



Communities for Children Community Needs Analysis 2025

Research & Consultancy Prepared by:
Mallee Family Care

Researchers/Consultants:
Josephine Carbone BA(Psych) BPsychSc(Hons)

Author:
Mallee Family Care
PO Box 1870, Mildura Victoria 3500
Telephone: (03) 5023 5966
Facsimile: (03) 5022 1065
Website: <http://www.malleefamilycare.com.au>

Disclaimer:

As far as practicable, material for which the copyright is owned by a third party is clearly labelled. Mallee Family Care has made all reasonable efforts to ensure that this material has been reproduced in this publication with the full consent of the copyright owners.

Mallee Family Care gives permission for excerpts of this report (unless stated otherwise) to be reproduced on the condition that they be fully referenced and acknowledged.

While Mallee Family Care endeavours to provide reliable analysis and believes the material it presents is accurate it will not be liable for any claim by any party acting on such information.

© Mallee Family Care 2020.

This publication has been made possible by funds provided by the Australian Department of Social Services.

www.malleefamilycare.com.au



Contents page

Background and introduction	6
Objectives	7
Methods and research design	8
Desk-based evidence review	9
Demographics	9
Cultural diversity	9
Socioeconomic status	10
Housing and homelessness	11
Health outcomes	11
Participation in Maternal and Child Health	12
Developmental vulnerability	12
Child care and kinder attendance	13
Social outcomes	14
Child abuse and family violence	14
Stakeholder survey	15
Townships serviced	15
Strengths	16
Activities and programs	16
Services	17
Stakeholder collaboration	17
Staff	18
Gaps	18
Specific support/services accessibility	18
Transport	19
Culturally and linguistically diverse	19
Availability	20
Engagement	20
Funding	20
Barriers for delivery	20
Location	21
Transport	21
Funding	21
Staffing	22
Awareness and engagement	22

Language.....	22
Waitlist	22
Barriers to accessibility.....	22
Transport.....	23
Costs	23
Language.....	23
Time	23
Location	24
Lack of awareness.....	24
Fear	24
Lack of suitable neurodiverse programs	24
Future programs and activities.....	24
Organised social events	25
Playgroups	25
Parenting support.....	25
Childcare	26
Community members survey	27
Townships.....	27
Age of children.....	27
Strengths	28
Connection	29
Educational	29
Times	30
Free	30
Location.....	30
Difficulties	30
Lack of opportunity or flexibility	31
Age appropriate.....	32
Venue setting.....	32
Barriers	32
Improvements	33
Time flexibility.....	33
More program awareness.....	34
Location and transport	34
Future programs and activities.....	35
Child voice research	36

What do you love to do with people you like to play with?	36
What do you like to do with your family?.....	36
Conclusions	37
Recommendations.....	37
Recommendations within the CfC Scope	37
Recommendations outside the CfC Scope	38
References	40

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional owners of the lands on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people. They have never ceded sovereignty, and remain strong in their enduring connection to land, water and culture.





Communities for Children: Community Needs Analysis 2025

Background and introduction

Established in 2005, the Communities for Children (CfC) is a place-based initiative funded by the Australian Government through the Families and Children (FaC) Activity. The FaC framework aims to assist children and families experiencing disadvantage by supporting early intervention and prevention efforts across Australia.

Under the Department of Social Services (DSS), CfC Facilitating Partners (FPs) are contracted to oversee the implementation of the initiative within specific localities. These CfC FPs engage Community Partners—local service organisations—to deliver programs tailored to community needs as identified by a locally led CfC Committee.

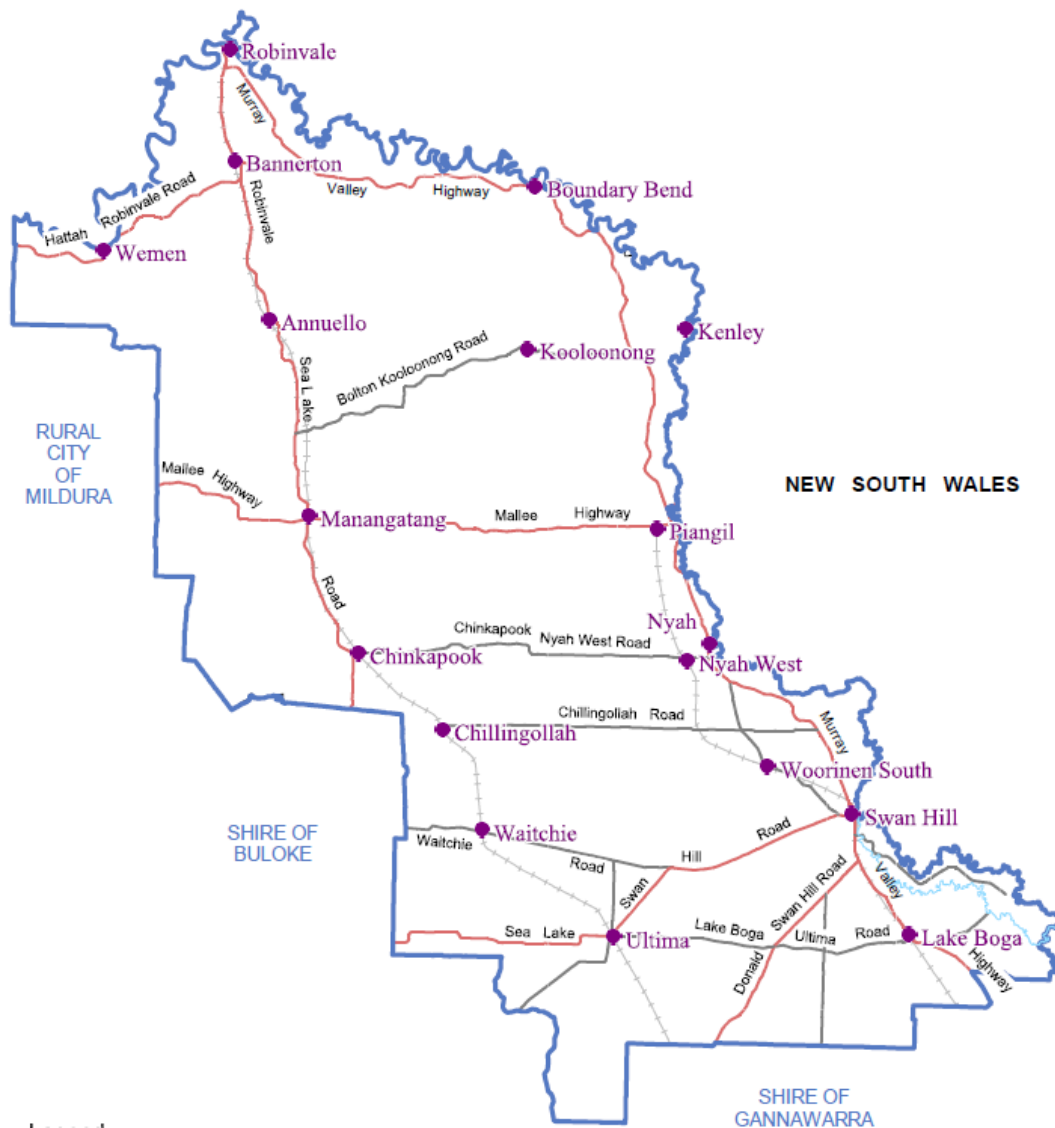
CfC FPs work by strengthening local service systems and community capabilities. They use evidence-based approaches to ensure services are strategic, sustainable, and collaborative. This partnership model encourages coordinated efforts among service providers to build a supportive environment for families and promote the wellbeing of children.

Programs funded through CfC reflect identified community priorities and may include initiatives focused on early childhood development, literacy, parenting support, and playgroups. While individual services are accessed directly by families, the broader goal is to enhance service integration and benefit the entire community. Currently operating in 52 communities nationwide, CfC adopts a place-based, early intervention model that supports families to strengthen their skills and relationships, contributing to better outcomes for children (DSS, 2021).

In the Swan Hill Local Government Area (LGA), Mallee Family Care acts as the CfC FP. Its role involves two key responsibilities: funding local service providers to deliver community-based programs and supporting collaboration between stakeholders through facilitation activities. DSS also requires ongoing community engagement and regular needs assessments to guide the strategic direction of CfC in each region, ensuring relevance and responsiveness to local priorities.

Located in regional Victoria, the Swan Hill LGA spans approximately 6,115 square kilometres and is primarily an agricultural and horticultural area (Swan Hill Rural City Council, 2022). As of the 2021 census, the region had an estimated population of 21,403 people (ABS, 2021). The LGA encompasses the larger townships of Swan Hill and Robinvale, along with smaller communities such as Lake Boga, Nyah, Nyah West, Woorinen South, Piangil, Manangatang, and Ultima.

Figure 1.
A map of the Swan Hill LGA.



Objectives

CfC aims to develop a detailed understanding of the key challenges affecting childhood development and wellbeing within the Swan Hill LGA. This understanding is essential to enhance and tailor the services delivered under the CfC initiative. This needs assessment will highlight current community issues and service gaps, with a focus on identifying priority areas requiring targeted support. Findings from this analysis will guide the creation of future Community Strategic Plans and Activity Work Plans, ensuring that CfC funding is directed to Community Partners best positioned to deliver the necessary programs and services.



Methods and research design

A mixed-methods approach was developed to collect information regarding children, families and other stakeholders program needs within the Swan Hill LGA, as well as the common barriers and strengths of the activities and services. This research utilises a desk-based evidence review, a cross-sectional survey that used multimethod collection, as well as child voice engagement.

The desk-based review utilised reports and data collected from a range of reliable sources.

Common data collection sources include:

- The Australian Bureau of Statistics Census
- Australian Early Development Census
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing data
- Social Health Atlas of Australia

The data extracted was pooled together and compared at a SA2 level for a more detailed evaluation.

The *Stakeholder Survey* was created by the CfC FP team in collaboration with the Research team. This survey was emailed to 20 organisations with stakeholders having the ability to complete it online. The survey included two demographic questions and five open ended questions that explore the strengths, gaps and barriers to service delivery and access. The responses to each question were collated and thematically analysed to pull out reoccurring themes.

Similarly, the *Community Members Survey* was developed by the CfC FP and Research team and consisted of two demographic questions before branching into people who are accessing services and people who are not. This was to uncover the barriers and highlight what makes programs more accessible as well as what is currently working well. This survey had a multi-method mode of data collection to expand the reach. Firstly, there was an online link that was shared on social media for people to complete. Additionally, five kitchen tables (focus groups) occurred across Nyah West, Swan Hill, Robinvale, and Manangatang. Responses for each question were thematically analysed, and common themes were gathered and reported on.

