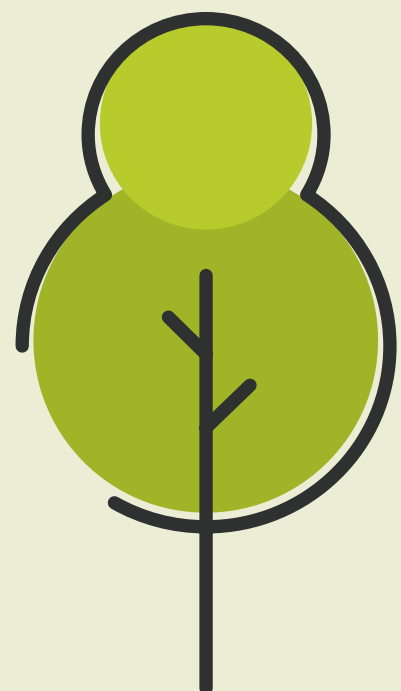
HRCC has committed to producing a plan and themes of:

- Supporting Families to Thrive;
- Building Blocks for Lifelong Learning;
- Strong Voices for the Community.

Community input

Key steps included:

1. Developing a data set of policies, research evidence, trends, services, community characteristics, partnerships and collaboration;
2. Engaging the community – including Council staff, external partners and agencies and community members, including children, both face to face and through a digital survey;
3. Analysing and identifying priorities, visions and direction;
4. Developing actions and an Early Years Plan;
5. Checking back in with community;
6. Council endorsement.



2 – What Council does in Early Years

Council works with a range of stakeholders to provide the following:

Planning and Coordination

We provide:

- **Service planning and development**
- **Early Years roles including:**
 - Community Services and Safety Manager;
 - Coordinator Youth and Early Years;
 - Casual immunisation staff;
 - Maternal Child Health Services;
 - Supported Playgroup Facilitators.

Developing and delivering strategic plans that include delivery elements across the early years sector including the Municipal Early Years Plan and:

PLAN	GOALS
HRCC Council Plan	Strategic objectives - Community, liveability; sustainability, accessibility and leadership.
HRCC Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021-2024	Health and Wellbeing Plan priorities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support gender equity initiatives in the prevention of family violence; • Enhance the inclusivity, accessibility and safety of our places and spaces; • Support the communication process to increase knowledge of local health and community services available to the public; • Create engaging spaces and places for social connection and wellbeing to build community resilience; • Advocate for educational opportunities, delivered locally, to support and encourage lifelong learning; • Respond to key community needs, ensuring our municipality is child and youth friendly and encourages positive aging; • Advocate and support the establishment and growth of integrated health services and facilities that meet the needs of all community members; • Promote recreational and social environments for people to enjoy (open spaces, waterways etc); • Planning for places and spaces to provide connectedness and social inclusion.
Play Space Strategy	Being developed – goal of current Council Plan - Increase the percentage of urban population within 400 m of a fully developed open space.
Social infrastructure plan	The Social Infrastructure Framework identifies and assesses existing social infrastructure provision focusing predominantly on Council owned facilities.
Community Inclusion Plan	Plan to help HRCC fulfil its vision as an inclusive place for people with disability, so they can participate, thrive and reach their full potential.
Child Safe Policy	Eleven Standards, reflecting the National Principles for a Child Safe Organisation developed following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Betrayal of Trust Enquiry).
Gender Equality Plan 2021-2025	Ensuring fairness for all people, so that everyone in HRCC and in the Horsham community can enjoy the same opportunities, rights and respect, regardless of their gender.
Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006	Human rights are essential in a democratic and inclusive society that respects the rule of law, human dignity, equality and freedom and belong to all people without discrimination, and the diversity of the people of Victoria enhances our community.

Service Provision

Working in partnership with State Government, HRCC:

- Delivers Maternal and Child Health Services;
- Provides an Enhanced Family Connection Officer;
- Delivers the Multi Birth Volunteer Program;
- Provides early years programs through the Library Service;
- Delivers Immunisation program;
- Provides a Supported Playgroup Officer and Program;
- Provides Art Gallery Childrens Programming;
- Provides supports through the Business and Tourism Development Team with family friendly events.
- Through the Kalkee Road Childrens and Community Hub, HRCC provides a venue for Toy Library and various playgroups, programs and services.

