

SOUTH GIPPSLAND SHIRE COUNCIL

DRAFT Children and Families Plan 2023 – 2027



Prepared 11 September 2023



Thank you

Children, parents and carers, service providers and agencies, community organisations, Council officers, and Councillors have all contributed to the development of the Children and Families Plan 2023 – 2027. This has occurred through the consultation and engagement process and through the establishment of a Steering Committee consisting of representatives from health, family support, education, early learning, and community organisations.

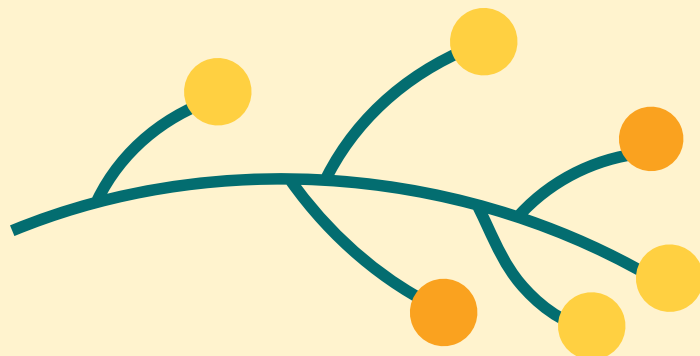
In particular, we would like to acknowledge the contribution of Steering Committee members including:

- Gabbi Boyd – Welshpool Primary School.
- Megan LeServe – Myli Community Library.
- Melissa McRae – Meeniyan Kindergarten.
- Carly Middleton – YMCA Ballarat.
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- PeeWee Lewis – Karmai Community Children’s Centre.
- Shelley Fixter – South Gippsland Shire Council.
- Lyndal Peterson – South Gippsland Shire Council.

Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the Bunurong and Gunaikurnai people as the Traditional Custodians of South Gippsland and pay respect to their Elders, past, present, and future, for they hold the memories, traditions, culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia.

Acacia pycnantha (wattle)



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Introduction

Children and families are a vital part of the South Gippsland community. Listening to their voices, understanding their experiences, and responding to their needs is the way South Gippsland Shire Council, its partners and the community show children and families they are valued citizens and are key to the vitality of South Gippsland.

The Children and Families Plan articulates how agencies, governments, children and families, and the wider community will work together to improve outcomes for children and their families.

While South Gippsland Shire Council has a leadership role in preparing the Plan because of the significant footprint it has in supporting children and families, it is through taking a partnership approach where everyone works together, that we can achieve the best outcomes for children and families.

The Children and Families Plan builds upon the work of the previous Plan from 2016 to 2021 and has been expanded to capture needs and outcomes for children aged 0 to 12 years and their families.

The Children and Families Plan 2023 to 2027 is supported by:

- An annual Action Plan identifying the projects and initiatives that will be implemented to deliver on the directions and priorities of the Plan.
- Annual reporting against the projects and initiatives.
- Reviewing the Plan every five years.

Developing the Children and Families Plan

The Children and Families Plan has been developed through extensive background research and consultation and engagement with families, children, agencies, Council officers and Councillors.

The background research has included:

- Examining research about early childhood development and why investing in children and families is so important to their health, wellbeing and resilience.
- Reviewing relevant strategic documents and plans to understand the existing strategic and policy context of South Gippsland Shire Council and the Federal and State Governments, and any implications for planning for children and families in South Gippsland.
- Reviewing and evaluating the recent and longer-term demographic and health and wellbeing profile for the South Gippsland community, to assist in identifying community needs and the likely demand for programs, services and facilities to support children and their families.
- Identifying the services delivered in and around South Gippsland Shire for children and their families and how effectively they support children and families.

Consultation and Engagement

The consultation program has been central to understanding what supports children and families in South Gippsland need, the issues impacting upon them, existing service provisions and opportunities for the future. It consisted of an online community survey, a short hard copy survey, pop-up engagement activities, online focus groups, and targeted discussions with community and early years agencies, Council officers and the project Steering Committee. Most importantly, it involved **nearly 700 primary and pre-school aged children** who shared what they love the most about their community and what they would like to see changed or improved.