Finally, questions and methodology were workshopped with the CfC FP and the Research team that concluded with two appropriate questions. These were: *What do you love to do with people you like to play with?* and *What do you like to do with your family?* There were 12 schools, 16 kindergartens and four playgroups who were asked to participate. Children had the chance to draw their responses with a space for annotation. Thematic analyses were also used on these two questions.

Desk-based evidence review

Demographics

With the Swan Hill LGA covering around 6,115 square kilometres, there is an expansive and diverse range of needs and vulnerabilities, as well as opportunities experienced by the children and families of these townships. Table 1 displays the population demographics of the Swan Hill LGA including family dynamics. The towns of Swan Hill and Robinvale make up the larger portion of the Swan Hill LGA population.

Table 1

Population demographics of the Swan Hill LGA

Location	Population	Aboriginal Population	Children aged 0-14 years	Couple families with children	One parent families
Swan Hill LGA	21, 403	4.5%	18.8%	39.2%	14.9%
Swan Hill	11,186	4.2%	19.2%	17.8%	17.2%
Robinvale	3,497	7.9%	18.2%	40.1%	15.0%
Lake Boga	982	3.7%	17.5%	36.4%	12.3%
Manangatang	274	7.7%	14.4%	35.4%	11.0%
Nyah	536	3.4%	13.8%	27.0%	15.2%
Nyah West	673	8.5%	18.2%	32.9%	21.7%
Piangil	230	2.6%	15.3%	37.0%	16.7%
Ultima	173	2.9%	19.0%	28.9%	23.7%
Woorinen	262	0.0%	18.7%	34.3%	7.5%
Woorinen South	404	3.2%	17.7%	36.8%	13.7%
Victoria	6,503,491	1.0%	18.0%	45.5%	15.2%
Australia	25,422,788	3.2%	18.2%	43.7%	15.9%

Note. Sourced from ABS, 2021 Census.

It should be noted that the Swan Hill Rural City Council (SHRCC) commissioned an investigation and report into the Robinvale population in 2019 and confirmed the true population is likely to be closer to 7,000-8,000 rather than the 3,088 reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 0-14 in the Swan Hill LGA (4.5%) is relatively high in comparison to the Victorian (1.0%) and the National (3.2%) population. Almost 40% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are under 14. The ABS data shows that 38% of Aboriginal households in the Swan Hill LGA are one-parent households compared to the 25% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in all of Australia.

Cultural diversity

A quarter of the Swan Hill LGA population reported they were born overseas which is an under representation compared to the 35% in Victoria and the 33% in Australia. Furthermore, the Swan Hill LGA percentage (17.4%) for households where a non-English language is spoken is not as significant as the Victorian (30%) and national (24%) percentage. There was however an increase in the number of households where a non-English language is spoken from 12% in 2016 to 17% in 2021. Refer to Table 2 for the specific details regarding cultural diversity indicators. Robinvale has a significant cultural and linguistically diverse community with more than half of their population reporting they were born overseas.

Table 2*Cultural diversity indicators for the Swan Hill LGA*

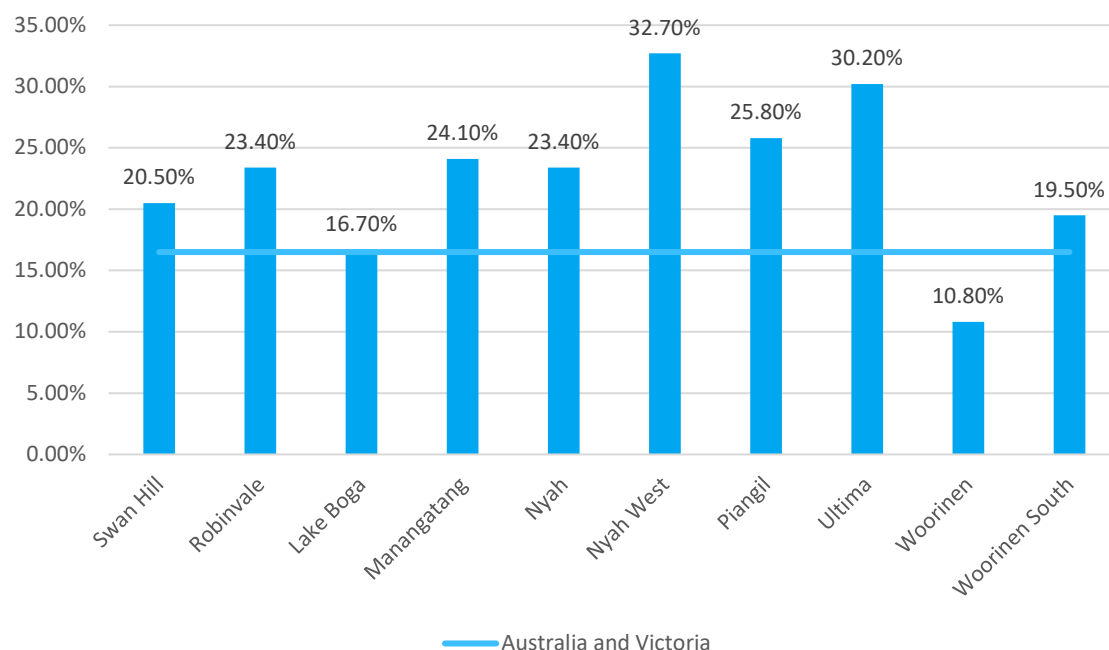
Location	Overseas country of birth	Households where a non-English language is spoken
Swan Hill LGA	25.7%	17.4%
Swan Hill	26.6%	13.5%
Robinvale	52.1%	49.6%
Lake Boga	20.3%	3.4%
Manangatang	12.4%	6.8%
Nyah	28.0%	19.8%
Nyah West	22.9%	5.4%
Piangil	19.1%	13.7%
Ultima	23.7%	0.0%
Woorinen	40.5%	30.4%
Woorinen South	17.8%	7.3%

Note. Sourced from ABS, 2021 Census.

Socioeconomic status

The Swan Hill LGA is in the top 25% of the socioeconomic disadvantaged in Australia and has been established as being in the most disadvantaged 9% in Victoria. The Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage identifies the Swan Hill LGA as the 7th most disadvantaged in the state. In particular, the most disadvantaged areas include Robinvale, Manangatang and Nyah/Nyah West.

The ABS data shows that 20.6% of households have a total weekly income of less than \$650 in the Swan Hill LGA. This percentage varies across towns; however, all are significantly higher than the Australian and Victorian average with the exception of Woorinen. See Figure 2 for exact figures.

Figure 2*Percentage of households with a weekly income of less than \$650*

Housing and homelessness

The number of people experiencing homelessness in the Swan LGA is 234, which equates to 111.4 per 100,000 people. This is significantly high when compared to the Victorian and Australian figures which can be found in the below table. The Swan Hill Rural City Council has created a Regional Housing Action Plan to combat the current housing crisis.

Table 3

Number of people experiencing homelessness

Location	People experiencing homelessness	
	N	Per 100,000
Swan Hill LGA	234	111.4
Victoria	30,605	46.9
Australia	455,494	58.1

Note. Sourced from ABS, 2024 Social Health Atlas.

Health outcomes

Early childhood health plays a crucial role in shaping a child's development and long-term health and wellbeing. One important indicator of newborn health is low-birth-weight, which significantly influences infant survival, overall health, and developmental outcomes. The percentage of low-birth-weight babies in the Swan Hill LGA is slightly lower than the Victorian and Australian percentage. Since 2021, the percentage has decreased from 7.5% to 5%. Additionally, vaccination rates across the Swan Hill LGA are relatively high compared to state and national percentages.

Table 4

Proportion of low-weight-birth babies, infants fully breastfed at three months, and children fully vaccinated at 2 years old.

Location	Low-birth-weight babies (< 2,500 grams)		Infants fully breastfed at three months		Children fully vaccinated at 2 years of age	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Swan Hill LGA	44	5.0	277	56.2	256	94.8
Victoria	14,729	6.3	90,735	63.4	70,608	92.4
Australia	58,342	6.5	383,701	68.9	275,505	92.2

Note. Sourced from ABS, 2024 Social Health Atlas Australia.

There were 425 children aged 0 to 14 in the Swan Hill LGA who reported they had one or more long-term health conditions. This equates to 10.6 per 100,000 compared to 8.5 and 8.7 per 100,000 in Victoria and Australia respectively. View the table below for figures on asthma, mental health conditions, and other long-term health conditions.

Table 5

Number of children with asthma, a mental health condition or any other long-term health condition

Location	People aged 0 to 14 years who reported they had asthma		People aged 0 to 14 years who reported they had a mental health condition (including depression or anxiety)		People aged 0 to 14 who reported they had any other long term health condition	
	N	Per 100,000	N	Per 100,000	N	Per 100,000
Swan Hill LGA	329	8.2	84	2.1	135	3.4
Victoria	74452	6.4	23,107	2.0	45,011	3.8
Australia	294,198	6.3	98,538	2.1	188,141	4.1

Note. Sourced from ABS, 2024 Social Health Atlas Australia.

Participation in Maternal and Child Health

Participation in maternal and child health is essential for promoting positive outcomes for both mothers and their children. Engaging families, communities, and healthcare providers in maternal and child health initiatives helps ensure access to timely care, supports informed decision-making, and contributes to healthier pregnancies, births, and early childhood development. Data from the Social Health Atlases of Australia indicates that more than half of mothers attended antenatal care within the first ten weeks of having a baby.

Table 6

Percentage of mothers who did not attend antenatal care within the first ten weeks

Location	Did not attend antenatal visits	
	N	%
Swan Hill LGA	359	40.9
Victoria	83,974	36.4
Australia	367,889	41.0

Note. Sourced from ABS, 2024 Social Health Atlas Australia.

Developmental vulnerability

Developmental vulnerability refers to the risk of delays or difficulties in areas such as physical health, emotional wellbeing, social competence, language, and cognitive skills during early childhood. Children experiencing developmental vulnerability are more likely to face challenges in learning and social adjustment, which can have lasting effects on their education, health, and overall life outcomes. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) measures the development of children in Australia in their first year of full-time school. The Swan Hill LGA shows the most vulnerability in the physical health domain, followed by language skills. Manangatang and Nyah/Nyah West show the highest proportions of children presenting with specific domain vulnerabilities. It must be noted that the data is from 2021; an updated AEDC took place in 2024 however the data has not yet been made available.

