



Middle Years in Whittlesea: **A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE**

A municipal middle years strategy for the City of Whittlesea

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The City of Whittlesea and the Whittlesea Youth Commitment recognises the rich Aboriginal heritage of this country and acknowledges the Wurundjeri Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of this place.

We gratefully acknowledge the children, young people, parents, community members, staff and local partners who have shared their experience to inform this strategy. The focus on children and young people in their middle years in the City of Whittlesea has been evolving over a number of years with the involvement of many dedicated and passionate community members. The development of this strategy is the culmination of those who have contributed in meeting and forum discussions, especially the members of the Whittlesea Middle Years Reference Group, as well as the guidance of key stakeholders and local experts in the field. We are grateful to those who have worked over a period of time to capture the background, research, policy context and objectives outlined in this strategy document. We also commend the Principals and staff from the local primary and secondary schools for providing access to the vital voices of children and young people through their survey responses to the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI). Special thanks, too, to the members of the Steering Group for providing valuable assistance and feedback to ensure this document reflects the collective input required to ensure a meaningful way forward.

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Within the City of Whittlesea we have a rich and diverse network of stakeholders, each with a role to play in supporting the development of children and young people in the middle years; these include parents, carers, educators, service providers, business, government and community leaders.

Introduction

The middle years, the period of development between 9 and 14 years, can be characterised as a time of significant transition, risk and opportunity.

Children and young people in the middle years experience tremendous growth and change. The middle years is a time of personal, cognitive and social development. It is a time when children transition into young adolescents and experience new challenges and opportunities in the personal, educational and social realms of their lives.

The middle years is also a time when significant risk factors can emerge. Early supports can be instrumental in strengthening the sense of connectedness, educational engagement and mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in this phase of life.

At a local, state and national level, children and young people in the middle years have not received the focus they require at a policy, program or service development level. Research illustrates policy and program gaps between early childhood and youth service provision. It also suggests that universal service systems, such as education, need to strengthen support and the engagement of children and young people in the middle years. Action is required across Australia to address this issue, colloquially termed the 'missing middle'.

Local communities are uniquely placed to make significant change in improving outcomes for children and young people in the middle years.

Within the City of Whittlesea, we have a rich and diverse network of stakeholders, each with a role to play in supporting the development of children and young people in the middle years; these include parents, carers, educators, service providers, business, government and community leaders. Collectively, we have a significant opportunity to forge new ground in the development of tailored policy, program and service responses for this age group.

This strategy lays the foundation for a way forward. It is designed to ensure that children and young people in the middle years and their families have access to the support and opportunities that they require.

A focus on the middle years allows us to build upon the significant investment made in young children during their early years. It enables continuing investment in their development during their adolescent years, harnessing preventative opportunities, and delivering early intervention that may potentially avert complex issues arising later in adolescence or early adulthood.

This strategy proposes key directions to focus our efforts in the City of Whittlesea. It seeks to shape the design of responses by overlaying the strategic directions with practice approaches. These offer fundamental considerations in working with children and young people in the middle years and their families. The practice approaches seek to guide current and future actions. The hope is that this will contribute to the growing body of good practice, aiming to support children and young people in the middle years and their families.

Supporting children and young people in the middle years is best achieved through the collaboration of stakeholders. Since 2008, the City of Whittlesea, Whittlesea Youth Commitment (WYC), local schools and services have worked independently and collectively, towards addressing the identified gap¹. Council committed to developing a middle years strategy in *Connect: A municipal plan for children, young people and their families in the City of Whittlesea 2013 to 2018*. This middle years strategy is the culmination of these collaborative efforts. It provides a platform from which partnerships can build on their current work, or new partnerships be initiated.

The middle years – transition, risk and opportunity

While definitions and age ranges of the ‘middle years’ may differ slightly, it can be described as the developmental period of middle childhood that encompasses the transition from childhood to adolescence.

The term ‘middle years’ has specific meanings within the education and community services sectors. Within the education sector, the ‘middle years’ refers to a period of schooling from grade five through to year eight or nine. Within the community services sector, the term the ‘middle years’ has been shaped by developmental factors, and also the service system gap when children and young people are ‘too old for children’s services and too young for youth services.’²

For this strategy, the middle years are defined as 9 to 14 years. This encompasses the middle years developmental life phase, it centres attention on educational objectives and transitions relevant to this age group, and directs service sector efforts on children and young people in the middle years, and their families.

A TIME OF SIGNIFICANT TRANSITION

The middle years is a time of key transitions and significant change. An increasing body of knowledge based on research and practice-based evidence is shaping a deeper understanding of the significance and importance of the middle years. Children’s transition into young adolescents involves a number

of overlapping and interdependent factors including physical, neural and cognitive, social and emotional.³ Research describes the significance of brain development during this time:

‘...middle childhood is rich in potential for cognitive, social, emotional and physical advancements. During this period, the brain is actively undergoing synaptic pruning and, as such, is constantly becoming more refined, a process that is heavily dependent on a child’s environment. This discovery opens the door to optimizing the experiences a child needs to provide themselves with a strong foundation for adulthood.’⁴

Children and young people in the middle years experience change in the nature of their relationships with family and peers. Relationships remain key to children and young people’s development. New relationships are formed with peers and learning to ‘manage’ social relationships and expectations with peers is a strong personal focus.

Relationships with family and carers may change as children and young people seek greater autonomy, responsibility and independence from parental surveillance and control. Typically they spend less time with,

and under the supervision of, their parents. Significant adults, particularly at school, play an increasingly important role in supporting children and young people at this time.

The key educational transition from primary school to secondary school presents exciting opportunities, but also a range of vulnerabilities and the potential risk of educational disengagement.⁵ In 2015, the Victorian Auditor General reported that while ‘the majority of children make this transition without disruption to their wellbeing, many experience a drop in achievement and engagement with school in the years following this transition.’⁶ The Auditor General advised that:

‘While a transition is generally considered to be a single event – where a child moves between sectors...or schools (primary to secondary) – the process of transitioning covers a longer period of time, and can be challenging and transformative...

It is therefore important not to consider a transition simply as a process of transferring a child from one setting to another, but as a series of interconnected processes taking place over an extended period of time.’⁷



UNDERSTANDING CONNECTEDNESS: USING MDI DATA TO GIVE INSIGHTS INTO STUDENT'S EXPERIENCES

Data collected through the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) in South Australia and Victoria revealed that, compared to children in Years 5/6, young people in Year 7/8 were less likely to rate their connectedness to adults in their neighbourhood as high; less likely to rate their connectedness to an adult in their school as high and less likely to be participating in sport, music, the arts or other organised activities.¹² This data indicates the need to explore this matter in order to enhance connectedness and strengthen resilience and wellbeing.

The following elements for successful transition programs are identified within the report:

■ **Preparation:** preparing the child to move. Making sure they have the relevant social, emotional and developmental skills needed to progress to the next stage of their education. Providing guidance and advice on the transition experience, and making effective introductions to their new educational environment.

■ **Transfer:** transferring the child from one setting to another. Making sure that the child, their families and the receiving school have all of the information they need to ensure an effective transfer.

■ **Induction:** settling the child into their new learning environment, and identifying and providing any additional support needed.

■ **Consolidation:** continuing to monitor the child's learning and developmental outcomes and engagement, and providing any additional support needed.¹⁸

Additional changes that occur in the middle years include the way children and young people engage with their communities, and connect to other people. Technology impacts on relationships and lifestyle. Relationships transcend 'local', and enable connection with others with similar interests and identities. Technology can strengthen young people's sense of connection and belonging, particularly where their physical access is challenged. It can support their exploration of identity and their sense of self. Information that supports mental and physical health and wellbeing is readily accessible.¹¹

Children and young people acquire independence and autonomy through independent mobility; using public transport and public spaces for socialising with peers and accessing public facilities, without adult supervision.

Supporting transitions: using MDI data to inform a holistic approach

Data collected through the Middle Years Development Instrument from children and young people in the City of Whittlesea, indicates several factors that may increase the vulnerability of children and young people through their middle years. These include connection to significant adults, nutrition, sleep and participation in out of school activities.⁹ These can impact on wellbeing and educational engagement and achievement. They indicate that while school-based transitions are a critical focus, supporting children and young people in the middle years requires a broader more comprehensive approach. Strategic partnerships can enable more holistic responses. Service providers working with schools, as the universal platform, can deliver tailored preventative and early intervention programs to support children and young people in the middle years, and their families. Benefits from a partnership approach include the respective and complementary roles of stakeholders, and the combination of disciplines and expertise.

Key elements of transition programs include:

- targeting grades five to year eight as a minimum age span¹⁰
- incorporating educational engagement, experience of school, learning outcomes, personal development and wellbeing.

Such an approach provides the opportunity to identify challenges and vulnerabilities early, and to keep learning and personal development on track. It also supports young people's sense of connectedness to significant people in their lives, and to their education setting.

'During this period, the brain is actively undergoing synaptic pruning and, as such, is constantly becoming more refined, a process that is heavily dependent on a child's environment.'



A TIME WHEN NEW RISKS EMERGE

Changes taking place in the lives of children and young people in the middle years increases vulnerability to a range of emerging risks.