Key Learnings Informing the Plan

As part of developing the Children and Families Plan, a Discussion Paper was prepared drawing together the findings from the background research and consultation, and identifying key learnings to inform the development of the Plan.

A summary of the key learnings is outlined below.

Building on the strengths of our communities

Children and families value the sense of belonging and connection to community and this is recognised as being a strength of many of the smaller communities across South Gippsland. Schools and early years services play a key role in facilitating and encouraging social connections between families and provide a place for accessing information and connecting to services.

Place-based community development initiatives offer an opportunity to connect families to each other and strengthen the capacity of our communities to support families and children.

The importance of universally accessible places and services

Universally accessible places and services are very important to the overall liveability of South Gippsland and are particularly important to children and families. Key places and services include parks, playgrounds, beaches, open space, walking and cycling trails, libraries, swimming pools and recreation centres. These are also the places and services children and families would most like to see improved.

While proactive upgrading of parks, playgrounds, streetscapes, walking and cycling trails to make them more interactive and child and family friendly is occurring, things to concentrate upon in future will be offering more diverse play experiences and spaces which support children and families of all abilities, addressing the age and poor condition of existing parks and playgrounds, and consideration of the need for shade and fencing.

Improving access to key services

Families experience significant difficulties accessing key services including emergency medicine, paediatric, allied health, public dental, early intervention, out of home care and family violence services. Many services are centralised in major townships or are located outside South Gippsland, and this combined with the lack of public transport and significant travel distances, makes it very difficult for families to access services. Other barriers are long waiting lists or health professionals not taking on new clients, cost (particularly for accessing services privately), or supports not being available.

While all families are impacted by this, it is the most vulnerable families who are most impacted. They often live in smaller townships or on the outskirts of larger townships, with no access to private transport. There is strong interest in pursuing initiatives to reduce these barriers and implement alternatives to centralising services to major townships.

Critical gaps in the availability of childcare	<p>A lack of access to childcare (both pre-school and school aged) is a key concern for parents and is having a significant impact upon their ability to work. Large parts of South Gippsland have been identified as being in a 'childcare desert' particularly in the south east (Foster, Fish Creek, Toora, Welshpool) and south west (Meeniyah, Tarwin Lower, Venus Bay) coastal districts.</p> <p>The private sector has a minimal footprint in the space and consequently South Gippsland Shire Council has invested significantly in infrastructure to support the delivery of childcare services. Partnerships between government, service providers and developers will be critical to addressing existing and future gaps.</p>
A sustainable workforce	<p>There are significant challenges securing and retaining a workforce to support health and education services for families and children including an ageing workforce, burn out, educators being uncomfortable with the changes to kindergarten, concern about a lack of experience and the impact this may have upon quality service delivery. Some services are operating below capacity because of staff shortages and prefer to do this, rather than employ inexperienced staff who do not demonstrate a commitment to quality outcomes for children.</p> <p>There is strong interest from the community and stakeholders to look at strategies to grow the health and education workforce in South Gippsland.</p>
Strength through partnering	<p>Partnerships offer an important way of responding to the needs of families and children. Existing partnerships between South Gippsland Shire Council, service providers, local communities and the State Government are recognised as being strong, but also offering the opportunity to leverage them further to deliver better outcomes for families and children.</p> <p>Organisations and agencies recognise that by sharing information and working together more closely they are able to better support children and families.</p> <p>Conversations as part of developing the Plan have been a trigger for organisations and agencies thinking about how they can work more closely together to pursue opportunities to address gaps.</p>
Building the capacity of children and families	<p>Many families are experiencing increasing stress driven by the increasing cost of living, a lack of access to services and in some instances, the complex behaviours and additional needs of their children.</p> <p>Services have articulated concern about increasing anxiety amongst parents which is being transmitted to their children. Reported incidents of family violence increased significantly between 2017 and 2022, although there has been a small decrease during 2022/23. Access to affordable housing is becoming more difficult with an increasing proportion of households identified as being in housing stress.</p> <p>There is a need and opportunity to strengthen the capacity and resilience of families, particularly in relation to the importance of regular medical and health checks, building unity within families, parents prioritising their child's health and development, and reducing family violence.</p>

The value of information

Key to supporting families and children is being able to access information, that information being available in many formats and locations, being consistently and regularly shared with the community (not just one time), and services working together to share information with the community are all key to supporting families and children.