Table 7*Developmental vulnerability indicators for the Swan Hill LGA*

Location	Proportion of children showing vulnerability in AEDC domains				
	Physical Health	Social competence	Emotional maturity	Language skills	Communication skills
Swan Hill LGA	15.4%	9.5%	9.5%	10.4%	6.8%
Swan Hill	20.2%	11.6%	11.6%	8.5%	6.2%
Robinvale	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Lake Boga	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	0.0%
Manangatang and Nyah/ Nyah West	23.3%	16.7%	13.3%	20.0%	13.3%
Victoria	8.1%	9.0%	7.7%	7.2%	7.4%
Australia	9.8%	9.6%	8.5%	7.3%	8.4%

Note. Sourced from AEDC, 2021.

The data shows that in the Swan Hill LGA, one quarter (25.7%) of children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains. In particular, Manangatang and Nyah/Nyah West have shown a significant inclination from 2018, increasing from 13.8% to 33.3% in 2021. Lake Boga, however, has significantly decreased from 19.0% to 4.8%. Similarly, Robinvale has decreased from 25.9% to 10.0%. Given the small populations of these towns, it is recognised that large percentage changes may be the result of only minor changes in actual numbers.

Table 8*Proportion of children developmentally vulnerably in Swan Hill LGA*

Location	Developmentally vulnerable in one or more domain	Developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains
Swan Hill LGA	25.8%	12.7%
Swan Hill	31%	14.7%
Robinvale	10.0%	0.0%
Lake Boga	4.8%	0.0%
Manangatang and Nyah/ Nyah West	33.3%	20.0%
Victoria	19.9%	10.2%
Australia	22.0%	11.4%

Note. Sourced from AEDC, 2021.

Childcare and kinder attendance

Enrolment and regular attendance in preschool/kinder are key factors in supporting children's early learning and development. These early education settings provide structured opportunities for social interaction, cognitive growth, and emotional development, laying the foundation for school readiness and long-term educational success. Consistent participation also helps identify and address developmental concerns early on. The data from the Social Health Atlases of Australia presents that just 33% of four- and five-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, and 30% are attending. This could be for an abundance of reasons that go beyond the scope of this analysis. However, community research conducted in 2021 suggested community members felt it was too expensive, the waiting lists were too long, there were none, or the times didn't suit their families.

Table 9*Preschool enrollment and attendance*

	N	%
Preschool enrolments of children aged 4 or 5	176	33%
Preschool attendance of children aged 4 or 5	158	30%

Note. Sourced from ABS, 2024 Social Health Atlas Australia.

Social outcomes

Child abuse and family violence

In 2023-24, the Crime Statistics Agency reported that the Swan Hill LGA had 3,295 family and domestic violence (FDV) incidents attended by police and it was identified that 33.4% involved a child who directly experienced or witnessed FDV. This was just below the Victorian average of 37%. Across the entire Loddon Mallee, 11% ($n = 819$) of incidents are experienced by children aged 0-17 years old. See Table 10 for the Swan Hill LGA Victim-Perpetrator dynamic breakdown. Most cases concerning a youth involve an adult perpetrator.

Table 10*Victim – Perpetrator dynamic breakdown*

Victim – Perpetrator Dynamic	% of Swan Hill LGA FDV incidents
Youth victim – adult perpetrator	9%
Adult victim – youth perpetrator	5%
Youth victim – youth perpetrator	1.7%

Note. Sourced from Crime Statistics Agency, 2024.

Stakeholder survey

The stakeholder survey was sent out to 20 different organisations across the nine townships included in this review. The survey contained two demographic questions and six open ended questions that explored gaps, barriers (to delivering and accessing services) and helpful aspects in the early years space. This survey returned 20 responses from an array of organisations. The list of organisations involved can be found in Table 11.

Table 11

Organisations involved in the stakeholder survey

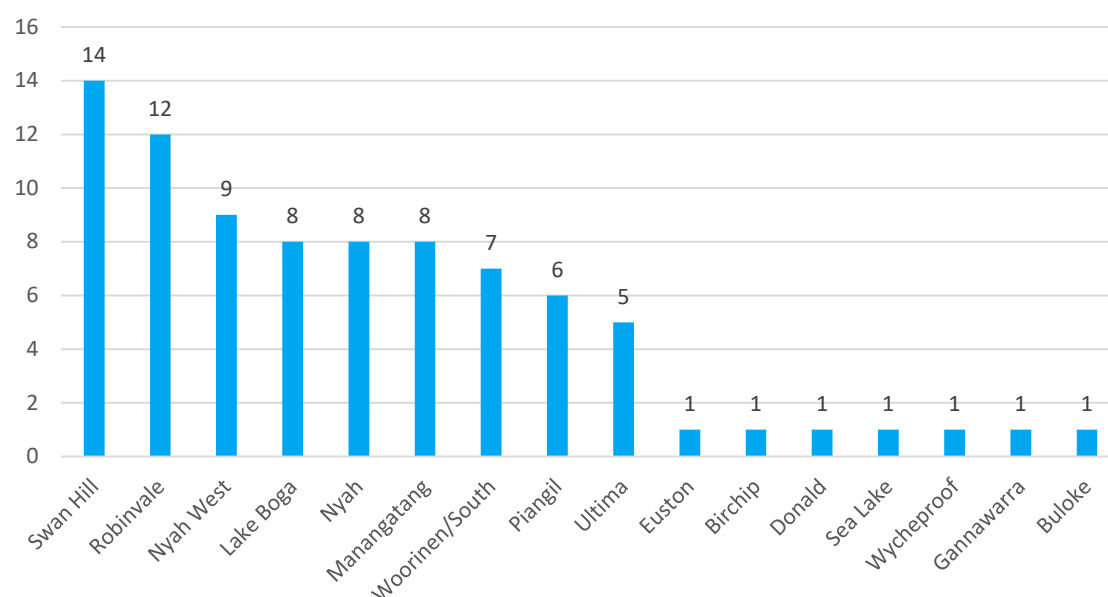
Organisation	N
Mallee Family Care	4
Robinvale District Health Services	4
Swan Hill Rural City Council	2
Our Place Robinvale	2
Swan Hill District Health	2
AXIS Employment	1
Department of Education	1
Swan Hill Primary	1
After School Care	1

Townships serviced

The ten different organisations that participated in the stakeholder survey serviced 16 townships. The main two townships serviced were Swan Hill and Robinvale, followed by Nyah West, Lake Boga, Nyah, and Manangatang. See Figure 3 for the complete number of towns serviced. Although some of the stakeholders are a part of organisations that service townships outside of the Swan Hill LGA, they primarily service towns within, which is the primary focus of this community needs analysis.

Figure 3

Townships serviced by organisations that participated in the stakeholder survey



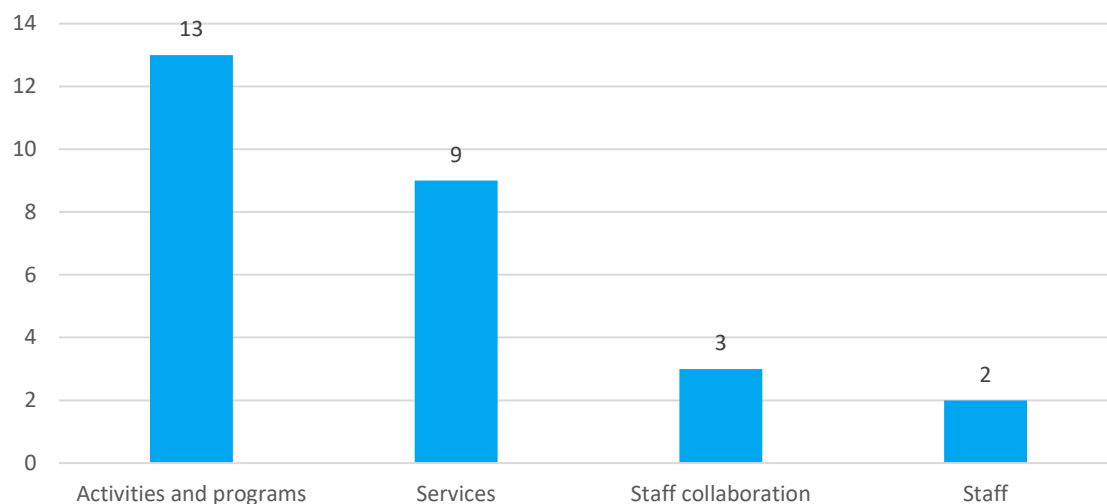
Throughout the report, themes are listed and presented in order of prevalence. This means that under each area explored (e.g., strengths, gaps, barriers, etc.) the themes are presented in order beginning with the theme most reoccurring to the theme that appeared the least.

Strengths

There were four major themes that came from exploring what is working well within the early years space in the communities the organisations service. These were: *activities and programs*, *services*, *stakeholder collaboration* and *staff*, see Figure 4. These themes are explored in further detail below.

Figure 4

Stakeholder survey 'strength' themes prevalence.



Activities and programs

Playgroups were mentioned by 11 different stakeholders as something that is working well within the Swan Hill LGA communities. Playgroups were recognised as a wonderful support that were highly valued and highly rated due to the opportunities to connect and grow that are created. Specifically, stakeholders noted it is their free access and the number of groups that are available that provide the community with more of an opportunity to attend.

The library was also identified as a wonderful resource with its activities and experiences by four stakeholders. Specifically, the programs run by the library were noted, such as the Toy library, and Rhyme Time.

Quotes
<i>"Lots of early years support, playgroups and activities available for free to families in the region."</i>
<i>"Playgroups are an asset to the community."</i>
<i>"The number of playgroups available to families. Numerous organisations run playgroup with very little overlap on times and dates."</i>
<i>"...MCH and Playgroups are all highly valued and highly rated by families."</i>

<i>"Playgroups provide families with essential opportunities to connect and grow."</i>
<i>"Almost every day there is a play group offered for children, giving parents the opportunity to attend at least one of the days with their children."</i>
<i>"Library is a wonderful resource for families/ story time and general use of the space. Currently fully staffed (for now) preschools are wonderful."</i>
<i>"Toy library offering free toy borrowing to families and services."</i>

Services

Stakeholders noted the services offered within the early years space as something that is working well. In particular, the Maternal and Child Health service was mentioned by six stakeholders for their support including the new parent groups, and breastfeeding group. Stakeholders reported that the services have quick action referrals and that they run efficiently. One stakeholder said that families are very engaged with the service which creates a positive space and area for building capacity of families.