Facility Planning

Council provides:

- Kalkee Road Children and Community Hub;
- Kindergarten facilities tenanted by Emerge Early Years Service (EEYS) at Bennett Road, Natimuk Road, Green Park and Natimuk Preschool;
- Horsham Aquatic Centre Facilities – which provide learn to swim, creche, after school care and school holiday care;
- Horsham Library – provision of early years space
- Sporting facilities, open spaces, nature play park and playgrounds;
- HRCC Investment/Business Development support active enquiries for Childcare providers around navigating permits etc.

State and Federal Policy

POLICY	JURISDICTION	KEY
National Quality Framework for early Childhood Education and Care	Federal	The National Quality Framework (NQF) supports quality care experiences, environments and relationships.
Preschool Reform Funding Agreement	Federal	Includes funding for kindergarten.
Early Childhood Reform Plan	Victorian Government	Aiming to deliver systematic change targeted at supporting the children who need it most. Help prepare children for kinder, school and life. Further Kindergarten sites are planned on DET land.
Kindergarten for Every 3-year-old Building Blocks for 3-Y-O kindergarten	Victorian Government	From now until 2029 extra hours of subsidised kindergarten will be progressively introduced. New kindergarten has been built and Hub will be used for long day care.
MCH Memorandum of Understanding	Victorian Government	Free services available to all families with a child aged between birth and six years of age
Roadmap to Reform	Victorian Government	Aimed at improving the lives of vulnerable children.
Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan	Victorian Government	Outlines public health strategic directions.
Local Government Policy	Local	Councils, State and Federal governments have a joint responsibility to ensure locally accessible family and children's services are available to support families in care, protection, health, development and education of children.

Our Industry Stakeholders

Service Provider environment:

ORGANISATION	ROLE	SUPPORT/SERVICES/FACILITIES
Barenji Gadjin Land Council (BGLC)	Traditional Owner Council for Wotjobaluk Nations.	Cultural consults; language and learning; cultural safety.
By Five	0-8 improve outcomes, physical, social mental and educational	Lobbying for and providing evidenced-based service data and provision. HRCC partners with By Five in the Paediatric Telehealth project.
Department of Education	Provision and monitoring of early years.	Planning for provision of kindergarten infrastructure and system-wide support.
Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH)	Child Protection	Specifically targeted to support those children and young people at risk of harm or where families are unable to protect them.
Emerge Early Years Service	Manage 20 Wimmera kindergartens Biggest provider in Wimmera	Kinder; Allied health referrals; transition (to school) support and supporting families.
Grampians Community Health (GCH)		Family Violence supports for victims including children: alcohol and other drugs; mental health; and working with carers. Liaising with Headspace; Connections and NDIS support coordination.
Grampians Public Health Unit (GPHU)	Health promotion, prevention and early intervention on 9 priorities including Early years	Expanding Smiles for Miles Digital literacy Mental Health First Aid Health and wellbeing planning
Orange Door	Supporting families and children impacted by family violence	Triage service in Horsham and at rural outposts and range of support service staff working from one site.
Uniting Wimmera	Early help program	In-home support; referrals out; integrated Family Services and Access Early Learning
Wimmera Southern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network (WSMLLEN)	Birth to school leavers	Literacy program for new babies.

Other stakeholders include

Primary schools; Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative; Playgroup volunteers; Victoria Police; Horsham Library; Horsham Art Gallery; Long Day Care Providers.

3 – Engagement process

What the data tells us

Horsham birthrate is fairly constant and the diversity of families is growing as migrants choose rural lifestyles and our First Nations population continues to grow.

The data showed continued high rates of family violence and higher than State average levels of stress for families of children entering school. While the Council has higher than average immunisation and Maternal Child Health (MCH) visits, rates of smoking during pregnancy were much higher than the state average.

In coming years the City will see increased hours for kindergarten in both three and four-year-olds. Stakeholders continue to collaboratively work on the challenges of insufficient childcare places, as well as workforce recruitment and retention issues in health and childcare roles.

The rural city also faces above average levels in language and speech concerns for children entering school and development delays for children in their first year of school.

Capacity to seek specialised help for these issues, is also hampered by challenges in recruitment and retention of skilled workers.