There is an opportunity for improvement around information and to ensure we do not hear from our community and from services '*I didn't know about that*'.

Being inclusive of all

The most important factor for families when choosing services, programs or supports for their child or family, are people being friendly and making the child and family feel welcome and included. With increasing diversity in our communities, the focus on services, places and people being welcoming and inclusive of everyone will become even more important.

Facilities to support services and programs

Having places and spaces is critical to supporting the delivery of services and programs. South Gippsland Shire Council has a significant footprint in providing community infrastructure supporting the delivery of childcare, kindergarten, maternal and child health, new parent groups, immunisation, supported playgroups, allied health services and libraries. Facilities also support community-based programs and activities.

Key challenges are the age and condition of community infrastructure, particularly kindergartens, and the need for additional infrastructure as population growth occurs. In response to this, there is a clear focus on developing facilities which are multi-purpose, flexible and support the co-location and integration of services, actively pursuing opportunities for spaces to be used for multiple purposes and partnerships.



Focus for the Future

Our Vision

All children and families in South Gippsland can reach their full potential.

Themes and Strategies

One

Places and spaces are welcoming and inclusive of all children and families.

Two

Services for children and families are accessible, inclusive and responsive.

Three

Children and families are thriving.

Four

Children and families are connected and engaged in their local community.

Five

Partnerships and collaboration strengthen outcomes for children and families.

Theme	Description	Strategies
One	<p>Places and spaces are welcoming and inclusive of all children and families.</p>	<p>1.1 Open space and playgrounds offer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive, diverse and adventurous play experiences supporting children and families of all abilities. • Spaces which facilitate social connections. <hr/> <p>1.2 New and redeveloped public spaces, walking and cycling paths, and community facilities are designed to be child and family friendly.</p> <hr/> <p>1.3 Children and families are actively engaged in the design of public spaces and community facilities.</p>
Two	<p>Services for children and families are accessible, inclusive and responsive.</p>	<p>2.1 Access to critical family support, health and education services for children and families is improved through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively pursuing alternative service models. • Growing the health, education and family support workforce in South Gippsland. • Facilitating and advocating for increased provision. <hr/> <p>2.2 Services are responsive to the increasing diversity and capabilities of children and families in South Gippsland.</p> <hr/> <p>2.3 High quality services and outcomes are actively pursued.</p> <hr/> <p>2.4 Information about services is coordinated and accessible for families.</p>

Theme	Description	Strategies
Three	Children and families are thriving.	<p>All children and families in South Gippsland deserve the opportunity to thrive. This means parents and carers feel empowered to support their children to play, learn and socialise; our most vulnerable children and families receive the additional support they need; our children are healthy and well; and the voices of children and families are heard and embedded in planning and service delivery.</p>
		<p>3.1 The knowledge and capability of parents and carers is strengthened.</p> <p>3.2 Children and families are connected to learning opportunities.</p> <p>3.3 The health and wellbeing of children and families is strengthened.</p> <p>3.4 Children and families are actively involved in planning for services and supports.</p>
Four	Children and families are connected and engaged in their local community.	<p>When children and families are connected and engaged in their local community, they feel safe and like they belong. People look out for each other, share information with each other, have regular contact, belong to community organisations, and participate in community events and activities.</p> <p>There are some great examples to build upon in South Gippsland where communities wrap around new families or families who need additional support, assisting with meals, transport and information, and providing a friendly and compassionate ear to listen.</p>
		<p>4.1 Opportunities for children and families to come together in their local community are created.</p> <p>4.2 Diversity among families and children is celebrated and supported in local communities.</p> <p>4.3 Existing strengths and community connections are celebrated and built upon to support children and families.</p> <p>4.4 Community organisations are engaged with children and families, providing support and opportunities for participation.</p>
Five	Partnerships and collaboration strengthen outcomes for children and families.	<p>Partnerships and collaboration which support children and families are a strength in South Gippsland. By working together service providers, community organisations and government agencies are able to achieve much more than they can individually. This is particularly important in regional and rural communities where services and infrastructure can be dispersed. By sharing facilities, jointly delivering services or initiatives and sharing information, organisations can more effectively support children and families.</p>
		<p>5.1 Services and facilities are co-located to make it easier for families to access services and supports.</p> <p>5.2 The capacity of service providers to support children and families is strengthened through networking, training and development, and information sharing.</p> <p>5.3 Referral pathways for families are effective and provide wrap-around support.</p>