Additionally, two stakeholders noted the Early Years Online Hub (EYOH) as something working well. It was mentioned that it is a great reference for families and always updated but that it may need more promotion.

Quotes
<i>Ability of services and programs to adapt and respond to emerging needs as able, reflecting on the needs of the most vulnerable families.</i>
<i>Lots of early years support, playgroups and activities available for free to families in the region.</i>
<i>There are quite a few support services for the early years and referrals are actioned quite quickly.</i>
<i>MCH is great...New parents' groups by MCH are great. ...I really like the breastfeeding support group as well.</i>
<i>The MCH service is also running efficiently, and Early Years Online Hub has been great as a reference for families.</i>

Stakeholder collaboration

Stakeholder collaboration emerged as a key strength within the community, with four respondents highlighting the effectiveness of service integration in supporting children and families. Participants noted that collaborative efforts between programs and services enhance the overall capacity to meet the needs of young families.

Quotes
<i>Collaboration of services and programs to support young families.</i>

<i>Continuity of Learning working group and Best Start - bringing services together to improve outcomes for children and families</i>
<i>Information sharing supporting families with transitions into school</i>

Staff

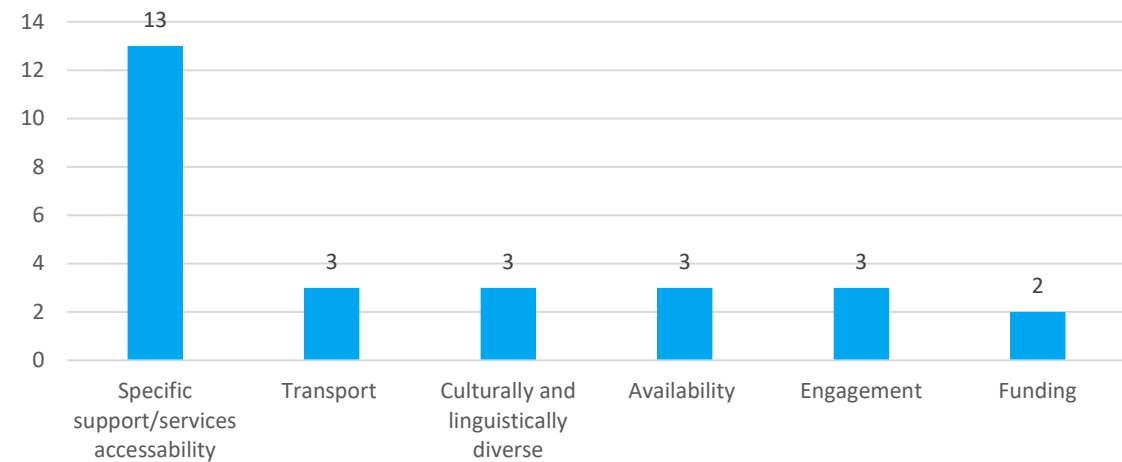
Two stakeholders specifically praised the staff working in the early years sector, highlighting their positive attitudes and strong commitment to supporting families. Comments described staff as *"friendly and hard-working"* as well as *"dedicated and inspiring,"* reflecting a high level of motivation and professionalism. This feedback suggests that the personal qualities and dedication of early years professionals play a vital role in building trust with families and delivering quality support during a critical stage of child development.

Gaps

Stakeholders identified six themes when asked about the gaps and needs within the early years community. These were the lack of *accessibility to specific support and services, transport, cultural and linguistic diversity, availability, engagement* and *funding*, see Figure 5.

Figure 5

Stakeholder survey gaps themes prevalence.



Specific support/services accessibility

A significant number of stakeholders identified critical gaps in the availability and accessibility of services for children and families across the region. The most frequently mentioned needs included daycare and kindergarten placements ($n = 5$), access to paediatricians ($n = 5$), GP appointments ($n = 3$), specialist care ($n = 3$), and allied health services such as speech therapy ($n = 2$) and occupational therapy ($n = 2$). Additional gaps included supports for autism and neurodiverse children ($n = 2$), parenting support ($n = 2$), mental health services ($n = 2$), interpreter services, family therapy, and access to NDIS services.

Beyond clinical and therapeutic services, some stakeholders also pointed to a lack of creative and recreational opportunities for children, such as crafting, outdoor play, and cultural engagement, including gallery visits. These gaps limit children's holistic development and social engagement. Additionally, many stakeholders identified the geographical location of Swan Hill itself as a systemic barrier to service access, contributing to inequities across the municipality.

Quotes
<i>"Getting daycare is nearly impossible, getting a GP appointment is a month wait, no paediatrician, nearly impossible to get specialist appointments (have to travel and it costs \$\$\$)"</i>
<i>"In smaller outlying communities there is no access to childcare and in Swan hill and Robinvale there is a significant shortage of childcare. Across the municipality there is a lack of other allied services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, paediatric specialists, Autism and neurodiverse support services, parenting support, mental health services, access to GPs, interpreter services."</i>
<i>"Paediatric and specialist services for children and young families, especially to access locally."</i>
<i>"There is a huge lack of long day care and paediatric medical appointments available with local GP offices."</i>
<i>"Access to specialist services, paediatricians and paediatric services, speech therapy, OT, family therapy, mental health services, services for families and children experiencing neurodiversity, access to childcare, allergy specialists."</i>

Transport

Transport was identified by stakeholders as a significant gap in accessing early years services. The lack of reliable and accessible public transport options within the community makes it particularly difficult for families—especially those without private vehicles—to attend appointments or participate in programs. Comments such as *"lack of public transport available"* and *"transport within the community"* were repeated by several respondents, highlighting that even when services do exist, physical access remains a major challenge. This issue is especially pronounced in rural and outlying areas, where travel distances are greater and alternatives to driving are limited.

Culturally and linguistically diverse

Stakeholders highlighted a significant gap in culturally and linguistically appropriate services within the early years sector. It was noted that existing services often do not adequately reflect or support the needs of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In particular, there is a shortage of early years programs that are tailored to or inclusive of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, as well as a lack of targeted education and support for families where English is not the first language. This gap can lead to reduced engagement with services, feelings of exclusion, and difficulty navigating the system.

Quotes
<i>"Services in the early years focused on CALD community and education, early years. For example, CALD outreach support available in other LGA to connect Kindergarten services to the early years/families before they start kindergarten and school."</i>
<i>"Cultural sensitivity needs to be worked on regarding interactions and expectations of the families, services reaching the families that are most vulnerable e.g., isolation."</i>

Availability

Availability was identified as a significant gap within the current early years system. Multiple stakeholders pointed to long wait times and limited capacity as key barriers to accessing essential services. A common concern was the difficulty in securing daycare placements, with one respondent stating that *“getting daycare is nearly impossible.”* Similarly, access to general practitioners was reported as inadequate, with wait times for appointments stretching up to a month. In addition to early childcare, the need for increased availability extended to school-aged programs, including after-school care. Stakeholders called for *“more spots and staff for after school care”* to meet growing demand and support working families. These shortages not only place stress on families but also hinder children's consistent access to learning and developmental opportunities.

Engagement

Three stakeholders identified engagement as an ongoing challenge, particularly in reaching vulnerable or hard-to-reach families. Despite the availability of some services, stakeholders noted that certain families remain disengaged or unaware of the support available to them. One respondent questioned, *“Reaching those vulnerable families, how do we engage with them and get them to attend sessions?”* This reflects a broader concern about equity in access and participation. Another stakeholder remarked, *“There are still families who haven't accessed any services and that's worrying,”* highlighting the need for more proactive and inclusive outreach strategies. These gaps in engagement suggest that simply having services in place is not enough—targeted, culturally appropriate, and community-informed approaches are needed to connect with families who may face social, cultural, or logistical barriers.

Funding

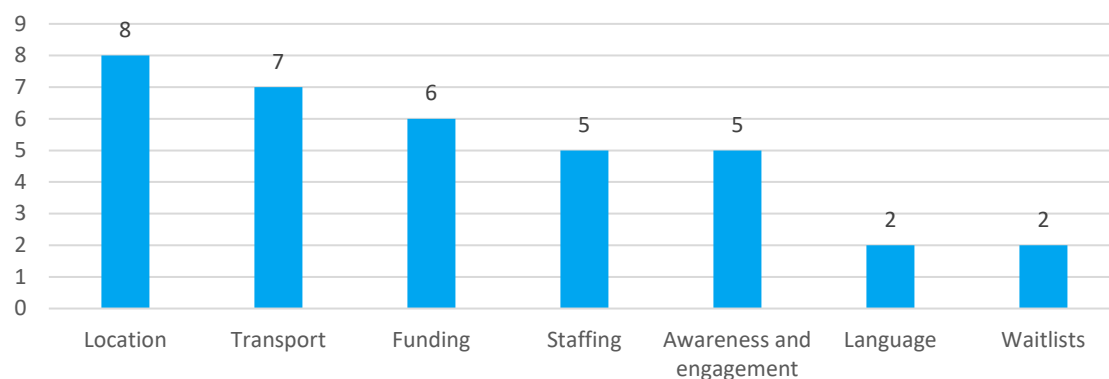
Two stakeholders stated that more funding was needed to counteract the gaps in the early years sector. They stated that *“More funding has to be provided to ensure every kid in the community gets a better future no matter where they live, and also more scholarships have to fill the gaps in the early years sector.”*

Barriers for delivery

There were seven themes identified across barriers to delivering early years services in the stakeholder communities. These were *location, transport, funding, staffing, awareness and engagement, language, and waitlists*, see Figure 6.

Figure 6

Stakeholder survey barriers for delivery themes prevalence.



Location

The rural location was often noted as a barrier to services being delivered within the community. Distance from services plays a role in preventing the organisations from delivering these services as travel is required. Smaller communities in particular suffer from a lack of resources and funding that is exacerbated by the isolated location. The “*distance between towns*” and lack of options also make it difficult for services to reach outlying areas, limiting support for vulnerable families across the region.