Parents, carers and professionals working with children and families

Fifty-nine respondents completed a 19-question survey about service and support in Horsham Rural City. They responded with strongly agree, agree, unsure, disagree or strongly disagree with the questions.

We also spoke to 14 adults and 8 children during two public pop-ups at Up Tempo cafe and the Horsham Plaza. Seven children completed a child's survey.

Survey Results

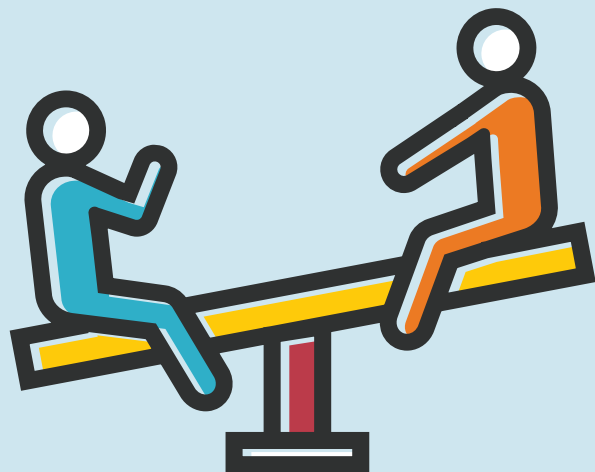
There was strong support and understanding around HRCC services for MCH and immunisation with 95% agreeing with children having access to MCH and 95 % in agreement that children had access to immunisation

There was less universal agreement about child access to playgroups and kindergarten with 56% disagreeing, while 78% agreed with access to required childcare.

Only 15% agreed that HRCC included children's needs in its planning process and more than half (57%) disagreed in the statement that the municipality provided excellent facilities for children. A total and 62% did not agree that parents/carer support services were easy to find.

Comments from survey

Childcare was one of the most commonly raised issues for respondents in their additional comments, as well as parks and recreation facilities. A lack of access to health and specialist services and the need for improved community-wide advocacy were also highlighted, as was the need for more targeted services to support parents. There was also an appetite for improved information about events and services.



Summary of commentary during engagement

KEY TOPICS RAISED BY STAKEHOLDERS	NUMBER OF COMMENTS MADE
Playgrounds and recreation	18
Childcare shortage and workforce recruitment and retention	17
Maternal and Child Health	7
Kindergarten and early learning	7
Access to Services and Specialists	7
Advocacy and networking	6

Some of the comments include:

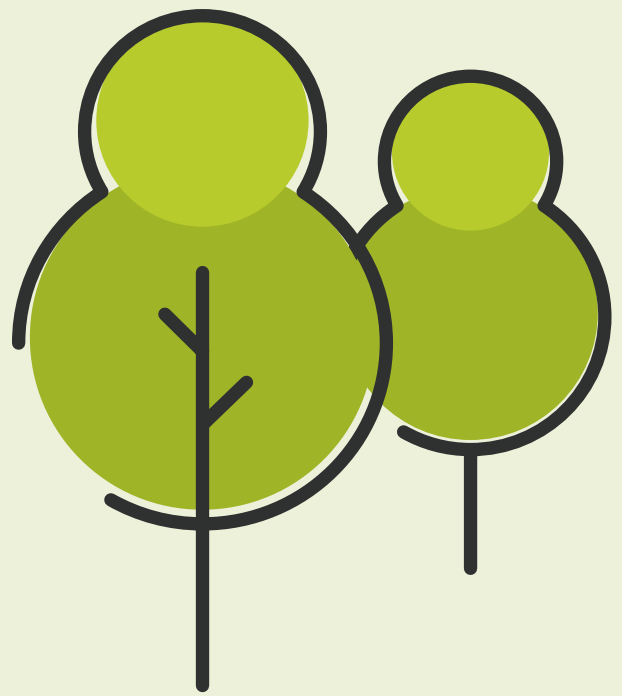
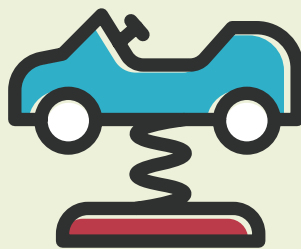
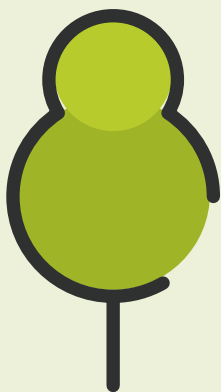
“The nature park along the river is fantastic. Please plant more trees throughout the community. Horsham is so hot in summer and the lack of nature strip trees would help.”