Research Underpinning the Plan



Strategic Context for Developing the Plan

Federal, State and local governments understand children and families are an integral part of communities, and their needs, aspirations and voices are essential for building strong communities.

Continuous improvement and quality underpin planning for services and infrastructure supporting families and children, and the development of child-friendly environments is increasingly being recognised as key to supporting the health, wellbeing and social development of children and families.

Children and families are a major policy priority for Federal and State Governments with policy directions informed by research and strongly reliant on a continuing role and partnership with local government.

Key Policy Influences

South Gippsland Shire Council

Community Vision 2040

Council Plan 2022 - 2026

Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2022 - 2025

Kindergarten Infrastructure and Services Plan

Position Paper: Council's Role in the Early Years 2022

State Government

Best Start Best Life Program

Universal access to 15 hours of funded three-year-old and 30 hours of four-year-old kindergarten.

Early Childhood Reform Plan

Expansion to maternal and child health services.

Federal Government

National Quality Standard

For early childhood education and care, and outside school hours care.

Productivity Commission

Inquiry into early childhood education and care 2023.

Why Supporting Children and Families is so Important

Established national and international evidence shows how the life experiences and circumstances of a child and young person impact significantly upon how the brain develops and their health, social and educational outcomes. Central to healthy brain development are supportive family relationships and positive learning experiences, along with universal access to services and additional support where families experience adversity.¹

Early intervention is key to preventing or minimising the impact of adversity in a child's life. In addition, economic modelling shows that the cost of investing in the early and middle years of a child's life provides significant long term savings and benefits such as higher levels of educational attainment, increased employment options, reduced crime, and improved health outcomes.² This research underpins the investment Federal, State and local governments make in the early and middle years through programs and initiatives such as the National Quality Framework and Standards for Early Childhood Education, Maternal Child Health Services, kindergarten and pre-school and school-aged childcare facilities and programs, and the School Readiness Program.

Families play a critical role through all ages and stages for children and are central to achieving positive health, social, educational and employment outcomes. This underlines how important it is for services and supports to be designed for families, as much as for children. Having a support system which offers universal access to a range of experiences, programs and supports, and encourages community connections for all families and children, alongside more targeted supports for families with additional needs or experiencing vulnerability, is essential.

¹ Centre on the Developing Child (2007), The Science of Early Childhood Development (In Brief). Available [here](#) or City of Boroondara (2014), Draft Children and Young People's Strategy [here](#).

² Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M., Espinosa, L., Gormley, W., Ludwig, J.O., Magnuson, K.A., Phillips, D.A., & Zaslow, M.J. (2013, August, September). [Investing in our future: The evidence base for childhood education](#). Society for Research in Child Development and Foundation for Child Development.

Consultation and Engagement Outcomes

What our Children Think

Through drawings and writing, nearly 700 pre-school and primary school aged children shared what they love most about their community, their favourite place and what they would do if they were in charge.

What Children Love Most

- Parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, outdoor environment.
- Family and friends.
- Living in a caring, friendly and small community.
- My school.
- The shops, cafés and local pub.

Favourite Place

- Home – they can be with family, relax and play games.
- School – they can learn, play with friends, play games and like their teachers.
- Kindergarten.
- Library.
- Sporting facilities – ovals and pools.
- Cinema.