Quotes
<i>“Lack of adequate funding that factors in the additional costs such as travel.”</i>
<i>“Resources where we live.”</i>
<i>Within small communities this can bring challenges to provide adequate services to the area.”</i>
<i>“Distance and travel time to outer areas.”</i>
<i>“Specialist services funding, recruitment and support so that families do not have to travel to access and obtain care.”</i>

Transport

Stakeholders identified lack of transport as a major barrier affecting delivery of services. Families—particularly those on low incomes—struggle to attend programs, with comments noting that “*transport to playgroup is a barrier*” and there is a need for “*adequate and affordable public transport.*”

Quotes
<i>“The distances between towns and lack of public transport.”</i>
<i>“Families having transport to access services when delivering.”</i>
<i>“...distance, lack of public transport...”</i>
<i>“Transport to Playgroup is a barrier...”</i>
<i>“Adequate and affordable public transport for low-income families.”</i>

Funding

Six stakeholders reported that insufficient funding is a significant barrier to delivering services effectively. Many believe that without additional financial resources, the sector will continue to struggle in meeting the growing demand for services. Increased funding could allow for better service provision, expansion of current programs, and the introduction of new initiatives to address gaps in care.

Quotes
<i>“Lack of ongoing funding.”</i>
<i>“Lack of adequate funding that factors in the additional costs such as travel to access and obtain care...”</i>
<i>“Specialist services funding...”</i>

"Insufficient funding exists..."

Staffing

Recruitment and retention of staff were highlighted as major challenges for the sector. In addition to difficulties attracting and retaining qualified staff, one stakeholder pointed out the need for opportunities to upskill existing staff. Providing professional development and training could help improve service quality and staff satisfaction, which would ultimately benefit the families they serve.

Quotes
<i>"...recruiting and retaining staff to provide enough allied health services is difficult."</i>
<i>"Low levels of skilled workforce, qualifications"</i>
<i>"Access to staffing"</i>
<i>"...staff shortages"</i>

Awareness and engagement

Stakeholders reported a lack of awareness of available services and activities within the community. This is compounded by a disconnect between services and community members, making it challenging for services to engage and connect with families in need. More effective communication strategies and outreach efforts are needed to bridge this gap and ensure that families know where to access the support they require.

Language

Two stakeholders identified language as a barrier to accessing services, particularly for culturally and linguistically diverse families. This language barrier can prevent families from fully understanding and engaging with the services available to them. Without proper language support, these families may miss out on crucial services that could address their unique needs, further isolating them from necessary support systems.

Waitlists

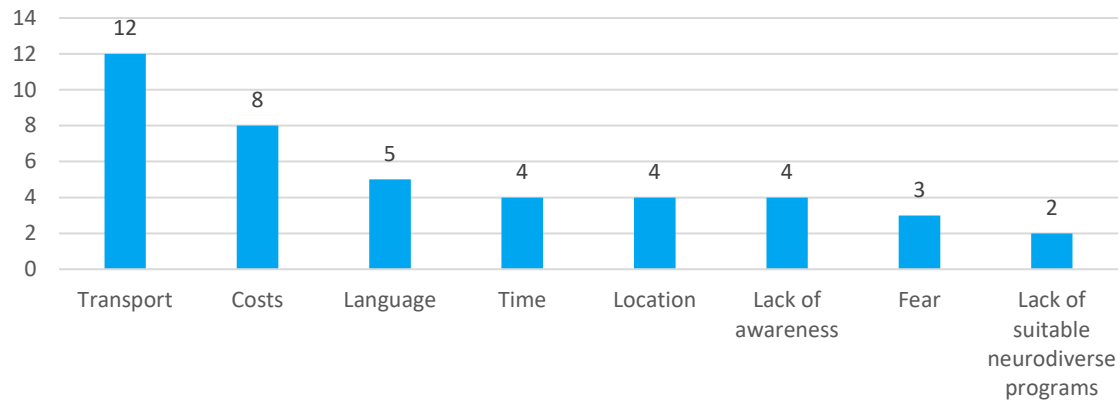
Some stakeholders reported that the availability of existing services and programs is insufficient to meet demand, with long waitlists acting as a significant barrier. Families often experience delays in accessing crucial support, which can impact outcomes, particularly for children in their early years. The inability to access services in a timely manner highlights the need for increased capacity and resources to ensure that families can receive the support they need without unnecessary delays.

Barriers to accessibility

There was a total of eight themes identified when stakeholders were asked what they believed were the barriers to community members accessing programs and activities. These were *transport, costs, language, time, location, lack of awareness, fear, and lack of suitable neurodiverse programs*, see Figure 7.

Figure 7

Stakeholder survey barriers to accessibility themes prevalence



Transport

Transport was identified as the biggest barrier for the community in accessing early years programs and activities. The lack of reliable and affordable transportation options limits the ability of families, particularly those in rural or remote areas, to attend essential services and programs. This transport barrier not only affects families' ability to engage with programs but also contributes to feelings of isolation and exclusion from support networks.

Costs

Eight stakeholders identified the current cost of living as a potential barrier to accessing services. The cost of programs and activities, or even the fear of hidden fees, creates a financial strain for many families. For low-income households, these financial barriers prevent them from engaging with necessary services and support systems, exacerbating existing inequalities and limiting children's access to critical early learning and development opportunities.

Quotes
<i>"...cost of living pressures..."</i>
<i>"...cost is too much..."</i>
<i>"Money (incentives and priorities)"</i>
<i>"Some disadvantages can be...money and the lack of services funded..."</i>

Language

Language was identified as a barrier specifically for culturally and linguistically diverse families. Without adequate language support, these families may struggle to understand or navigate available services, leading to underutilisation of programs. This barrier puts culturally and linguistically diverse families at risk of missing out on vital services that could assist with early childhood development, parenting support, and other critical needs.

Time

Lack of time and differing working hours for parents were frequently noted as significant barriers to accessing services. Parents often struggle to attend programs or activities due to work commitments, which may conflict with service schedules. This lack of flexibility can make it

difficult for families to engage in early childhood services, resulting in missed opportunities for support and early intervention.

Location

Living in a rural location was highlighted as a barrier for accessing services, with the primary challenge being the need to travel long distances to reach programs, services, or activities. Stakeholders noted that this geographical isolation can place a strain on families, particularly those with limited transport options or resources, further exacerbating access issues for rural communities.

Lack of Awareness

Stakeholders reported that many clients do not access services simply because they are unaware of what is available. This lack of visibility means families may miss out on vital supports that could benefit them and their children. Improved promotion, clearer communication, and stronger community outreach were identified as important steps to address this gap in awareness.

Fear

Stakeholders noted that some community members may be hesitant to participate in programs or services due to concerns about judgment, costs, or eligibility requirements. One respondent specifically pointed out the additional challenges faced by culturally and linguistically diverse families, who may worry about their visa status or fear being judged due to cultural differences. These barriers highlight the need for services to adopt more inclusive, non-judgmental approaches that can better engage families and build trust.

Lack of suitable neurodiverse programs

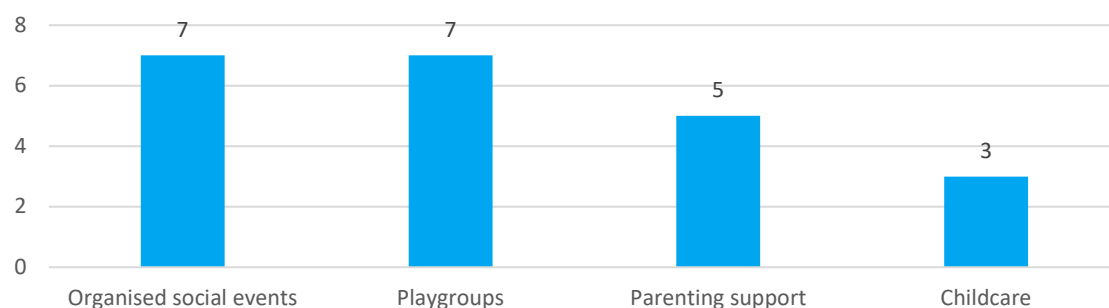
Some stakeholders reported that parents feel there are insufficient programs or activities suitable for children, particularly those with challenging behaviours or additional needs related to neurodiversity. Stakeholders expressed frustration that services often do not cater to the specific needs of these children, leaving them without appropriate support or opportunities for development. This gap highlights the need for more specialised programs designed to address the unique challenges faced by neurodiverse children and their families.

Future programs and activities

There were many different ideas suggested by the stakeholders regarding programs and activities that they would like to see in the future. These were *organised social events*, *playgroups*, *parenting support*, and *childcare*, see Figure 8.

Figure 8

Stakeholder survey future programs and activities' themes prevalence



Organised social events

Stakeholders' responses indicated that more organised social events would be beneficial to families. Specifically, events that are outdoors, fun, educational, creative, and social. Furthermore, activities that involve whole family engagement focusing on building connections was often noted.

Quotes
<i>"Organised picnics/play/events in the parks."</i>
<i>"Social activities for kids, mums and dads. Art and outdoor play activities for kids."</i>
<i>"Activities that can be fun, healthy (like sport or playing outside) and educational - and safe obviously."</i>
<i>"Following on building connections whilst engaging them in social group events."</i>

Playgroups

More playgroups were stated by seven stakeholders. In particular, stakeholders spoke of wanting more early intervention playgroups, smalltalk playgroups, outdoor playgroups and smaller playgroups for children of varying ages. One stakeholder suggested that playgroups have an expo day that informs parents of available services.

Quotes
<i>"More playgroups more often with guest speakers with expo days to inform parents of services available."</i>
<i>"Smalltalk Playgroup is an amazing program that works alongside the families and is there to support and scaffold the families."</i>
<i>"Outdoor activities playgroup"</i>
<i>"Small groups for playgroups of children at different ages."</i>

Parenting support

Stakeholders suggested the need for more parenting support. This support could come in the form of education sessions, or home visits. Furthermore, extra help for families who have children with additional needs was identified.

Quotes
<i>"Mum groups, dad groups, parenting wellbeing support, education about raising children."</i>
<i>"Parenting programs including those focused on healthy eating and active living, parenting, social connectedness. These can include playgroups, education sessions and events."</i>
<i>"Home visit help and support new mom."</i>



Childcare

Stakeholders emphasised the need for increased availability of childcare services, including daycare, as well as before and after school care. Expanding these services would help meet growing demand and better support working families with more flexible care options.

Community members survey

Data for the community members survey was collected in a multimethod fashion through kitchen tables and an online survey. The online survey returned 41 responses while the five kitchen tables involved 32 families totalling responses from 73 families. A power analysis was conducted using the Swan Hill LGA population of parents of children aged 0 to 5 and determined this number to be statistically powerful in terms of generalisation.