Rapid and intense brain development results in enormous benefits and capacity, if the adolescent is thriving in healthy and supportive conditions – however extended trauma or stress can affect their learning, plus their ability to manage emotional, social and moral challenges prevalent during this period of growth.¹³ As previously discussed, transitioning from primary to secondary school is challenging, with unacceptable numbers of young people reporting not feeling connected to school, or positive about their learning environment.¹⁴

Other risks include the shift and challenge of relationships with self, parents and peers. A myriad of internal and external issues confront adolescents including self-esteem, body image, anxiety and depression. Also bullying and discrimination can be experienced. These can lead to alienation, substance use behaviour, and initial contact with the criminal justice system.¹⁵ The *State of Victoria's Children Report 2015*, tells us that

'(c)hildrens' experience of bullying tends to peak in the middle primary school years and the first year of high school.'¹⁶

During this time, the risks of disengagement from school can become increasingly evident, and in some cases children and young people stop attending altogether.¹⁷ The *State of Victoria's Children Report 2015* explains that 'NAPLAN results show that performance tends to drop in the middle secondary school years, which corresponds to the highest rates of school absence.'¹⁸ Data on school suspensions in recent years reveal that the number of school suspensions increases dramatically following the transition from secondary school, peaking in Year 8, with boys significantly more likely to be suspended than girls.¹⁹

These risks emerge in a context of significant service gaps. While a number of services for middle years children and young people do exist within the community, research indicates a large proportion of unmet need across Victoria in terms of programs and services tailored for the middle years.²⁰ These service gaps are exacerbated within new growth areas (NGAs). Practitioners, from existing agencies within NGAs raise concerns about 'the lack of services, long waiting lists,

and increased demand on agency resources.'²¹ There is also a need to strengthen practice and service models in working with this age group.²² In the context of the municipality of Whittlesea, this service gap was acknowledged in *Connect: A municipal plan for children, young people and their families in the City of Whittlesea 2013 to 2018*.²³

A TIME TO HARNESS SIGNIFICANT OPPORTUNITIES

The middle years provide an invaluable opportunity to empower and support children and young people in their development. The middle years is a period when lifestyle habits begin to be established.²⁴ It is a time in which foundations can be laid to support success on a range of fronts, in later adolescence and adult life. It is a critical time for prevention and early intervention approaches to address risk, promote wellbeing and support educational engagement.²⁵ Middle years children and young people can be empowered with the skills, knowledge and experiences to develop healthy relationships, a positive sense of self, strong identity and an increased sense of agency and connection to their communities.

This strategy promotes collective responsibility, from a range of stakeholders within our community, to support children and young people in the middle years. The outcomes it seeks to achieve are that young people:

- have positive and supportive relationships with family, peers and important adults such as teachers and coaches
- have a positive sense of self and pride in their identity
- experience healthy physical development
- are meaningfully engaged in learning, and
- feel connected to the community.

A tailored focus on the middle years makes the most of the significant policy and program investment made in children during their early years and bridges the service system gap between children's and youth services. This ensures access to support for children, young people and their families continues as children grow older. It harnesses an essential prevention and early intervention opportunity and lays important foundations for a healthy and positive experience of adolescence and adulthood.

Practice snapshot

Schools have reported to the School Focused Youth Service that children and young people in the middle years need mental health support, with anxiety a common concern. In response to this need, we offered an animal assisted therapy program for students' aged 10 and over to local primary, secondary and P to 9 schools from across sectors. The program was very popular, with 10 schools from both primary and secondary identifying 8 to 10 students from each school to participate.

Canine coaches brought their dogs into the school to work with the students in small groups on a range of activities that encouraged mindfulness, reflection on self (such as body language and physical symptoms and triggers of anxiety) and a further understanding of anxiety and strategies to manage it. The program was flexible, and tailored for the needs of students often supporting the development of social skills or regulating emotions if required. By inviting our local headspace provider to facilitate one session per term, we also supported a possible transition pathway for students to more specialised mental health support.

School Focused Youth Service, Whittlesea



The middle years provide an invaluable opportunity to empower and support children and young people in their development.

Demographic profile of the City of Whittlesea

CITY OF WHITTLESEA

The Wurundjeri Willam people are the original inhabitants, and the traditional owners, of the land of the City of Whittlesea. The municipality is located in Melbourne's north, about 22 kilometers from the city centre. It is one of Melbourne's largest Local Government Areas (LGAs) at 490 square kilometers.

The majority of the population live in the established areas of Bundoora, Epping, Lalor, Mill Park, Thomastown, Whittlesea Township, and the current growth areas of Mernda, Doreen, South Morang and Epping North. Significant future growth is projected for Wollert, Epping North, and Donnybrook.

The 2017 estimated residential population is 209 118, this is forecast to grow to 379 342 by 2041.²⁶ In 2014/15 the City of Whittlesea was the third fastest growing LGA in Victoria.²⁷ The profile of the population is relatively young with the median age at 34 years compared to 37 years for Victoria.²⁸

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF WHITTLESEA

The City of Whittlesea is one of the most culturally diverse LGAs in Victoria. Recent data shows:

- The City of Whittlesea has the 4th largest municipal population of residents that identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in Victoria.²⁹
- 43% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population are aged between 0 and 17 years old.³⁰

- 34% of the population was born overseas, and 43% of the population speaks a language other than English at home.³¹

- 31.6% of children speak a language other than English at home.³²

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS IN THE CITY OF WHITTLESEA

In 2016, nearly half (47%) of the households in the City of Whittlesea were families with children, the majority (40.9%) being two-parent families.³³ One-parent families made up 6.3% of all households.³⁴ It is estimated that by 2036 there will be 25 869 additional families with 24 769 school-aged children.³⁵

VULNERABILITIES AND CHALLENGES IN FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

Recent data reveals:

- In 2016 the unemployment rate was 6.1% compared to 5.9% for Victoria.³⁶
- In 2013 nearly half of all single parent households had no parent in paid employment.³⁷
- Parents report that they are time poor, due to long commutes to work, and traffic congestion.
- Whittlesea ranks the lowest of all municipalities in Victoria on having time for family and friends.³⁸
- 1 in 10 people spend 2 hours or more in the car getting to work.³⁹
- Many households experience high financial stress, with 54% reporting in 2016 that their rental or mortgage payments stress their household finances.⁴⁰

- 10% of households reported they had run out of food and could not buy more, at least once in the last twelve months.⁴¹

- In 2016 there were 56 reported incidents of family violence every week with children present in around 1 in 3 incidents.⁴²

VULNERABILITIES AND CHALLENGES IN RELATION TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE YEARS

- Epping is currently in the top five suburbs in Australia that will need new schools in the next 10 years. In 2016 Epping had an estimated 6928 school age children. This is expected to grow to 13 853 in 2026.⁴⁵

- In 2015, about 16.4% of young people aged 15 to 24 in the City of Whittlesea were unemployed, the second highest in Northern Metropolitan Melbourne after Hume (17.4%).⁴⁶

- In 2016, the rate of young people in the City of Whittlesea disengaged from education and employment was 9.2%, compared to 8.1% for Victoria.⁴⁷

- In 2014, 68.4% of young people in the North East region reported having a trusted adult in their life.⁴⁸

- The first onset of mental health concerns most often occur during adolescence. In 2014, 15.5% of young people in the North Eastern Region showed high levels of depressive symptoms.⁴⁹

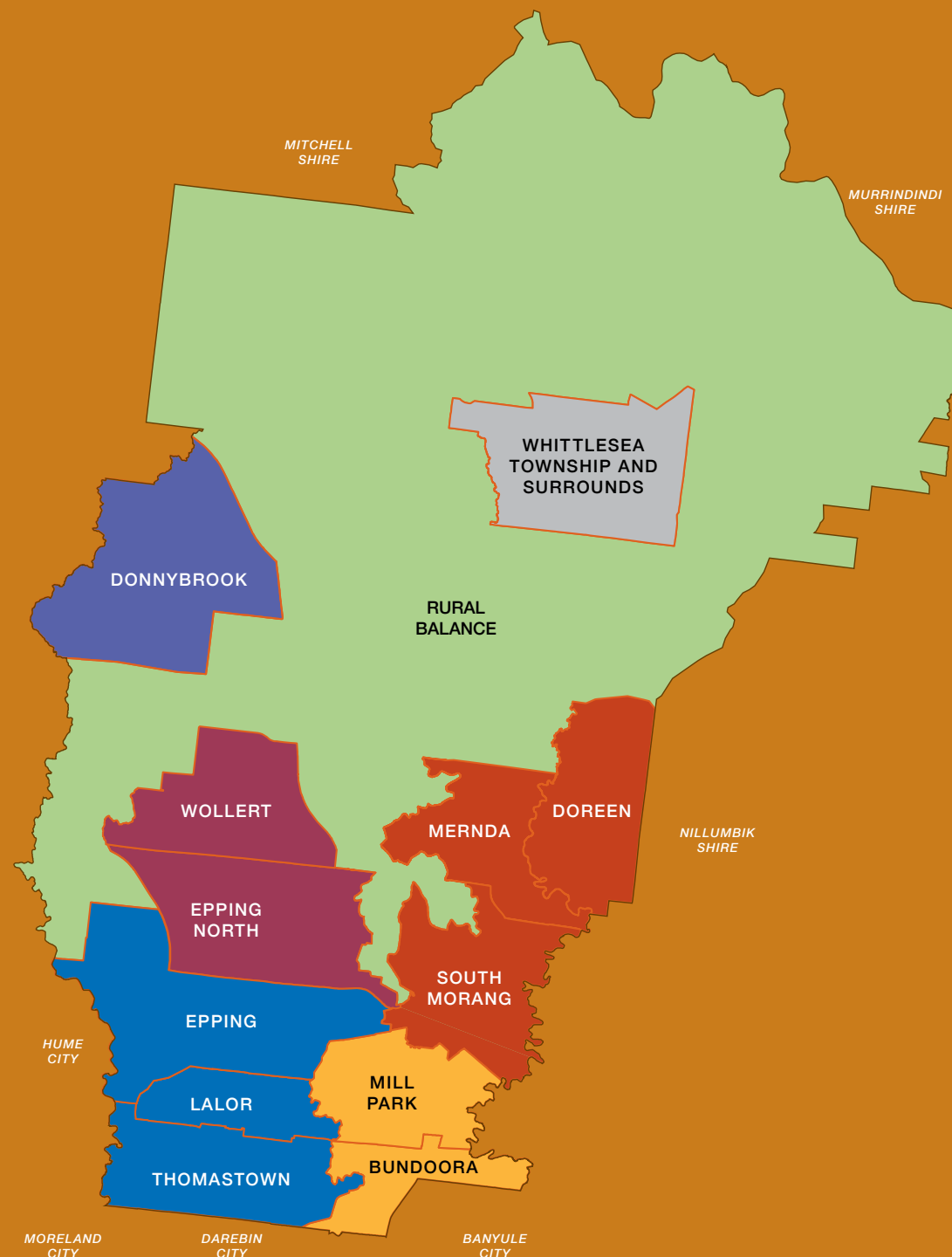
Children and young people in the middle years in the City of Whittlesea