If They Were In Charge

- Improve local swimming pool.
- Improve the skatepark – make it bigger.
- Develop more and bigger shops.
- Improve and expand sporting facilities.
- Improve parks, playgrounds and public spaces.
- Support community members who need help.

What Parents and Carers Think

What They Value	Concerns or Things to Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sense of community and belonging. • Being in a small community or town. • Feeling safe and that my child is secure. • Being close to family and friends. • Outdoor spaces and the natural environment. • Having access to quality services close to home, especially kindergarten, maternal and child health, childcare, immunisation and school. • Parks and playgrounds, swimming pools and recreation centres, community events, libraries, and walking and cycling paths. • Feeling welcome, included and safe when accessing services. • Having facilities that are welcoming and accessible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parks and playgrounds including the need for more inclusive, diverse and quality play spaces. • Libraries including a desire for longer opening hours. • Swimming pools and recreation centres including difficulty accessing swimming lessons, the cost of entry, the ageing infrastructure and the travel distances. • Lack of and limited access to childcare, kindergarten, playgroups, paediatric and allied health services, and family support services. A lack of childcare makes it difficult for parents to work. • For services to offer programs at times that better support working parents, especially kindergarten, maternal and child health, immunisation, playgroups and library story time.

What Agencies Think

Opportunities	Concerns or Things to Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building upon the strengths which already exist in our community and our services. • Place-based initiatives to improve local access to services and build capacity in communities. • Increasing access to information. • Education initiatives for families. • Growing the health and education workforce. • Strengthening and building partnerships. • Co-locating services and facilities. • Maintaining high quality service provision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited access to critical services e.g. childcare, paediatric, allied health, mental health, dental care, early intervention, NDIS, housing, out of home care and domestic violence services. • The centralisation of services to larger towns and the negative impact on children and families in smaller towns. • Increasing number of children with behavioural issues and complex needs. • Improving access to information. • The shortage of early years educators and health professionals resulting in services not operating at capacity.

Our Community

South Gippsland is made up of many different towns and localities, all of which have different needs, opportunities and challenges. Major townships include Leongatha, Korumburra and Foster.

South Gippsland Population



The community is characterised by:

- Consistent population growth concentrated in Leongatha and Korumburra and some of the smaller communities such as Nyora.
- Increasing cultural diversity.
- A growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.
- Moderate levels of disadvantage but with significant differences by location. The communities experiencing the highest levels of disadvantage are Toora to Welshpool and surrounds, and Korumburra.
- A significant number of low-income households (28.7 per cent) and nearly half of all households' experience housing stress where more than 30 per cent of their household income is directed towards housing costs.
- An increasing number of people needing assistance with their daily life due to a disability. While this is typically older community members, there was a notable increase (55 per cent) in pre-school and primary school aged children requiring assistance between 2016 and 2021.

Our Children and Families

0- to 11-year-olds

2021

3,987

2036

4,678

Increasing number of primary school aged children in some communities.	South West Coastal District (Meeniyan, Tarwin Lower, Venus Bay). South East Coastal District (Foster, Fish Creek, Toora, Welshpool).
Most children attend kindergarten.	96 per cent of all three- and four-year-old children attended kindergarten in 2022.
Engagement with Maternal and Child Health services has increased.	Key Ages and Stages (KAS) visits for 18 months and 3.5 years increased in 2022 to be within 5 per cent of benchmarks.
A high proportion of children in their first year of school are developmentally vulnerable.	<p>Developmentally vulnerable on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One domain – 19.9 per cent Victoria and 27.3 per cent South Gippsland. • Two domains – 10.2 per cent Victoria and 13.6 per cent South Gippsland. <p>Developmental vulnerabilities are highest for physical health and wellbeing, social competence, and emotional maturity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental vulnerability has increased in Leongatha to Hallston, Fish Creek to Yanakie, and Foster. • Developmental vulnerability has reduced in Korumburra, Meeniyan to Tarwin Lower, Mirboo North to Nerrena, and Poowong to Nyora and surrounds.
Increasing incidents of family violence.	63 per cent increase in reported incidents between 2017 and 2022.
An increasing number of single parent families.	The highest growth has occurred in Korumburra and Leongatha, consistent with population growth.
Unpaid childcare.	25 per cent of the community provide unpaid childcare for their own child or other children.