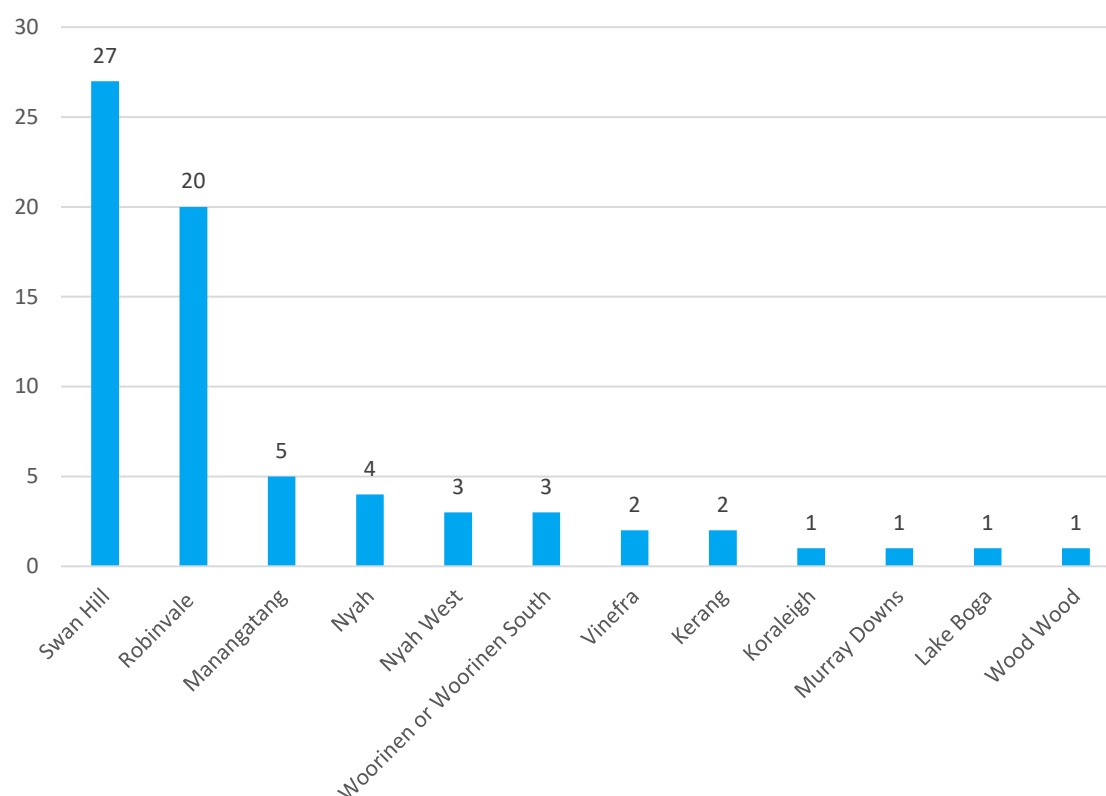
It must be noted that sometimes community members may have misinterpreted some of the questions and not made regard to specific activities and programs within the community rather than larger scale projects/services that are not within the scope of Communities for Children. However, all responses have been included within the report in the spirit of transparency.

Townships

Community responses were returned from members who resided across 12 towns. A large majority came from families who reside in Swan Hill ($n = 27$) and Robinvale ($n = 20$), followed by Manangatang ($n = 5$), Nyah ($n = 4$) and Nyah West ($n = 3$).

Figure 9

Towns where community member respondents reside

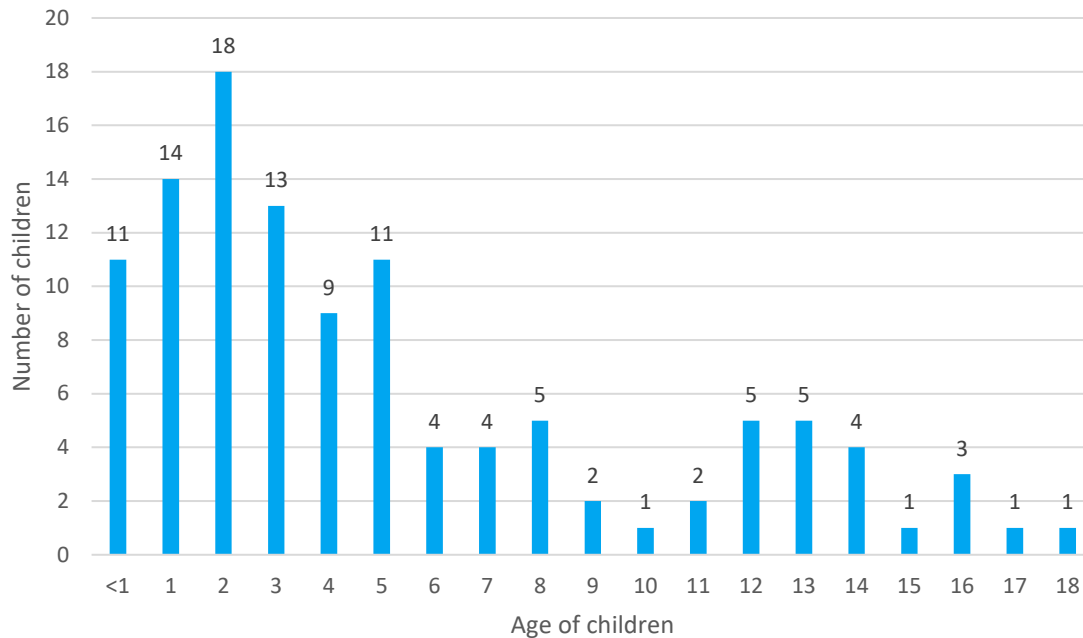


Age of children

The community members/caregivers were asked the ages of their children and the responses showed that majority were caregivers of children aged between zero and five years old.

Figure 10

The number of children at each age from 0 to 18



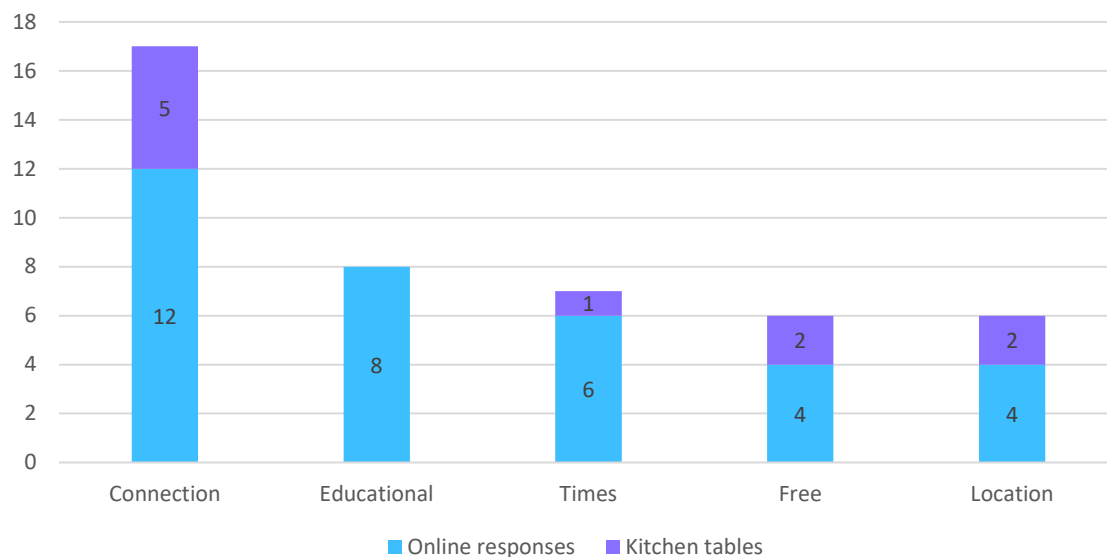
Community members were asked whether they were currently accessing or have accessed community programs and activities in the past for their children aged 0 to 5 years old. Precisely 75% ($n = 30$) of community members had accessed programs while 25% ($n = 10$) had not.

Strengths

A thematic analysis revealed five key themes regarding the types of programs and activities that work well for families: *connection*, *education*, *timing*, *cost (free)*, and *location*, see Figure 11. Each of these is explored in more detail below.

Figure 11

Community member survey 'strengths' themes prevalence



Connection

It was identified by 12 community members and in all kitchen tables that one thing they like about the programs and activities is the opportunity for connection. Mostly they spoke of the child's chance to connect and socialise with other kids, but they also noted the connections caregivers make with other caregivers/families and to services. In particular, community members highlighted the impact playgroups had on this.

Quotes
<i>"Allows mums to come together and talk with a variety of different educational people and groups."</i>
<i>"Helps me connect to other families, and get help when I need especially on the online hub for early years."</i>
<i>"Social connections for both children and adults, opportunities to connect to services such as speech and social worker with assistance from playgroup facilitators when needed, connecting to community"</i>
<i>"Playgroups it helped my children make friends"</i>
<i>"Meeting new parents"</i>
<i>"My grandchildren get to meet others from the area they might go to school with."</i>
<i>"it's the only time she gets to socialise with other kids... So, this definitely helps her socialising."</i>
<i>"I feel like this is her social outlet and to get out.... Just getting out of the house I think and socialising. Meeting new kids and mums, it's nice."</i>
<i>"Yeah true, meeting other parents with kids your age."</i>
<i>"And I think in a small town it's good to have somewhere to go for this age group that's not your house for the kids to socialise."</i>
<i>"It gives the kids something to do, gets them out of the house and playing with other kids. We get to see other people."</i>
<i>"It's good because out farming it obviously gets isolating so it's nice for us to see our friends and then the kids play... The parents can catch up and the kids can catch up."</i>

Educational

Community members appreciated when programs and activities had a strong educational focus, providing opportunities for both children and parents to learn and develop new skills. It was also noted that playgroups led by qualified educators were particularly valued, as they offered structured learning and professional guidance.

Quotes
<i>"I like that the programs help my kid, helps me teach him."</i>
<i>"Coordinated and facilitated by qualified Early Childhood educators,"</i>

"Allows mums to come together and talk with a variety of different educational people and groups."

Times

Six community members specifically mentioned that the timing of programs and activities worked well for them, allowing families to participate without disrupting other daily commitments such as school drop-offs, work, or appointments.