The estimated residential population of children and young people in the middle years aged 9 to 14 years old in 2017 was 15 282. This is forecast to grow to 29 493 by 2041.⁴³ Growth of this population group will generally remain stable in the established areas of the municipality. In 2017 the estimated number of children and young people in the middle years in recent growth areas, like Mernda and Doreen, is relatively high at 2131 and 1610 respectively. The numbers of children and young people in the middle years is forecast to be very high in future growth areas. The estimation for 2041 in Epping North is 4782, and Wollert is 3351.⁴⁴



Children and young people in the middle years, 9 to 14 years old, by City of Whittlesea districts⁵¹

This map and these tables illustrate population data for children and young people in the middle years at a district level within the City of Whittlesea. Significant growth is anticipated in the population of children and young people in the middle years by 2041, particularly in the Growth North District and the Central West District.



CENTRAL EAST DISTRICT

	2017	2041
Mernda	2131	2565
Doreen	1610	2567
South Morang	1905	2384
TOTAL	5646	7516

SOUTH EAST DISTRICT

	2017	2041
Bundoora	787	892
Mill Park	2101	2028
TOTAL	2888	2920

CENTRAL WEST DISTRICT

	2017	2041
Wollert	9	3351
Epping North	2324	4782
TOTAL	2324	8133

SOUTH WEST DISTRICT

	2017	2041
Epping	887	1308
Lalor	1591	1874
Thomastown	1224	1581
TOTAL	3702	4763

GROWTH NORTH DISTRICT

	2017	2041
Donnybrook	8	5300
TOTAL	8	5300

RURAL NORTH DISTRICT

	2017	2041
Rural balance	253	304
Whittlesea Township and surrounds	462	555
TOTAL	715	859

The numbers of children and young people in the middle years is forecast to be very high in future growth areas.

Insights from middle years children and young people, their families and service providers

The perspectives of children, young people and their families in the middle years are central to this strategy. A key initiative undertaken within the Whittlesea municipality has been the implementation of the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI). The MDI has given middle years children and young people a voice in reporting on their own experiences and wellbeing and has provided unique and important data and insights into a range of development and wellbeing indicators. The City of Whittlesea and the Whittlesea Youth Commitment have worked with the Victorian Department of Education and Training and the South Australian Department of Education and Child Development to implement the MDI in 2013 and 2014. In 2015 the City of Whittlesea and the Whittlesea Youth Commitment worked again with the Victorian Department of Education and Training and also the Social Research Centre to implement the MDI.

WHAT HAVE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE REPORTED THROUGH THE MIDDLE YEARS DEVELOPMENT INSTRUMENT?

The MDI surveys children in Years 5/6 and young people in Years 7/8. It is a self-report, population-level measure developed to learn more about development and wellbeing during the middle years. It is concerned with five dimensions that 'are critical components of development and strongly linked to wellbeing, health, and academic achievement:

- Social and emotional development
- Physical health and wellbeing
- Connectedness to adults and peers
- School experiences
- Use of after-school time.⁵²

In 2013 the MDI survey engaged 936 Year 5 students and in 2014, 628 Year 8 students within the City of Whittlesea. Comparisons paint a picture of several concerning trends in relation to wellbeing, both in the

Whittlesea context and the broader South Australian context. They show a concerning drop in positive results when comparisons are made between the results collected in Years 5/6 and the results for Years 7/8 students.

In 2015, nine primary schools and four secondary schools within the Whittlesea municipality undertook the surveys in order to have a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of their students. This involved 644 students from Years 7 or 8 and 995 students from years 5 and 6. This data showed similar trends to the previously collected data.

In broad terms, the data points to the need for further investigation to explore how to:

- Strengthen relationships with adults – at school, home and in the neighbourhood.
- Strengthen students' sense of a positive school climate.
- Improve nutrition (eating breakfast) and sleep.
- Increase engagement in after-school activities.⁵³

Practice snapshot

Survey data that reveals the experiences of our students, such as the Middle Years Developmental Index survey and the Attitudes to School Survey, provide us with valuable insights to support our planning. It has highlighted the importance of further supporting students' sense of connectedness to school staff. To strengthen connectedness, we have made some significant changes at our Middle Years Campus, with the development of year level 'hubs'. This enables for classes for each year level to be hosted in the same area, and for homeroom teachers to be based in the hub. The student wellbeing staff also have a highly visible presence at each hub, increasing their accessibility and enabling them to work side-by-side with teaching staff.

In order to strengthen connectedness with parents as well, we ensure that we don't simply invite parents to the school in order to communicate information to them. We have asked parents to share their own ideas, expectations, hopes and fears about their child's education with us.

Mill Park Secondary College



A snapshot of outcomes from the 2013 and 2014 MDI surveys in the City of Whittlesea⁵⁴

The survey results collected through the MDI showed several positive results for students in the City of Whittlesea.

Of the year 5 students from the City of Whittlesea surveyed in 2013:

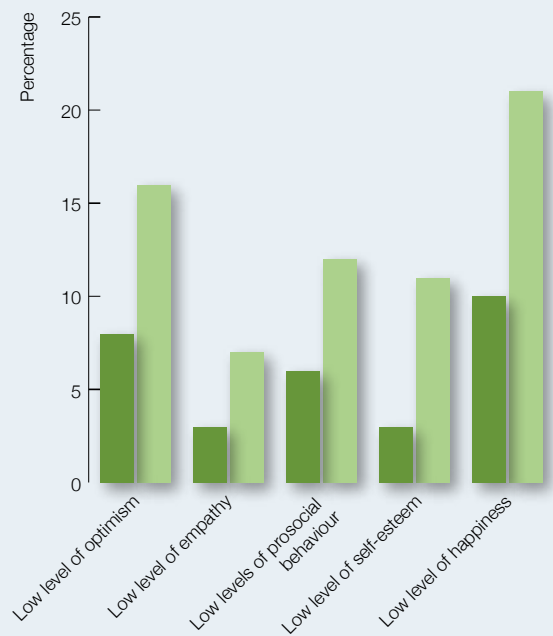
- 83% had high levels of empathy and 82% had high levels of self-esteem.
- 84% reported a high level of connection to adults at home and 78% reported a high level of friendship intimacy.
- 85% reported a high level of academic self-concept and 70% reported a high level of 'school belonging'.

The Year 8 students from the City of Whittlesea surveyed in 2014 reported higher levels of friendship intimacy, peer belonging, pro-social behaviour and perseverance than the broader student group from South Australia.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The data reveals that Year 8 students are more likely to report lower levels on a range of indicators of social and emotional development than the students in Year 5. In relation to worries and sadness, however, children in Year 5 reported higher levels of concern than young people in Year 8.

Table 1: Social and Emotional Development – a sample of indicators

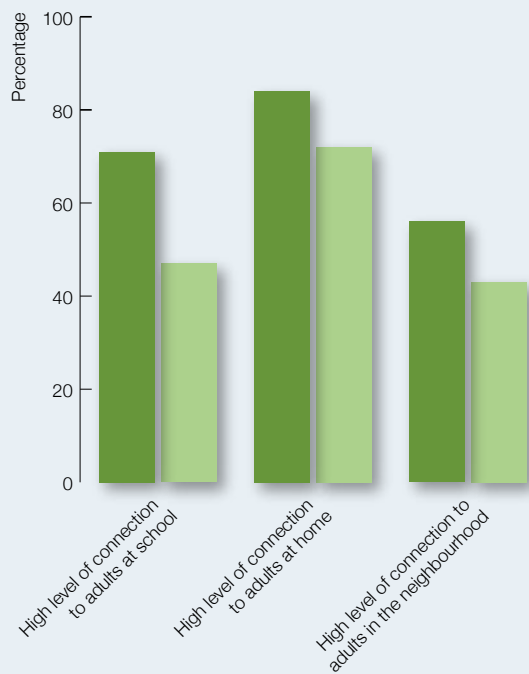


Year 5 (2013)
Year 8 (2014)

CONNECTEDNESS

The data on connectedness shows that Year 8 students experienced a lower level of connection with adults at school, adults in the home and adults in the neighbourhood compared to the Year 5 cohort. It also reveals a slight lowering in the level of peer belonging and level of friendship intimacy.