“Daycare, childcare and kinder in this area is a joke. We need more!”

“HRCC needs to be advocating for families harder. Access to support services are virtually non-existent. Supports for children including community paediatric OT, counselling and psychology supports, services/ program to support families such as Circle of Security parenting program.”

“More advocacy for kindergarten, childcare, inclusive play spaces, age-appropriate design, more child and family related facilities and groups would enable a better outcome for the children of our future.”

“Access to childcare is a huge barrier for families and also after kinder care for families accessing Kinder that isn’t within a childcare facility. Access to allied health professionals is also a huge barrier.”



Out of the mouths of babes....

Seven children filled out the survey and we also spoke to others at two public engagement sessions.

Children told us **They liked:**

the river, parks, their school, events around town, shops and freedom to run around and make noise.

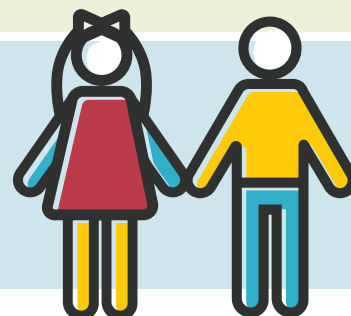
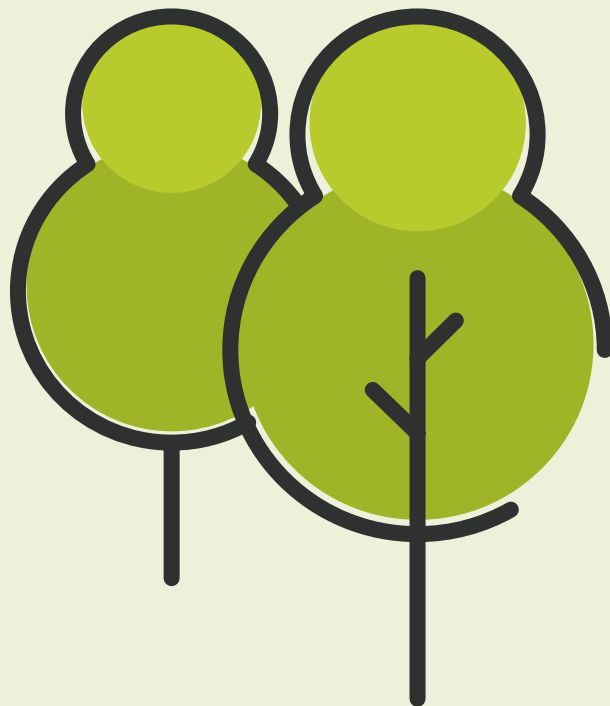
When asked what else they would like they talked about:

- Indoor play areas, more childcare, playgrounds near home, an outdoor pool and play programs with toys,

If they could be granted one wish, their responses included:

- A show with free rides, a place to swim in the river, a water park, more playgrounds, indoor play centre and food outlets along the river.

"I like the river and the new water playground."



Industry Stakeholder Engagement


We spoke to the HRCC Maternal Child Health Nurses who work with new families. We engaged with representatives from agencies and other organisations working with children aged 0-10. These included two workshops and several one-to-one meetings. Many issues raised are outside the core business of HRCC and will require partnerships and collaboration to address.

Early Years Planning Horsham Rural City Council

Horsham Rural City Council (HRCC) is part of the diverse village that raises our children. We see these early years (ages 0-10 years old) as a critical foundation for our whole community's future. These are the key roles we play in helping you all raise healthy, happy, safe and thriving children.