Quotes
<i>"Playgroups in the morning we're good after breakfast time."</i>
<i>"Times are perfect."</i>
<i>"Timing and days work out with our schedule."</i>

Free

Families reported that free programs and activities were highly beneficial for families, especially given current cost of living pressures. Removing financial barriers encourages greater participation and ensures inclusivity across all income levels. One community member stated that *"obviously, free things are really good for us."*

It was also mentioned that the inclusion of free food in programs helps children stay engaged for longer periods and reduces pressure on parents in the mornings. When meals or snacks are provided, families do not need to pack food, making it easier to attend and enhancing the overall experience for both children and caregivers.

Location

The location of programs and activities was also identified as a strength. Having services delivered within local, accessible venues, particularly within walking distance or central to the community, made it easier for families to attend regularly.

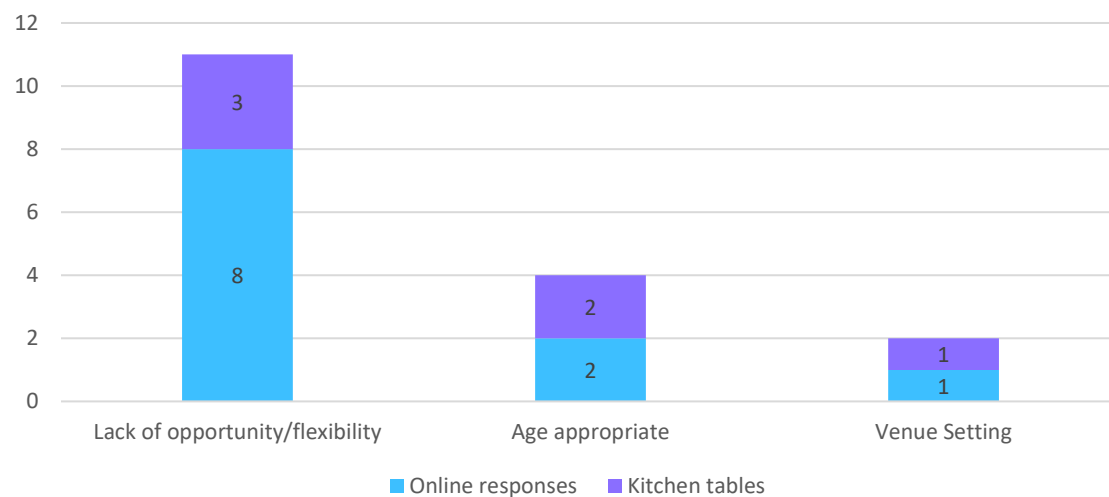
Quotes
<i>"Rhyme time at the library is flexible and free and at a central location."</i>
<i>"Wonderful to have playgroups running in Swan Hill. Locations easy to park at and child friendly."</i>
<i>"Walking distance or near bus line/stop (e.g. pioneer settlement, library)"</i>
<i>"Nice that it's local."</i>
<i>"And I think having it town actually makes it a lot easier for me because I live in town so I can get to the things whereas people who don't live in town miss them I notice."</i>

Difficulties

There were three themes identified as factors that aren't working for families within the current programs and activities offered within community, see Figure 12.

Figure 12

Community member survey difficulties' themes prevalence



Lack of opportunity or flexibility

The biggest issue families found with the activities and programs is a lack of opportunity to attend. Particularly there were problems with specific playgroups only occurring once a week or many being at the same time. Additionally, it was noted that there are not enough playgroups and that there are none on weekends which makes it difficult for working parents. The specific times of the activities can also make it difficult with many noting that the times can coincide with their child's sleep schedule.

Quotes
<i>"I struggle with time availability, when I work I can't access the programs or activities that I want."</i>
<i>"No playgroups or opportunities on weekends for working families"</i>
<i>"A lot of programs are offered during the day effectively eliminating anyone working."</i>
<i>"Hard to fit around babies sleep schedule."</i>
<i>There are 3 playgroups in Swan Hill all on the same day and times (just different locations) and they all start quite early in the morning - would be better to spread them through the week/day e.g. put one on a Monday and Friday, do 10am-12pm instead of 9-11am</i>
<i>"So, the times and days of the playgroups."</i>
<i>"Yeah, the time for me, I've only just started coming with her because she used to sleep at 10, its only now that she's a bit older that I can push her back and she can nap when she gets home."</i>
<i>"That was like us at the start, I couldn't come because she napped at 10" - *all agreeing*</i>
<i>"It works perfect for her now, but when she was little her nap time was at 10, I couldn't come."</i>
<i>"Obviously times for some people and depends on how old your baby is."</i>

"It would also be good if there were more varied times, like when I go back to work, we might miss out on this... you can't cater to everyone. But it would be nice to have a little more flexibility."

"There're certain points of the year there's no point putting anything on. If the dads are busy, then we're sought of stuck."

Age appropriate

Another issue arose regarding the programs not being age appropriate or stimulating enough for certain age levels. Kitchen tables reported differing stances initially stating that mixed-age group activities are sometimes not suitable for all ages. It was then conversely stated that having a mixed-age group was a positive as it meant that parents could bring all their kids to the one place.

Venue setting

It was also noted that the physical environment plays a role in how well programs work for families. Community members highlighted the importance of having locations that are safe, fully fenced, and suitable for all weather conditions—including hot or rainy days. When venues lack these features, it can limit attendance and make the experience less enjoyable or safe for children.

Barriers

Similarly to the previous responses, the biggest barrier for families is the program times ($n = 16$ online + 2 kitchen tables). Families are limited in terms of the times they can attend; some feel as though too early in the morning doesn't work and that it can often clash with nap times.

Quotes
<i>"Time of program, it would be easier if it was on at 11.30am for babies."</i>
<i>"Days and times of programs - 9am is too early a start (better when playgroups went until 12pm)."</i>
<i>"Time of program - playgroup happens early in the morning while my child took nap at that time."</i>
<i>"We have limited days and times that we can attend."</i>
<i>"Sometimes clashes with other activities we have on as a family."</i>
<i>"Sometimes I find if it's too early it could be an issue but a lot of them haven't been which is nice."</i>

Other barriers include:

- Lack of transport and the location of programs ($n = 5$ online responses + 2 kitchen tables) with the addition of the costing of fuel ($n = 2$ online responses + 1 kitchen table).
- Lack of awareness of the programs that exist and knowing when they occur ($n = 4$ online responses + 1 kitchen table).

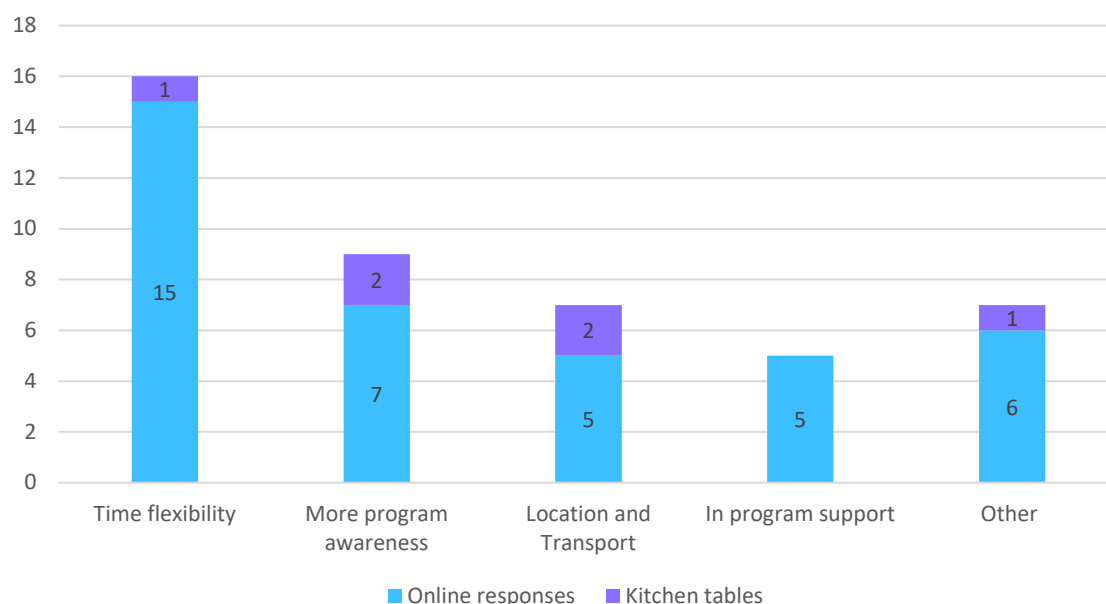
- Lack of childcare availability ($n = 4$ online responses) – families recognise the difficulties of getting their child/ren into childcare and have stated that there is a barrier for getting into childcare.
- Weather ($n = 1$ online response + 2 kitchen tables)– if it’s raining and or too hot and there’s no shade sales it prevents families from attending.
- When an environment is not fenced in ($n = 2$ kitchen tables) – community members feel as though they cannot relax and are constantly worried about where their child is.
- It is difficult for non-English speaking families ($n = 1$ online response + 1 kitchen table).
- One community member revealed they have fear surrounding attending, wondering whether they would feel welcomed.
- Distance was an issue – activities being far away. *“Distance is definitely a big thing. It’s just getting to it!”*($n = 1$ kitchen table)
- Age appropriate – one kitchen table identified when programs and activities cater only to a specific age group, it becomes difficult if they have kids in other age groups who don’t want to attend.

Improvements

Community members noted many factors that would assist them to access programs and activities. See Figure 13.

Figure 3

Community members survey ‘improvements’ themes prevalence



Time flexibility

Community members responded to this question by requesting program scheduling flexibility. Particularly they reported wanting a program on every day of the week, with mornings working for some or later in the day working for others. It was suggested that *“perhaps having it running at two different times during the week or alternating times.”* Furthermore, some community members suggested the programs go over a longer amount of time.

Quotes
<i>"A playgroup on every day of the week in Swan Hill and runs later in the morning. (So it doesn't matter which days you work or if the older siblings have Kindy)."</i>
<i>"Suitable activity times and opening hours"</i>
<i>"More variety and different days as options".</i>
<i>"It wouldn't be too bad to have another one out here. To offer maybe 2 days."</i>
<i>"Well with this session there's only one session so they could offer multiple. And like going back to work – different days and different times."</i>

More program awareness

Another major theme that reoccurred was that community members felt they needed more awareness of activities and programs that were occurring. Community members stated that more information, advertising and communication from programs would be helpful.