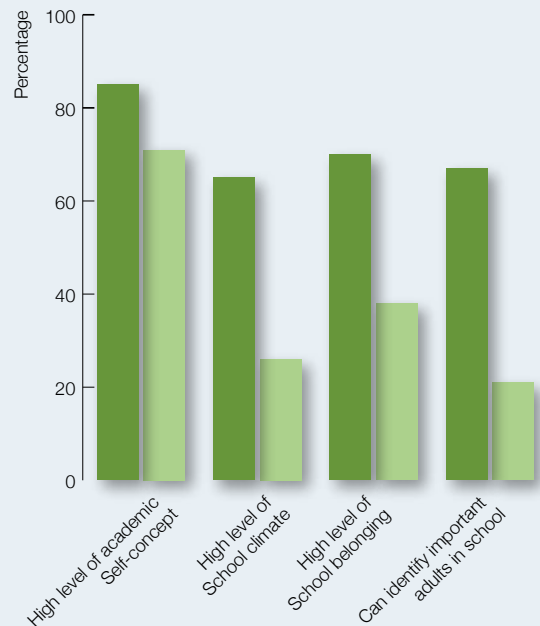
Table 2: Indicators of Connectedness



SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

The data reveals that the Year 8 students were less likely to report a high level of academic self-concept, and were significantly less likely to give high ratings for school climate, school belonging and ability to identify important adults at school – with only 26% reporting a high level of school belonging in Year 8 and only 20.6% reporting that they can identify an adult who is important to them at school.

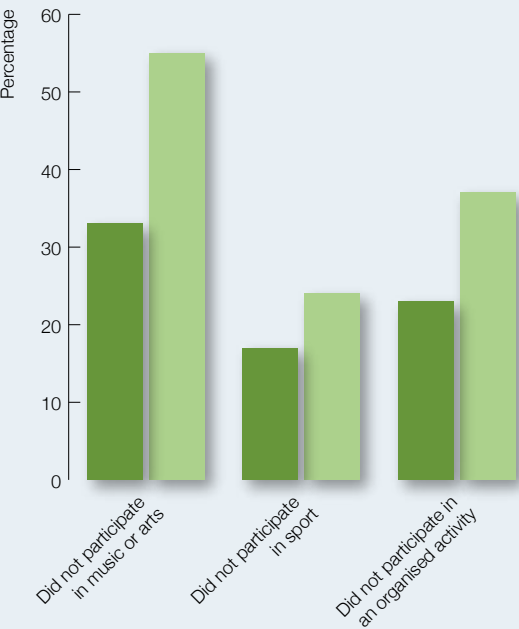
Table 3: School experiences



AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Students in Year 8 were less likely to participate in arts/music, sports or organised activity of any kind than the Year 5 students.

Table 4: After School Activities



■ Year 5 (2013)
■ Year 8 (2014)

PHYSICAL HEALTH

The data suggests that young people are less likely to rate their general health as excellent in Year 8 compared to Year 5. They are also less likely to eat breakfast or get a good nights sleep. Notably, within the Year 8 cohort almost 30% of students reported they don't eat breakfast more than three times a week and almost a quarter reported that they don't get a good nights sleep more than three times a week.

Table 5: Breakfast and sleep

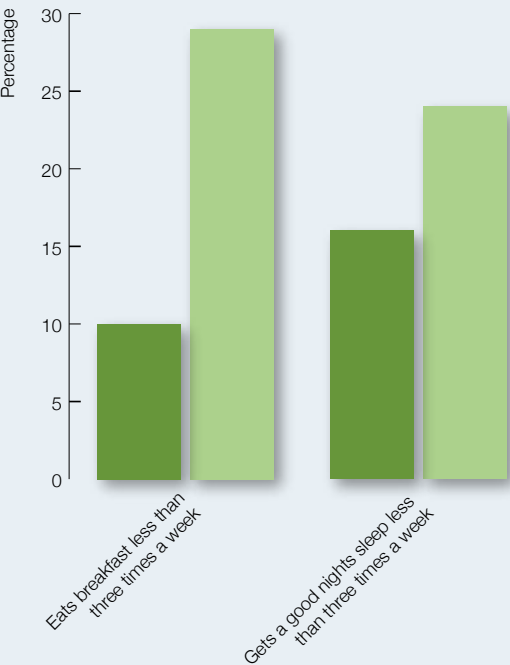
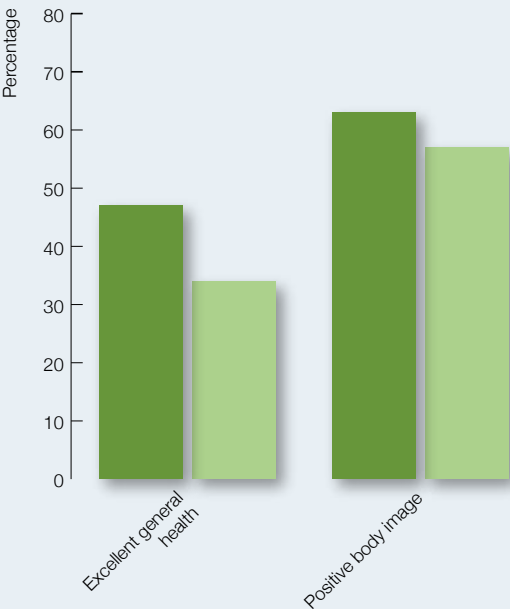


Table 6: General health and body image





Opportunities revealed through the MDI

The MDI data reveals a complex picture, indicating that young people experience increased vulnerability across a range of domains as they move through their middle years.

The MDI highlights a range of opportunities for the various stakeholders who have a role to play in supporting children and young people in the middle years, to target support to reduce this vulnerability. Stakeholders need to consult with children, young people and their families to strengthen the following areas of intervention:

- Develop more social and emotional learning initiatives.
- Support students to maintain a high level of academic self-concept and confidence in themselves as learners in secondary school.
- Ensure the early identification of students who face learning challenges.
- Collaborate across primary and secondary schools to enable the consistent provision of early intervention learning support as children and young people transition across schools.
- Build a stronger sense of connectedness to staff and peers at school and create participatory opportunities for students to actively build a positive school climate.
- Increase the availability and accessibility of targeted activity (particularly for 11-14 year olds), such as arts, sport and other activities as identified by middle years children, young people and their families.
- Strengthen the engagement of parents in school communities and their child's learning.
- Offer information and support to parents to strengthen their relationships with children and young people in the middle years.
- Provide families with information and support regarding the importance of adequate sleep and breakfast to the healthy development of children and young people, and develop program responses to meet children and young people's nutrition needs.

WHAT ELSE HAVE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US?

In 2016, the City of Whittlesea consulted with children, young people and their families about 'What makes a good life?' Results from this and other local consultations reveal the following key themes raised by children and young people in the middle years.

FAMILY, FRIENDS AND RELATIONSHIPS

'Good family', 'good friends' and 'nice people' were reported as central to a 'good life' by children and young people in the middle years.⁵⁵ Children report that they are 'most happy when with their family' and 'recognise and deeply value the importance of parents in their lives'.⁵⁶ Aboriginal children and young people reported that, along with spending time with family, going to community events was important to them.⁵⁷

Similarly, family 'is of the utmost importance to young people and their overall wellbeing' and 'it is important to them that their parents feel free of emotional and financial stress, or other threats'.⁵⁸ Young people also report the central value of friendships and their need for

trustworthy relationships with peers, parents and service providers.⁵⁹

When asked to identify things that 'stop a good life for yourself, your family and the community', children and young people in the middle years most commonly reported issues to do with relationships and the behaviours of others, such as 'family problems', 'mean people', bullies and disrespect.⁶⁰ Young people 'often request assistance to manage their relationships with peers, partners and parents.'⁶¹

HUMAN NEEDS

Children and young people identify the importance of having basic human needs met in order to have a 'good life', such as love, joy, peace, privacy, kindness, safety, no stress and having 'the ability to live as my true and authentic self'.⁶² Young people have reported that 'bullying is prevalent and that effective interventions are needed' both at school and outside of school.⁶³ Aboriginal children and young people also raised the importance of community as central to their lives and that it was important to 'ask the community what they want'.⁶⁴

MATERIAL NEEDS

Children and young people have told us that in order to have a 'good life' you need money, housing, home, safety, food and water.

PLAY AND OUTDOOR PLAY SPACES

Children report the importance of play to them as well as wanting outdoor places with 'things to play on'.⁶⁵

PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTUREⁱ

Children reported that they value the outdoors and 'want public swimming pools, play spaces, 'big' play equipment, a place with a stage and events for children'.⁶⁶ Young people tell us they 'need opportunities to socialise in places that are safe, affordable and welcoming'⁶⁷ and that infrastructure should be 'inclusive of young people'⁶⁸. They express a desire for public spaces that 'facilitate intergenerational and intercultural mingling, provide shops and amenities, socialising and entertainment opportunities'.⁶⁹ Children and young people report that faster internet, better public transport, less traffic congestion and more pedestrian crossings, and compost bins to support recycling waste would improve the 'livability' of their local communities.⁷⁰



SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Young people recognise the importance of engagement with school, however 'they strongly express the need for teaching styles and curriculum content to be relevant to them to keep them engaged'.⁷¹

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTUREⁱⁱ

Young people and children reported the following would improve life for themselves, their family and community: a good home, neighbours and community; support groups for mothers and fathers; community events; public safety and police presence. Young people 'recognise that at times they need informal support, and at other times they need expert support and guidance to assist their development'.⁷²

FACTORS THAT MAKE IT HARD TO HAVE A GOOD LIFE

Alongside problems with relationships, family concerns and bullying behaviours, children and young people identified a range of other factors that can get in the way of 'a good life', including: obesity and disease; stress related to school grades, and too much homework, crime, pollution, traffic, litter, road works, and not enough jobs.⁷³

WHAT HAVE PARENTS TOLD US?