Helping families

- Maternal Child Health services, especially to new parents and for the first 1000 vital days of life
- Supported Playgroup Officer Role
- The Enhanced Family Connection Officer role and Youth Services Planning & Engagement Officer role
- Library services - which provides early years programs
- Immunisation program



Places to be

Council currently provides:

- Kalkee Childrens Hub
- Some Kindertarten buildings
- Horsham Aquatic Centre
- Sporting facilities and playgrounds
- Horsham Library

Calling for change

- We advocate to State and Federal government for increased resources, services and infrastructure our community needs to improve early years outcomes for all.
- Planning for future services


Stronger Community


- Supporting community events
- Kindergarten referrals and supported playgroup
- Help for vulnerable families to access childcare
- Monitoring births to ensure we provide services where they are needed

Working with others

HRCC is one of many in our village that helps raise our 2400 children aged 0-10. We see networks and relationships as critical in collectively ensuring all our children get to live the best life they can.

We would like to hear from you:





Key issues identified included:

- Waiting lists for specialised support and medical interventions
- Challenges for families navigating services including the NDIS
- Lack of childcare;
- Recruitment and retention challenges especially in allied health and risk of burnout in existing workforce as a result.
- The opportunity for a coordinated regional advocacy approach to work more collaboratively in the early years space and reduce duplication of effort was also suggested.

As a result of these conversations, a key recommendation is to work with stakeholders to develop a well-designed, well represented and sustainable HRCC Early Years Network to advocate for children and families in the municipality.



4 – Key themes and actions



1. Supporting families to thrive



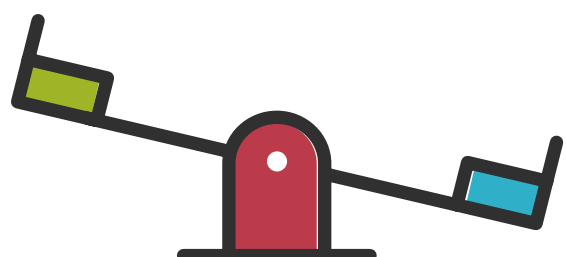
2. Building blocks for lifelong learning



3. Strong voices for our community

What is happening beyond Council

- **The Orange Door** has been established in Horsham to support children and families who have been exposed to family violence. It can connect people with a range of supports and services.
- **By Five** focuses on children aged 0-8 with three key advocacy priorities:
 - Equitable access to early years services;
 - High quality care for all families in the Wimmera Southern Mallee;
 - Creating environments that enable confident and connected families;
- **Federation University** has researched both childcare needs and young parents' experiences in HRCC and the Wimmera to support further advocacy.
- **Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership** is also advocating for a range of issues which effect children and families in the region.





1. Supporting families to thrive

Respondents were supportive of Council services they know and use. But there was lack of understanding about how to access other services, provision of facilities, how council works to build capacity and about activities and events for children and how it includes children in its planning.

Stakeholders also raised concerns about access to specialists and other non-council services because of long waiting times, lack of qualified staff in the region and difficulty navigating the service system.

Capacity to seek specialised help for these issues, is also hampered by challenges in recruitment and retention of skilled workers.

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	ROLE OF COUNCIL	PARTNERS	INDICATOR	TIMING
1.1 Better informed families	1.1.1 Develop an Early Years Communication strategy to enable better community understanding of Council's Early Years services, including community playgroups and Council family services.	Deliver	Library; Town Hall; Recreation Team.	Communication strategy developed and actioned	2024
	1.1.2 Actively and strategically promote Council's core Early Years activities and services: Immunisation, MCH, Supported Playgroup, Libraries, Town Hall programming	Deliver	Early Years Team; Community Relations and Advocacy Team (HRCC).	Communication plan is operationalised and annually reviewed.	2024-2027
	1.1.3 Maintain on HRCC website: Things-to-do-in-Horsham-with-small-children.pdf(PDF, 275KB)	Deliver	Early Years Team; Community Relations and Advocacy Team (HRCC).	Document updated every 6 months.	2024-2027
	1.1.4 Actively and strategically share information about other related Council actions and strategies on Early Years social media and other networks Including: play spaces, sport and recreation, family events and opportunities of future childcare places.	Deliver	Early Years Team	Process established to better cross-promote posts affecting Early Years cohorts and their families.	2024-2027
1.2 Better responding to family needs	1.2.1 Better support young parents through specific young parent groups.	Deliver	Early Years Team	Young parents group created.	2024
	1.2.2 Update the name of MCH services to reflect modern families.	Deliver	Early Years Team	Name changed and well communicated.	2025-2026
1.3 Create stronger connections and collaborations across the entire Early Years Sector.	1.3.1 Look to partner with stakeholders to explore development of an Early Years Network advocating for children and families.	Partner	Uniting; Wimmera; Orange Door; Department of Education; Emerge Early Years Service; By Five; Grampians Community Health; Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative.	Network meetings held and Terms of Reference established by end of 2025.	2025





2. Building blocks for lifelong learning

While council owns some of the kindergarten buildings, Emerge EYS has the role of managing many of these services across the municipality.