Supporting Children and Families

There are a wide range of facilities, services and activities supporting children and families in the South Gippsland Shire with many different government, not-for-profit and private organisations and agencies working in the space. South Gippsland Shire Council has a significant footprint in supporting children and families through:

- **Direct service delivery** for Maternal and Child Health (including enhanced Maternal and Child Health), immunisation and supporting playgroup services.
- **Provision of infrastructure** to support kindergarten, childcare (Korumburra, Leongatha and Foster), Maternal and Child Health and playgroups.
- **Sector coordination and capacity building** including coordinating Kindergarten Central Registration, facilitating networking and training opportunities for services and the Pre-School Field Officer.
- **Capacity planning for the service system** to ensure the community has access to early years services in the right locations and in facilities which support the delivery of high-quality early years services.

In addition to these targeted services and supports, some of the things most valued by children and families are the parks, playgrounds, libraries, festivals and events, and community centres provided and supported by South Gippsland Shire Council.

Place or Service in South Gippsland	Count
Public Libraries	5
Community Centres	9
Indoor Swimming Pools	2
Outdoor Swimming Pools	5
Sports Stadiums	3
Recreation Reserves	45
Sport and Recreation Clubs	120

The Service System

Services specifically supporting children and families are broadly grouped into three categories: universal, secondary and tertiary. **Fundamental strengths of the service system** are:

- The collaborative and partnership approach taken by so many organisations and agencies and the willingness to look for new ways to meet the needs of the community.
- The leadership role South Gippsland Shire Council takes in advocating for services and infrastructure and building capacity, and encouraging collaboration across the service system.
- The quality of the kindergarten and childcare services available to the community.

There are, however, many **challenges in the service system**, with access to secondary and tertiary services particularly difficult for the South Gippsland community. The availability of services in locations to effectively support families is a fundamental challenge because of the geographic area South Gippsland covers and the number of small communities, remote from larger centres such as Leongatha, Korumburra and Foster, where many services are located. This combined with limited or no public transport can make it difficult for families to access services.

For services, the key challenges are accessing government funding to allow them to respond to the changing community needs and workforce shortages, which results in services not being available.

Description	Key Challenges
<p>Universal</p> <p><i>Available for all families and children including services such as childcare, kindergarten, Maternal and Child Health, and schools.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of availability and accessibility of childcare and kindergarten impacting on the ability of parents to work. • Operating hours of services not supporting working parents. • Limited access to kindergarten, childcare, Maternal and Child Health and immunisation in small communities.
<p>Secondary</p> <p><i>Focussed on early intervention and identification of risk factors. For example early intervention, disability services and parenting / family relationship programs.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centralisation of services in larger townships and outside South Gippsland. • Lengthy wait times to access services. • Significant cost and transport barriers accessing paediatric, allied health, public dental and early intervention services.
<p>Tertiary</p> <p><i>Focussed on families and children who require intensive and often ongoing interventions such as child protection, specialised allied health, mental health and drug and alcohol treatment programs.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No emergency department in South Gippsland requiring families to travel to Warragul, Traralgon or Wonthaggi. • Reducing number of foster carers with an increasing number of children needing out of home care. • An increase in the reported incidents of family violence and limited or a lack of local services to respond.

Monitoring and Reporting on our Progress



South Gippsland Shire Council, in conjunction with its partners, will review the progress and impact of the Children and Families Plan annually and at the end of the five years in 2027.

The annual Action Plan will be reviewed each year and a report will be provided to Council, and its partners. The review will consider:

- Progress on strategies and actions.
- Relevance to current and emerging needs.
- Influential State and Federal Government policy and planning.
- Emerging research and practices.

The review after five years will consider the extent to which the strategies have been achieved through the actions of the Plan and other influencing factors. This will inform the development of the next Children and Families Plan for South Gippsland.



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