The City of Whittlesea consulted parents of children and young people in the middle years about '*What makes a good life?*' Information from this, and other local consultations reveal the following priorities for parents.

HUMAN NEEDS

Parents report the value to them of 'having more time together with family' and the importance of a safe and healthy community.⁷⁴

MATERIAL NEEDS

Parents identified the need for support with the following material needs:

- financial assistance with extra-curricular costs
- more money to purchase food
- discounted holiday vouchers
- affordable sporting options.⁷⁵

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Parents value programs that give their adolescent children 'opportunities to interact with others their own age' where they can 'learn new skills'.⁷⁶ Parents feel that it is important to have access to quality local schools (including choices between public,

independent and religious schools).⁷⁷ Parents seek services from out of school hours programs, libraries and leisure and recreation programs. They would like their children to have access to local sporting clubs, social clubs and 'creative opportunities'.⁷⁸ They also report they would like improved access to health services (including mental health services), youth programs and programs that support parents with children with disabilities.⁷⁹ Where families live in rural and new growth areas, they would like 'more opportunities and choices for their children'.⁸⁰

Parents (of children of all ages) seek information and support around issues such as:

- understanding adolescent development; what is 'normal behaviour'; understanding their point of view; knowing what is going on in their lives, and balancing intervention with respect for their privacy.
- listening and communicating with young people.
- setting boundaries, avoiding and dealing with conflict, managing difficult behaviour and resolving problems.
- preparing kids for transition from primary to secondary school and adjusting parenting styles as they grow older.

i. Physical infrastructure refers to all aspects of the public realm including the built environment, the natural environment, facilities, town centres, streetscapes and open space.

ii. Social infrastructure is about civic actions that generate community ownership and build social capital. It includes services, programs, events and campaigns that link a community together.

- helping children with their homework.
- supporting their children under pressure.
- handling alcohol and drug use.
- responding to bullying, keeping children safe in cyber-space and safe partying.
- ways to enjoy spending time with children.⁸¹

Parents also seek support to manage a range of challenges and pressures in their lives, including:

- mental health concerns
- financial pressures
- strained relationships
- poor community connections
- a lack of confidence in parenting ability
- family breakdown and family violence.⁸²

PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Parents report that the following factors would strengthen the livability of their communities for children and young people in the middle years:

- more public spaces for young people
- better parks for older kids
- accessible, frequent public transport

- bike paths and crossings
- improved roads
- sports facilities.⁸³

We need to understand in more detail, the specific needs of parents of children and young people in the middle years to best understand what targeted support they require.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

Service providers within the City of Whittlesea have raised a range of issues in relation to supporting children and young people in the middle years and their families.

HUMAN NEEDS

Service providers identify the importance of children and young people having confidence, friendship and social skills.⁸⁸ They want children to feel valued; have positive family relationships; have a voice and access to positive role models and guidance.⁸⁹

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Service providers identify the value of targeting participation and engagement activities, and the importance of social opportunities for children and young people in the middle years, including free activities on school holidays and weekends.⁹⁰ They report significant concern about

increasing numbers of students disengaging from school. Factors identified as leading to disengagement include capacity of schools to support students with additional learning needs, mental health issues, family poverty and dysfunction, young people acting as family carers, and experiences of bullying.⁹¹

In terms of services for children and young people in the middle years, they see a need for:

- programs that build confidence and anti-bullying programs
- counselling services
- youth friendly mental health services
- early intervention behaviour management programs
- diversion programs (away from contact with Police)
- Respectful Relationships programs (in all secondary schools)
- parenting support and holistic, integrated approaches to working with families
- strengthening relationships between schools and services, with a focus on supporting transitions.⁹²

PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Service providers reported that access to 'youth spaces' and better public transport would improve the

lives of children and young people in the middle years.⁹³ They also recognise the importance of spaces to gather and socialise for children, young people and their families, and the importance of outdoor spaces that are 'safe and engaging' for children and young people in the middle years.⁹⁴

Service providers also made a range of observations in relation to educational engagement, pressures experienced by families, health and wellbeing and participation and access for children and young people in the middle years. These are listed in detail in Appendix B.

We run various programs to support the social and emotional needs of our students and their engagement at school. One such program is Hands On Learning in which a small group of students spend one day per week working on creative building projects that benefit the school community. The program includes students from multiple year levels, enabling them to form supportive relationships and offers an opportunity to build students' social and emotional skills and confidence. Students participating in the program report that Hands On Learning improves their enjoyment of school and makes them feel valued. We also observe that they build a stronger sense of connectedness to others and valuable skills such as team building and problem solving.

New Growth Areas

In 2014, community service practitioners were interviewed to inform the development of *Growing Pains: Living in new growth areas*. In describing the needs of children and young people in the middle years living in new growth areas, practitioners advised ‘they need access to a range of schooling options, different leisure activities, movies, skate parks, music options, libraries, free WiFi, places to meet, shops, opportunities for future part-time work, and access to public transport.’⁸⁴ Also noted is the need for children and young people in the middle years to have access to ‘schools close to home, after school activities, safe public spaces to roam, socialise and explore.’⁸⁵

Family support services are amongst the most utilised services in new growth areas. Practitioners identify service gaps including ‘early intervention services’ and ‘mental health counselling for children witnessing family violence’ – both likely to impact on children and young people in the middle years. They highlighted ‘the need for integrated services in community centres and schools, with services for all ages; families, early years and young people...(and) that school and community facilities should be available for community use after school hours.’⁸⁶ Practitioners also identified that all age groups need services ‘to help cope with mental health issues’ and ‘places to connect and form friendships’.⁸⁷

Opportunities identified from consultations with children, young people, parents and services providers

The experiences and insights of children, young people, parents and service providers reveal a range of opportunities to strengthen outcomes for children and young people in the middle years and their families, including:

- Ensure the availability of early intervention, holistic services with a focus on family strengthening, and holistic transitions support.
- Provide family strengthening programs including a focus on health and wellbeing, development during the middle years, social media use, drugs and alcohol use, and managing change in child/parent relationships.
- Ensure children and young people have access to counselling, targeted mental health support and generalist youth support services, including programs that support skills for healthy relationships, and address bullying.
- Ensure the design of social and physical infrastructure and urban development facilitates opportunities for family activities.
- Address the material needs of families, including financial support for food, extra-curricular and sports costs, and holiday vouchers.
- Undertake community building activities to strengthen connectedness and sense of safety, including community events.
- Consider children and young people in the middle years in relation to planning of public areas, including parks and recreation spaces.
- Ensure access to affordable, tailored after school hours programs, including subsidised sport and creative activities.
- Advocate to state and federal government about access to educational institutions and public transport.
- Address issues of support, access and service provision in line with messages in *Growing Pains: Living in new growth areas*.
- Strengthen the partnership with parents and carers, in underpinning their child's learning process.
- Support student's access to student-centred, strengths-based, personalised approaches to learning at primary and secondary levels.
- Work in partnership with specialist services to assist in addressing family violence and drug and alcohol use.
- Improve availability to youth friendly health and mental health services.
- Provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to access positive information that reflects and celebrates diverse identities.

Supporting children and young people in the middle years and their families in the City of Whittlesea

INITIATIVES, SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

There are a range of stakeholders, services and networks within the Whittlesea municipality playing a critical role in supporting children and young people in the middle years such as:

- education providers
- youth services
- family services
- outside of school hours programs
- health (and mental health) services
- sport and recreation providers
- community clubs
- arts programs
- libraries
- municipal parks and public facilities
- community networks seeking to strengthen supports and opportunities for children and young people.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL POLICY

This middle years strategy has been developed in response to a commitment to action made in *Connect: A municipal plan for children, young people and their families in the City of Whittlesea 2013 to 2018*, which recognised a 'planning and policy gap'⁹⁵ in relation to the middle years. Also resulting from *Connect*, are the City of Whittlesea policy frameworks:

■ *Growing Pains: Living in new growth areas*, with key messages for Council and stakeholders, on building strong communities that strengthen families in new growth areas, and

■ *Spaces 8 to 12+ Creating engaging places for young people*, which proposes planning principles, matched to practical case studies, to inform designing young people into public places and spaces, to ensure that the public realm is inclusive of children and young people in the middle years.

The City of Whittlesea is a signatory to the *Victoria Child Friendly Cities and Communities Charter*, which is 'a statement of the principles and actions that underpin the right for the municipality to be considered child friendly.'⁹⁶ Also relevant to supporting children and young people in the middle years, are the following City of Whittlesea policies:

■ *The City of Whittlesea YouthPlan2030* outlines 'a whole of Council and whole of community approach' framework to guide the development of the municipal service system that is responsive and effective in meeting the needs and aspirations of all young people in the City of Whittlesea.'⁹⁷

■ *The City of Whittlesea Community Building Strategy* commits Council to a range of actions to build organisational capacity, build community connections, build local democracy and build linkages.'⁹⁸

■ An early years policy framework and a family strengthening policy framework for the City of Whittlesea are also under development.

The *Whittlesea Youth Commitment Action Plan 2016-2019* commits 'to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people in their Middle Years through a coordinated and continuous approach across the community.'⁹⁹

At state government level, strategic policy commitments, relevant to the middle years, have been made in youth affairs, education, mental health and family services. Similarly, the federal government policy and program areas of education, social services and health (incorporating mental health) currently hold relevance to the middle years. A more detailed summary of specific state and federal policy appears in Appendix A.