There are concerns about:

- meeting the increasing hours of kindergarten availability;
- a shortage of childcare places.
- finding qualified staff to teach and care in the early years;
- and the above average number of students entering school with vulnerabilities.

While HRCC does not have control of these issues, we will continue to work with partners to seek solutions.

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	ROLE OF COUNCIL	PARTNERS	INDICATOR	TIMING
2.1 Supporting parents/carers to learn and grow	2.1.1 Work with council Business and external partners to fund and design an annual free family event.	Partner	Early Years Team; HRCC Business and Tourism Development Team	Event held in 2024	2024
	2.1.2 Work with external partners to promote their family-friendly events and potentially collaborate on jointly funded and delivered events.	Partner	Members of the HRCC Early Years Network	Events promoted by HRCC	2024 -2027
	2.1.3 Continue to support families to develop playgroups for connection and learning and to provide supported playgroup.	Deliver	Promotion of Community Development Grants to help fund equipment and facilities for playgroups Community Relations and Advocacy Team	Media release written and sent to promote grants to young families and playgroups - in line with grant opening timeframe	2024 -2027
	2.1.4 Continue to provide education and support through creation of new parents' groups, promotion of free and low-cost activities at the Horsham Library and Horsham Regional Art Gallery.	Deliver	Horsham Library; Horsham Regional Art Gallery; Business and Tourism Development unit	This promotion included in comms plan	2024 -2027
	2.1.5 Provide support for grandparent carers at Kalkee Road Children's Hub	Deliver	Early Years Team	Sessions held	2024 -2027
	2.1.6 Support efforts across the community to increase parents' ability to be involved in the workforce and to attract quality staff to the work in the Early Years Sector	Partner	By Five; Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership (WSMRP); Federation University	HRCC staff member on By Five Steering or Advisory Committee	2024



3. Strong voices for our community

Council delivers a range of key services but many issues raised during the community engagement were beyond council's individual control. These include long daycare services, access to allied health and other medical specialist services and the challenges with workforce retention and recruitment.

In response to this we propose development, in partnership with a range of stakeholders, of an HRCC Early Years Network. Once established, this network could then feed into regional advocacy processes for Children 0-10, being led by By Five, Federation University and the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership.

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	ROLE OF COUNCIL	PARTNERS	INDICATOR	TIMING
3.1 To work with stakeholders to share information and advocate for Children aged 0-10	3.1.1 Work with partners in HRCC to develop framework for diverse, inclusive and broadly represented HRCC Early Years Network to collaboratively lobby, set priorities, design and advocate for our children and families.	Partner	HRCC; By Five; Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnerships; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development; Emerge EYS; Department of Education; Uniting Wimmera; Grampians Community Health; Orange Door; Playgroup and other community representatives.	Governance and membership completed and group meetings held. Quarterly meetings being held	2024
	3.1.2 Explore and investigate the opportunity for a council staff member to join the By Five Steering Committee or Advisory Committee to extend regional advocacy efforts in issues such childcare, workforce, access to specialist health and other services.	Partner	By Five; Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnerships;	HRCC on subcommittee	2025
	3.1.3 To work with the network to develop a list of key priority issues and actions aimed at improving outcomes for children in HRCC.	Partner	HRCC; By Five; Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnerships; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development; Emerge EYS; Department of Education; Uniting Wimmera; Grampians Community Health; Playgroup and other community representatives	Priorities established and beginning to be pursued.	2025

5 – Implementation and review

Council will work with other key stakeholders in the community to deliver the recommendations of the Early Years Plan.

The Early Years Network will meet at least four times each year. One of these meetings will be used to review the progress of actions and outcomes. Indicators of success are listed in the Key Themes and Actions table. These will be updated annually.

Council will use this feedback and other data to undertake an annual review of the plan's progress. These results will be reported to the Early Years Network, HRCC Executive Management Team and HRCC Council.