Quotes
<i>"Advertise on social media what is available"</i>
<i>"Information flyer, not on Facebook so I miss out"</i>
<i>"More information"</i>
<i>"Advertising it better – like a well run hub"</i>
<i>"It's not that easy to find information on programs."</i>

Location and transport

Community members highlighted the importance of having accessible programs in terms of location and transport. They reported it would be helpful if the location was close to their residence, if programs came to their houses or if they had free transport. Community members of a kitchen table made it very clear that programs and activities are best when they are localised:

"Bring things to Manangatang.

It's always nice when things come here.

When things come here!

I feel like when things are here, we all try and support them and put that big effort in!"

Community members also reported needing more support within the programs and activities. They specifically state wanting *"trained support workers to access programs and activities"*, and *"regular check ins from facilitators"*, as well as *"more help to look after my kid when I come to programs"*.

Other helpful things identified were events being free, consistent, suitable for people who don't speak English, and in an enclosed area. It was also noted that it is helpful when families get text reminders about events.

Future programs and activities

Community members indicated that they would like more childcare or before/after school programs. They also reported needing more support from one another in the form of specific groups such as “a twin mums’ group, an IVF support group”, or a “mums’ group” and support from professionals in areas such as transitioning children to school, enrolling in kinder, first aid training, as well as drop-in sessions and home visits. It was noted that mothers are only assigned to one mothers’ group (when they have their first child) but it would be beneficial to have a mother’s group for each child they have.

The community members also brought up a range of different activities and programs. These can be found in Table 12.

Table 12

Programs and activities community members would like to see in the future.

Program/Activities	Online responses	Kitchen tables
Childcare	7	
In program support from community members	3	1
In program professional support	3	1
Educational for parents and child	3	1
Indoor play centre	2	3
A Splash Park	2	2
Dancing/singing/gymnastics playing	2	2
Cooking	2	2
Fenced in areas	2	2
Hands on/outdoor play	2	
Holiday programs	2	
Parental study	2	
Swimming	1	1
Bonding activities for all members of the family	1	1
Playgroups		1
Fun and exciting things		1
Scavenger hunt		1
Community garden		1
A rodeo		1
Toddler/infant specific programs	1	
Kid friendly café	1	

In one kitchen table discussion, community members shared that programs don’t need to be large-scale or continuously available to be valuable. Even pop-up or one-off programs were seen as beneficial and appreciated, as they offer flexible opportunities for engagement without requiring a long-term commitment.

Child voice research

The aim of this research was to gain the children's voices on activities and things they like to do with their family and friends. Questions and methodology were workshopped by the CfC FP and Research team who decided on two appropriate questions. These were: *What do you love to do with people you like to play with?* and *What do you like to do with your family?*. There were 12 schools, 16 kindergartens and 4 playgroups who were asked to participate with one school and one playgroup who returned responses. Children had the chance to draw their responses with a space for annotation. There were 18 responses to the first question about friends and 29 for the second question about family.

What do you love to do with people you like to play with?

When asked what the children liked to do with their friends, they responded mostly saying they enjoy playing on playgrounds ($n = 7$), specifically on monkey bars, swings, slides and in the sandpit. They also noted they enjoy playing with toys ($n = 6$) and using their hands to create, build and cook. Active playing ($n = 3$) such as running around, playing active games, coming to playgroups and waterplay ($n = 3$) was also identified. Other things the children recognised they like to do with their friends included reading, watching movies, playing video games and blowing bubbles.

What do you like to do with your family?

Similarly, one of the children's favourite things to do with their family is to go to the park and play on playgrounds and in the sandpit as well as at play centres with slides and ball pits ($n = 14$). Additionally, the children identified they enjoy physical activities like swimming, fishing, walking, bike riding ($n = 6$) as well as creative activities like drawing, colouring, building Legos and reading ($n = 9$). Cooking and sharing meals with their families was another reoccurring theme ($n = 3$). An overarching theme throughout the interpreted responses was the quality time they enjoyed spending with their family and the connection made through bonding time ($n = 11$).

Conclusions

This Community Needs Analysis has provided key insights into the needs and wants of the Swan Hill LGA community with regard to programs, activities and services for young children as well as their parents and caregivers. This research will be utilised to aid the CfC Committee with its Strategic Plan and to guide Activity Work Plans.

The results highlighted the current programs and activities as assets within the community as they are educational, foster connection with other community members and services as well as encourage socialisation. Specific services such as MCH, the EYOH and programs such as playgroups were greatly appreciated. The staff's level of motivation and determination is highly valued by the community including service collaborations.

It was evident that the community has an absence of specific support services such as specialist services and allied health services. There is also a need for more culturally and linguistically appropriate services and programs. Other recurring barriers and gaps across both the stakeholder and community surveys include the lack of transport, specific location of programs, lack of awareness and engagement, financial costs, and program times.

The children's drawings indicate they enjoy activities where they can make a connection with their family and friends. Specifically, by being active through playing on playgrounds, with water, with toys, swimming, walking/running around outside, or by being creative through arts and crafts, cooking, or building Legos. At the centre of their drawings was an overarching theme of play and quality time.

Future programs and activities suggested by the stakeholders include more organised social events, playgroups, parenting support and childcare. While community members also identified the need for more child/after/before school care, and parental support as well as activities such as dancing, singing, gymnastics, cooking, and outdoor activities. Holiday programs and new environments for their child to play in, such as a splash park and an indoor play centre, were commonly mentioned to help combat the heat.

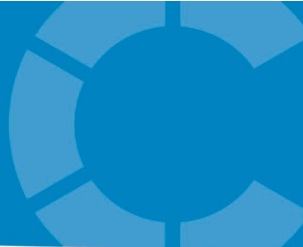
Recommendations

The below recommendations are based on the findings of community outreach explored through the online surveys, kitchen tables and child voice drawings. It is recognised that the community is best placed to recognise the strengths and difficulties as well as the solutions for community. The recommendations have been separated into recommendations for CfC and recommendations that are outside the scope of the CfC initiative.

Recommendations within the CfC Scope

It is recommended for CfC to:

1. Continue to fund programs such as playgroups that are highly valued by stakeholders and community for their contribution in creating connection and encouraging socialising between children and their caregivers. In general, the community highlighted organising pro-social events that include the whole family.
2. Continue to utilise stakeholder collaboration between services and programs supporting children and families.
3. Maintain free-of-charge programs and activities that could otherwise create a barrier for financially struggling families.

- 
4. Ensure events/programs/activities are held in a location that is child friendly (e.g. lots of shade, fenced in, or inside if necessary), as well as somewhere that is central and easily accessible for the community. In addition to this, it is recommended that CfC offer transport to programs/events where possible.
 5. Engage in more promotion to increase awareness and knowledge of activities and programs in the community. This could be through the EYOH, social media such as Facebook pages and Instagram, newspapers, or at other social events etc. More awareness and information can also help combat any fear families may have to attend.
 6. Increase efforts to connect with the culturally and linguistically diverse communities through becoming more language inclusive and adequately reflect their needs. Specifically, more targeted education and support for families whose first language is not English.
 7. Offer a mix of program formats, including regular sessions and flexible options such as pop-up or one-off events. These should be scheduled at varied times (e.g. mornings, afternoons, weekends) to accommodate different working hours and routines. Flexibility in timing increases accessibility and allows more families—especially those with limited availability—to participate in early years programs and activities.
 8. Offer a range of programs and activities in terms of age and development. That is, some programs that are age specific and targeted, while some that involve a diverse age range for inclusion of the whole family.
 9. Ensure that there is professional support for parental concerns within the programs. This could be done through occasional pop-ins from various service providers. Additionally, creating structured opportunities for peer connection and shared experiences within the group setting can help families feel more supported, reduce isolation, and foster a sense of community.
 10. Organise events that are educational and encourage children to be physically active or creative. This could be events that include dancing, singing, playing games, reading, cooking, or creating. Events that encourage outdoor play were also suggested.
 11. Organise events/programs/activities that are in line with the voices of the children. That is, activities such as but not limited to playing on the playground, with toys, going to the park, cooking, waterplay, watching movies, swimming, bike riding, drawing, building Legos etc. These should be activities that foster quality time and connection with friends and family.

Recommendations outside the CfC Scope

It is recommended for the Swan Hill LGA that there is:

1. An expansion of local availability of specialists (e.g. paediatricians) and allied health services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and mental health support. This could be achieved through visiting practitioners, telehealth options, or establishing dedicated hubs within the community. Additionally, introduce strategies to ease service demand, such as mobile outreach teams, shared service models, and better triage systems to prioritise urgent cases. Increasing capacity through flexible delivery models and targeted funding can also help address current waitlists.
2. Improvements in infrastructure for all-weather outdoor activities and ensuring that outdoor program spaces and play areas include adequate shade and shelter to protect children and families during hot or rainy weather. Investing in weather-proof infrastructure will support year-round participation.
3. Establish a community splash park or water play area as a low-cost, family-friendly activity that promotes physical play and offers relief during hot weather—especially valuable in rural or regional areas with limited recreational options.

- 
4. Develop an indoor play centre equipped with soft play equipment, ball pits, and sensory areas to provide safe and stimulating environments for young children—especially useful during extreme weather or for neurodiverse children who benefit from controlled play settings.
 5. Advocate for better public transport routes and frequency to reduce travel barriers and enable families, especially those without private vehicles, to access services, programs, and recreational facilities more easily.
 6. Increase the availability of childcare, before-school, and after-school care services to meet community demand. This includes hiring more qualified staff and opening new facilities or extending hours at existing centres.
 7. Implement strategies to recruit, train, and retain early childhood professionals. Support staff development through upskilling opportunities, mentoring, and professional recognition to ensure high-quality service delivery.
 8. Secure more consistent and sustainable funding to support program delivery, staffing, outreach, and infrastructure improvements. This will help meet demand and ensure long-term impact in early childhood development.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021) Australian Census Data <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/SAL22860>

Australian Early Development Census. (2021). <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data-explorer/?id=181509>
<https://phidu.torrens.edu.au/social-health-atlases/data-archive/data-archive-social-health-atlases-of-australia#social-health-atlas-of-australia-data-released-march-april-june-september-december-2024-by-population-health-area-local-government-area-and-primary-health-network>

Torrens University. (2024). Social Health Atlases of Australia. PHIDU

Victoria Police. (2024). Crime Statistics Agency Victoria, Family Violence Dashboard by Local Government Area. <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/family-violence-data/family-violence-dashboard>