At a local, state and federal level, policy needs to respond to the changing developmental and social needs of people throughout their life course, from early childhood, through the middle years, into older adolescence and adulthood. Policy areas such as education, social services, health, urban planning, transport and infrastructure, justice, arts and culture all must have specific relevance and be responsive to children and young people in the middle years, and their families.

At Baseline, our Youth Workers have been partnering with local primary schools to provide Grade 6 students the opportunity to participate in sessions that endeavor to strengthen the likelihood of making a positive transition into secondary education. We take a targeted approach with input from each of the schools which either reflect the individual MDI results the school received in the previous survey or is reflective of other needs identified by school staff to support students transitions. Each session is one school period in length and consists of group discussions, information sharing and group-based activities. To date, sessions have been delivered on topics such as body image, mental health, cyber-safety and respectful relationships.

A photograph of a man and a young boy sitting at a wooden table in front of a large window. The man, on the left, is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt over a grey t-shirt and is looking towards the boy. The boy, on the right, is wearing a blue and teal striped t-shirt and is focused on writing in a spiral-bound notebook with a black pen. His left hand is resting on the notebook. A clear glass is on the table to the left of the man. The window behind them shows a bright, out-of-focus view of trees and foliage. The overall atmosphere is calm and focused.

*‘Good family’, ‘good friends’ and
‘nice people’ were reported as central
to a ‘good life’ by children and young
people in the middle years.*

Embedding the middle years approach in a conceptual practice framework

This middle years strategy builds upon the conceptual framework articulated in *Connect: A municipal plan for children, young people and their families in the City of Whittlesea 2013 to 2018*. This framework encompasses an ecological perspective and the life course perspective. The conceptual framework assists local stakeholders to identify their role in supporting the development of children and young people in the middle years. It assists in creating a collective understanding of policy and practice approaches that support the children and young people in this age group and respect their rights.

THE MIDDLE YEARS WITHIN THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

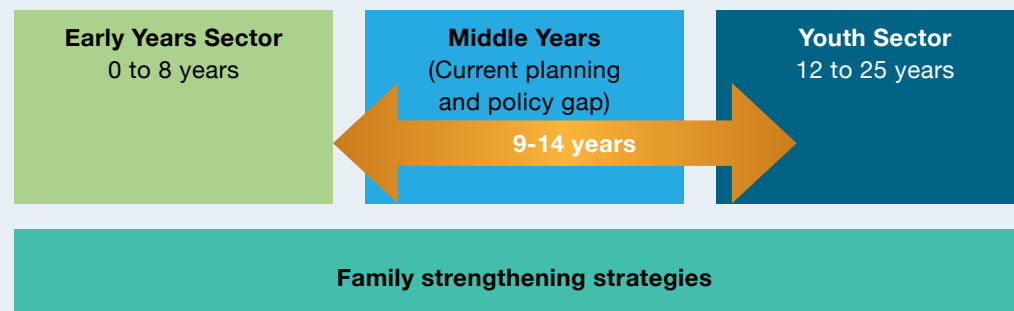
Adopting a life course perspective, that is, 'considering adolescence in the context of what precedes it and what follows,'¹⁰⁰ has particular value for the planning and development of policy, opportunities, services and programs. The tendency to compartmentalise service provision on the basis of distinct age groups, rather than 'taking an approach that recognises the transitions between age groups,'¹⁰¹ has led to specific policy and service gaps in the middle years.

The life course perspective presented within *Connect: A municipal plan for children, young people and their families in the City of Whittlesea 2013 to 2018* describes the middle years as a time of significant opportunity and risk and recommends a focus in policy and practice on 'strengthening development through the provision of positive experiences, early detection of risk factors and by creating and securing protective factors.'¹⁰²

A focus on the middle years within a life course perspective will:

- build upon the work undertaken in the early years sector, ensuring children and young people continue to be supported in their development.
- ensure that children and young people in the middle years can access opportunities and supports tailored to meet their needs and that reflect the critical importance of family to middle years' children and young people.
- harness critical prevention and early intervention opportunities that build protective factors, support healthy development, and secure participation and engagement for adolescents and young adults.

Life Course approach:



THE ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND OUR COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The ecological perspective¹⁰³ emphasises that the 'health, development and wellbeing of children and young people, and the functioning of their families, is shaped by environmental factors.'¹⁰⁴ It is critically important to understand the context in which children and young people live, and the influences that shape their world.

At each layer of the ecological model, children and young people participate in a range of settings; as members of households, in learning environments, in sports clubs, accessing services, as consumers, and in some cases contributing to policy and program development.

There are multiple stakeholders, with roles and responsibilities related to these settings, able to influence the experiences, opportunities and development of children and young people. Family and carers play a central role. Stakeholders also include service providers, educators, business, urban planners and developers and governments (at a local, state and federal level).



At each layer of the ecological model, children and young people participate in a range of settings

As a stakeholder; with roles and responsibilities related to these settings – how can you enhance the agency, identity and wellbeing of children or young people in the middle years?

RECOGNISING RIGHTS AND IMPLEMENTING TAILORED PRACTICE APPROACHES

Children and young people have rights that need to be respected. The *Code of Ethical Practice – a First Step for the Victorian Youth Sector*, highlights the central relevance of the four core principles of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, ratified by Australia, to working ethically with children and young people.¹⁰⁵ Those principles are ‘non-discrimination’, ‘the best interests of the child’, ‘the right to life, survival and development’, and ‘respect for the views of the child.’ With regard to the role and responsibilities of services and governments, Article 3.1 of the Convention prescribes that ‘in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.’

The following ‘practice approaches’ support children and young people in the middle years to achieve a sense of agency, positive identity and wellbeing. These approaches are relevant in all settings and can be applied in a range of ways.

RIGHTS BASED PRACTICE APPROACHES TAILORED FOR THE MIDDLE YEARS

RECOGNISING THE UNIQUE STATUS, RIGHTS AND CULTURE OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE.ⁱⁱⁱ

Within the City of Whittlesea we live on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri Willum Clan and respect the cultural identity of Aboriginal children, young people and families within the municipality. Culture and connection to land and community is a right for Aboriginal young people and they have a right to cultural safety.

RESPECTING CULTURE AND DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cultural values and norms influence family structures and ways of understanding ‘childhood’ and ‘youth’ as life phases. If policies, programs and services don’t recognise and respect these cultural differences, they can become inaccessible, unhelpful and in some cases harmful. When connection to culture is respected and fostered, children and young people experience positive health, wellbeing and development outcomes (including a positive

THE VICTORIAN YOUTH SECTOR CODE OF ETHICAL PRACTICE EXPLAINS THAT:

‘Cultural Safety relies on the prevention of cultural abuse and is important to protect a person’s emotional and psychological wellbeing. When the culture of a people is ignored, denigrated, or intentionally attacked, it is cultural abuse. Cultural abuse can be overt (such as in the case of direct vilification or discrimination) or covert (such as in the case of a lack of cultural sensitivity or an absence of positive images about another culture). Cultural abuse is harmful for young people because it strikes at their sense of identity. We are respectful of Indigenous culture at all times and recognise the importance of culture as it relates to Indigenous children and young people’s self-esteem and sense of identity.’¹⁰⁶

sense of identity and self-worth) and their access and engagement in opportunities, services and learning is strengthened. It is critical to work with cultural communities as partners and seek, in an ongoing way, to build and strengthen cultural competence.

VALUING DIVERSITY

The diversity of children and young people in the middle years and their families must be valued and celebrated. The middle years is a critical time for exploration and formation of identity – celebration of diversity in all its forms supports this to be a positive process. This needs to include access to information about gender fluidity and positive representations of same sex attracted, intersex, trans and gender diverse people. Children and young people have varied abilities and are also at varied stages of development within this age bracket and as such have diverse needs and experiences. Fostering understanding, inclusion and respect creates a more protective community context for children and young people in the middle years.

PARTICIPATION, VOICE AND DIALOGUE

All children and young people have a right to participate in decisions

The diversity of children and young people in the middle years and their families must be valued and celebrated. The middle years is a critical time for exploration and formation of identity ...

iii. This practice approach is based on the ‘Recognition of Indigenous Peoples’ Practice Responsibility as stated in the Code of Ethical Practice – A First Step for the Victoria Youth Sector developed by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, 2007.

that affect them. Increasing agency is a characteristic of middle years development and tailored opportunities for meaningful participation are required. Hearing the voice of children and young people in the middle years, and their families, is key to designing effective services and infrastructure, and to building inclusive resilient communities. Meaningful opportunities for participation enable children, young people and their families to be involved in respectful dialogue about what is important to them.

OTHER PRACTICE APPROACHES TAILORED FOR THE MIDDLE YEARS

STRENGTHS-BASED

A strengths-based approach includes building upon the strengths of individual children and young people in the middle years as well as building opportunities from the strengths of families, schools, services, networks and the community.

PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Supporting the development of children and young people in the middle years is a critical component of prevention and early intervention in terms of health and

wellbeing (including mental health), engagement in education and support for families.

FAMILY STRENGTHENING

Family is centrally important in the lives of children and young people in the middle years. Parents and carers play a critical role in supporting their wellbeing, healthy development and engagement in learning. Programs and services for children and young people in the middle years need to be inclusive of families and respectful of the diversity of families. During this period of development, relationships between children and young people and their parents can change. Families sometimes need support with navigating this shift. Parents and carers need access to early supports to strengthen relationships and parenting skills and capacities, including an understanding of adolescent development.

STRENGTHENING INTERDEPENDENCE

Strengthening interdependence involves recognising the importance of positive relationships with others to an individual's wellbeing. For children and young people in the middle years, relationships with family remain key, whilst the importance of relationships

with peers and significant others increases. Children and young people benefit from support to develop skills and knowledge to have healthy relationships.

EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE

It is important to continuously apply the evidence of 'what works' in supporting children and young people in the middle years and their families. Current and emerging research, the lived experiences, and expressed needs and aspirations of children and young people in the middle years and their families (as articulated by them) are critical sources of evidence.

PARTNERSHIPS

Working collaboratively can maximise outcomes for children and young people in the middle years and their families. Meaningful and respectful partnerships can create new opportunities and improve consistency of approach, including in supporting transitions.

In summary - translating these approaches into action.

1. Ensure policies and programs are responsive and relevant throughout the life course and include a specific focus on the needs of children and young people in the middle years.
2. Be mindful of the context in which children and young people in the middle years live their daily lives and ensure that all stakeholders are alert to the role they play in influencing the opportunities and experiences of children and young people in the middle years.
3. Build upon good practice approaches to supporting children, young people and their families. This includes tailored practice approaches and respecting their rights, their developmental stage and their need for connectedness and supportive relationships.

Vision, approach and strategic directions

Vision

*That **all** children and young people in the middle years have supportive relationships, a positive sense of self, healthy development, meaningful engagement in learning and connectedness to community.*

APPROACH

The following are fundamentals of the approach to implementation of the vision:

■ **Supporting children and young people in the middle years, and their families is a collective responsibility.** All stakeholders bring expertise and have diverse roles and responsibilities to play in realising this vision – including community networks, service providers, education services, state and federal governments, research institutions, peak bodies and the City of Whittlesea.

■ **Partnership approaches will assist to meet needs more holistically.** A critically important partnership opportunity involves community services and networks working with schools as the universal platform upon which programs and supports can be delivered.

■ **Adopting a broad view of ‘transitions’ is required to incorporate factors that impact on the wellbeing, development and educational engagement of a child or young person in the middle years.** These include, but extend beyond school-based efforts, to include personal relationships, parent support, healthy lifestyle, and participation in out of school activities such as sport or music.

■ **Implementing the practice approaches tailored for the middle years (outlined earlier in this strategy) can strengthen the planning and delivery of actions.** The practice approaches outlined earlier in this document can underpin our work when planning and implementing actions in response to the following strategic directions.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

These directions have been built on the strategic directions outlined in *Connect: A municipal plan for children, young people and their families in the City of Whittlesea 2013 to 2018*. They have been modified and informed according to the evidence reported in the previous sections of this report.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1: CONTINUOUS DIALOGUE WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE YEARS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Objective: Ensure that the experiences and needs of children and young people in the middle years and their families are central in influencing the shape of policy, program and service development.

Broad areas for action:

- Collect data that gives voice to the experiences of children and young people in the middle years and their families so as to build a comprehensive understanding of those experiences.
- Collaborate across the children's, youth, family and education sectors to share information to inform program and service development.
- Develop the capacity within the children's, youth, family and education sectors to engage children and young people in the middle years and their families in participatory opportunities that help shape program and service development.

Builds on:

Connect – Strategic direction 1: Partnerships and continuous dialogue with children, young people, parents and the community

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2: STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS AND IMPORTANT ADULTS

Objective: Support children and young people in the middle years to establish strong and safe relationships that support and guide them through opportunities and challenges.

Broad areas for action:

- Identify opportunities for family strengthening, informed by the experiences of children and young people in the middle years and their families.
- Ensure families of children and young people in the middle years can access early intervention family strengthening services.
- Use the universal platform of schools to implement partnership approaches to family strengthening and support.
- Strengthen the sense of connectedness that children and young people in the middle years have with adults in their schools and communities.
- Support children and young people in the middle years to develop knowledge and skills for healthy relationships and friendships.

Builds on:

Connect – Strategic direction 2: Family Strengthening

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3: HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT AND A POSITIVE SENSE OF IDENTITY

Objective: Support the personal and physical development of children and young people in the middle years, and nurture a positive sense of self and pride in identity.

Broad areas for action:

- Enhance the capacity of stakeholders to offer participation and engagement opportunities for all children and young people in the middle years, in line with the principles and approaches outlined in the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria's YERP online resource, found at <http://yerp.yacvic.org.au>.
- Provide information, tailored support and access to positive role models representing the breadth of diversity of ethnicity, culture, gender identity and sexuality to children and young people in the middle years and their families.
- Provide quality opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop their social and emotional skills, and engage in 'healthy' risk taking.
- Provide, facilitate or advocate, to address identified need to support the healthy development of children and young people in the middle years.
- Provide generalist youth support services enabling continued good practice for youth development with a central focus on youth participation and engagement practices.

Builds on:

Connect – Strategic direction 3: Resilient and robust children and young people

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 4: SUPPORTING ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

Objective: Support children and young people in the middle years to be engaged in meaningful learning opportunities with a strong sense of competence and positive connection to school.

Broad areas for action:

- Collaborative, community-based partnership for the provision of a broad, holistic 'transitions support' model for children and young people in the middle years.
- Use evidence based approaches to strengthen early identification of children and young people at risk of educational disengagement.
- Address the learning styles and needs of young people who are disengaging or have disengaged.
- Promote a culture of respect within all learning environments.

Builds on:

Connect – Strategic direction 3: Resilient and robust children and young people

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 5: OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT WITH COMMUNITY

Objective: Support children and young people in the middle years to have a strong sense of belonging and connectedness to community and place.

Broad areas for action:

- Deliver opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to participate in decision-making about them and their communities.
- Ensure social and physical infrastructure is designed to be inclusive of, and responsive to, children and young people in the middle years and their families. Good practice approaches are reported in *City of Whittlesea Spaces 8 to 12 +: Creating engaging places for young people*.
- Promote access to affordable out of school hours activities, tailored in response to the views of children and young people in the middle years and their families.
- Advocate for early provision of place based community development and social and physical infrastructure in all new growth areas, including for children and young people in the middle years and their families, as identified in *City of Whittlesea Growing Pains: Living in new growth areas*.

Builds on:

Connect – Strategic Direction 4: Social and physical infrastructure for diversity, all ages and abilities and Strategic Direction 5: Opportunities to connect





Next steps

This strategy provides a framework for a collective approach whereby stakeholders can work in complementary ways, reflecting their valuable and diverse expertise, to support the development of children and young people in the middle years and their families.

The Whittlesea Youth Commitment, with support from the City of Whittlesea, will bring together a range of stakeholders (including schools, service providers, network and Council representatives) to support the development of specific actions for implementation. These will be building upon the important work already being undertaken by many stakeholders within the community.

APPENDIX A: RELEVANT POLICIES AT A LOCAL, STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

CITY OF WHITTLESEA

The City of Whittlesea's vision is '*Creating vibrant self-sustaining communities together*'. To assist in achieving this vision, strategies have been developed. Those with particular relevance to supporting children and young people in the middle years and their families are outlined below.

CONNECT: A MUNICIPAL PLAN FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES IN THE CITY OF WHITTLESEA 2013 TO 2018

Connect consolidates Council's strengths-based practices. It aligns practice to the voice of children, young people and their families, acknowledges the developmental challenges of children and young people, and locates young people in the context of their families and communities. It is informed by research, consultation and local data. It embeds support for young people in the context of prevention and early intervention, strengthening families, and building community through inclusive social and physical infrastructure. *Connect* recognised a 'planning and policy gap'¹⁰⁷ in relation to the middle years and triggers Council's commitment to develop a 'Middle Years Strategy'.¹⁰⁸

YOUTHPLAN2030

Based on best practice and evidence, YouthPlan2030 guides Council's strategic approach and investments, in:

- upholding young people's rights,
- delivering the conditions that support the development of all young people,
- responding to vulnerability, and
- strengthening the social and physical environments for all young people to thrive.

GROWING PAINS: LIVING IN NEW GROWTH AREAS

Growing Pains builds on consultative evidence in *Connect*, that spoke of families enjoying living in the municipality, and some also of experiencing social and physical isolation, and other challenges and vulnerabilities. *Growing Pains* identifies key messages, for Council and stakeholders, to build strong communities that strengthen families in new growth areas. In relation to service provision to children and young people in the middle years and their families it is recommended that *Place plans* ensure timely access to 'schools close to home, after school activities, safe public places to roam, socialise and explore...

secondary schools that are local, youth programs and WiFi'.¹⁰⁹

SPACES 8 TO 12+ CREATING ENGAGING PLACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

One of the objectives of *Connect* is that the 'City of Whittlesea is a child, young person and family friendly city'.¹¹⁰ *Spaces* is a key action of *Connect* under Strategic direction 4: Social and physical infrastructure for diversity, all ages and abilities. *Spaces* is driven by the voice of local young people, and informed by international experience. It delivers planning principles, matched to practical case studies, to inform designing young people into public places and spaces. As reported in *Spaces*, '(r)esearch indicates that developmentally, young people in the 'middle years'... require appropriate, engaging, welcoming places to rightfully congregate and safely expend energy, to take risks and develop physical and social skills'.¹¹¹

STATE GOVERNMENT

The State Government has responsibilities for the development of policy, programs and funding that relates to children and young people in the middle years and their families. This includes education, youth affairs,

health (including mental health), youth justice, public transport and planning. Recent policy reforms in the areas of education and youth engagement with specific relevance to the objectives of this strategy are detailed below.

YOUTH POLICY: BUILDING STRONGER YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN VICTORIA

The *Youth Policy* was informed by the views of over 2000 young people in Victoria 'from a diverse range of age groups, backgrounds, cultures and locations'.¹¹² The purpose of the policy is to 'create mechanisms, provide guidance and support initiatives to empower young people to input into government services, policies and programs that are important to them'.¹¹³ The policy includes a *Youth Engagement Charter*, outlining principles to guide the government's engagement with young people and when the government will apply the Charter.¹¹⁴

The *Youth Policy* includes three action areas for youth engagement:

- Amplifying the voice of Victorian youth in government priority settings.
- Increasing youth participation in youth-focused policy, program and service design.

- Empowering individual young people in their own care.¹¹⁵

The *Youth Policy* recognises that:

‘Councils play a key role in the delivery of youth services. They often provide the most immediate experience of being part of a democratic process and opportunities for young people to participate in their communities through funding for youth workers and support for youth councils.’¹¹⁶

The action areas will be implemented through a range of ‘Flagship Projects’ and governance arrangements for the implementation of the *Youth Policy* include a Youth Interdepartmental Committee, a Victorian Youth Congress and Sector Advisory Group.¹¹⁷

THE EDUCATION STATE

The Education State outlines the State Government’s commitment to ‘building an education system that, through early childhood education, schools and vocational education and training, produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage.’¹¹⁸ *The Education State* outlines a range of targets seeking to achieve:

- Excellence in reading, maths, science and the arts, and in critical and creative thinking.

- Building resilience and physical activity in our children.

- Ensuring more students stay in school and eliminating the connection between outcomes and disadvantage.

- Making sure every community has access to excellence, in every school and classroom.¹¹⁹

Several of the initiatives have a specific focus on strengthening the capacity of schools to engage in partnerships with community services and parents and empowering student participation, such as:

- The implementation of a new DET regional model, through which multi-disciplinary Area teams will work with local communities to support schools in a range of ways, including ‘sharing best practice and a culture of collaboration across school communities’ and to ‘strengthen links with community organisations, parents and businesses.’¹²⁰

- A focus on schools ‘harnessing the full capacity of the community and parents to collectively encourage students’ learning and enhance student outcomes’¹²¹ and on strengthening the capacity of schools to ‘build relationships with the broader community by partnering

with the community sector and providers....to make strategic use of existing community resources and capabilities, and increase the services delivered ‘inside the school gate’.¹²²

- Requiring schools ‘to develop approaches that give students a greater say in the decisions that affect their learning and their lives at school.’¹²³

MARRUNG: ABORIGINAL EDUCATION PLAN 2016—2026

Marrung ‘underpins the delivery of *The Education State* to Koorie learners, ensuring full benefits of the reforms benefit Koorie Victorians.’¹²⁴ *Marrung* ‘seeks to leverage existing universal early childhood and education platforms in recognition that all services have a responsibility to meet the learning needs of Koorie Victorians.’¹²⁵ Most outcomes that *Marrung* seeks to achieve are relevant to the middle years:

- Services and Koorie communities work together on local, place-based approaches to improving learning outcomes.

- Success for Koorie Victorians is core business of all educational leaders.

- Young Koorie children are on track in their health, development and wellbeing.

- Koorie students engage fully throughout their schooling years, and gain the knowledge and skills to excel at Year 12 or its equivalent.

- Koorie people have opportunities to access education at all stages of life.

VICTORIA’S 10 YEAR MENTAL HEALTH PLAN

Victoria’s *10 Year Mental Health Plan* seeks to achieve outcomes of relevance to children and young people in the middle years, including a prevention and early intervention focus:

- Early in life – infants, children, young people and their families are supported to develop skills and abilities to manage their own mental health.

- Families and carers – the role and needs of family, kinship community, and carers of people with mental illness are respected, recognised, valued and supported.

- Universal access to public services – people with mental illness and their families and carers have access to high-quality, integrated services according to their needs and preferences.

■ Recovery – people receiving treatment and other services are supported to realise personal wellbeing through recovery-oriented, trauma-informed, family-inclusive services that build optimism and hope.

■ Access to specialist mental health services – people with mental illness, their carers and families have access to the public treatment and support services they need and choose, appropriate to their age and other circumstances, where and when they need them most.¹²⁶

In the area of prevention, the plan commits to:

■ work closely with existing school-based programs and supports to build resilience and influence attitudes that support mental wellbeing of children and young people;

■ strengthen collaborations between public specialist mental health services for children and young people, paediatricians, and other social and community services and schools.¹²⁷

ROADMAP TO REFORM

Following the release of the findings of the *Royal Commission into Family Violence* and reports released by the Auditor General

and the Commissioner Children and Young People, the *Roadmap to Reform* seeks to address ‘the hard fact that our current systems have failed generations of children at risk.’¹²⁸ The *Roadmap* provides ‘an initial outline of how a new system will operate to better support Victoria’s most vulnerable individuals, families and communities.’¹²⁹ It sets out initial actions to progress the following three reform directions:

■ Build supportive and culturally strong communities and improve access to universal services.

■ Support children, young people and families in need with integrated wrap-around supports and targeted early interventions.

■ Strengthen home-based care and improve outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The Federal Government policy and program areas of most relevance to children and young people in the middle years and their families are education, social services and health (incorporating mental health). Through the Department of Education and Training, the Federal Government provides funding to

government and non-government schools, administers programs encouraging young people’s participation in further education and training, and works with the State and Territory Governments to provide governance, regulation, support and funding for the Vocational Education and Training System. In 2016 the Department also funded the School Chaplaincy Program and the Pathways in Technology Early College High School (p-Tech) Pilot, and offered information support to parents, for example through the *Parent Engagement in Children’s Learning* resources.¹³⁰

The Department of Social Services has responsibilities across a broad range of social policy areas, providing programs, services, benefits and payments in areas such as family and parenting support, housing and homelessness, community support, disability, women’s safety, mental health and settlement and multicultural affairs. The Department has also been implementing the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children*, which ‘aims to deliver a substantial and sustained reduction in levels of child abuse and neglect over time.’¹³¹ A key

initiative of the Framework has been the establishment of a National Commissioner for Children. The Department supports research through the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (a cooperative research program between the Australian Government and the state and territory governments)¹³² and the provision of information resources to parents.¹³³

The Department of Health has a range of responsibilities related to the provision of Australia’s universal medical, pharmaceutical and hospital services.¹³⁴ This includes responsibilities related to the provision of Mental Health programs and services and provides funding for programs targeting children and young people, including the national mental health program *headspace*,¹³⁵ and the *Children of Parents with a Mental Illness*¹³⁶ service.

APPENDIX B: FURTHER OBSERVATIONS FROM SERVICES PROVIDERS

The following is a summary of further observations from service providers about the needs of middle years children, young people and their families within the City of Whittlesea.

EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Service providers identified the following issues in relation to supporting the educational engagement of children and young people in the middle years:

- Increased need for support for children once they have moved from early childhood education settings into primary schools, with early childhood services reporting increasing requests for support for children in the younger end of the middle years cohort.¹³⁷

- Schools need more support from outside services to address wellbeing, learning and behaviour challenges of children and young people, and to support parents.¹³⁸

- A need for more 'hands-on' and alternative learning programs for middle years children and young people.

- A need to educate parents about the importance and value of parental engagement in their child's learning across all ages and educational settings.¹³⁹

- Children experiencing concerns ('worries' or 'anxiety') that are not easily identified in the early years, and likely not addressed, which impacts on learning in the middle years.¹⁴⁰

- A gap in affordable supports for children and young people moving into high school.

- The need for more targeted and inclusive approaches to education and support to meet children and young people's diverse needs and the importance of more child-centered and strengths-based approaches to learning in primary and secondary schools.¹⁴¹

- Strengthening literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal young people and refugee young people is a priority.¹⁴²

- Challenges for schools in meeting the needs of students with learning disabilities.¹⁴³

PRESSURES EXPERIENCED BY FAMILIES

Service providers report the following factors as placing pressures on families:

- Isolation is experienced by families for a range of reasons including geographic location, limited mobility, limited English, racism, and a lack of time and appropriate places for socialising.

- Newly arrived families face specific challenges, requiring awareness and understanding from service providers to effectively support children, young people and parents.

- Financial stresses, particularly for some families in new growth areas and areas of particular socio-economic disadvantage.

- Family violence is a significant concern. Children and young people experience family violence as direct targets of violence and/or as witnesses of violence, which is in itself a form of child abuse.¹⁴⁴

- A lack of family support services in the municipality.¹⁴⁵

- Generational differences in experiences and world-view can impact on relationships. These differences are seen to relate to changes in lifestyle and technology and parents feeling they have less time with their children to model behaviours and transmit values.¹⁴⁶

- Children and young people spend time at home alone while parents work, or undertake caring responsibilities for younger siblings.¹⁴⁷

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Service providers raise the following concerns in relation to the health and wellbeing of children and young people in the middle years:

- Use of alcohol and drugs by young people in the municipality.

- Concerns related to social media use by children and young people, and the need for parents to have capacity to guide the use of social media by their children.

- Meeting the needs of increasing numbers of children and young people with disabilities (and their families).

- A shortfall in mental health services to meet local need, with evidence suggesting 'mental health is a serious concern for all ages in this municipality.'¹⁴⁸

PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS

Observations related to participation and access to support and opportunities for children and young people in the middle years:

- The need for a 'wider approach' to consultation and engagement of children and young people in participation activities.¹⁴⁹

- The value of recognising that 'solutions are held within the knowledge and experience of the community.'¹⁵⁰

- The benefit of continuous improvement to deliver successful outcomes for children, young people and their families.¹⁵¹

- Concern about existing service gaps, particularly given forecast increases as the municipality continues to grow at a significant rate.

- The impact of geographic isolation and lack of services and infrastructure in new growth areas on children and young people – in terms of access to public transport, education, services and activities.

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