



Exploring care and education in Cohuna Final Report

A group of five children are captured in a traditional Indigenous Australian dance performance. They are in a wooded area with sunlight filtering through the trees. Two boys on the left are shirtless, wearing green headbands and white body paint. Two girls on the right wear black long-sleeved shirts and blue skirts with green sashes. A girl in the center wears a blue long-sleeved shirt and a green sash. All children have white body paint on their faces and chests. They are in various dance poses, with arms raised and hands clasped.

Acknowledgement of Country

Gannawarra Shire acknowledges the Barapa Barapa, Yorta Yorta and Wamba Wamba people as the traditional owners of the land now known as Gannawarra.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge their rich culture and connection to Country.

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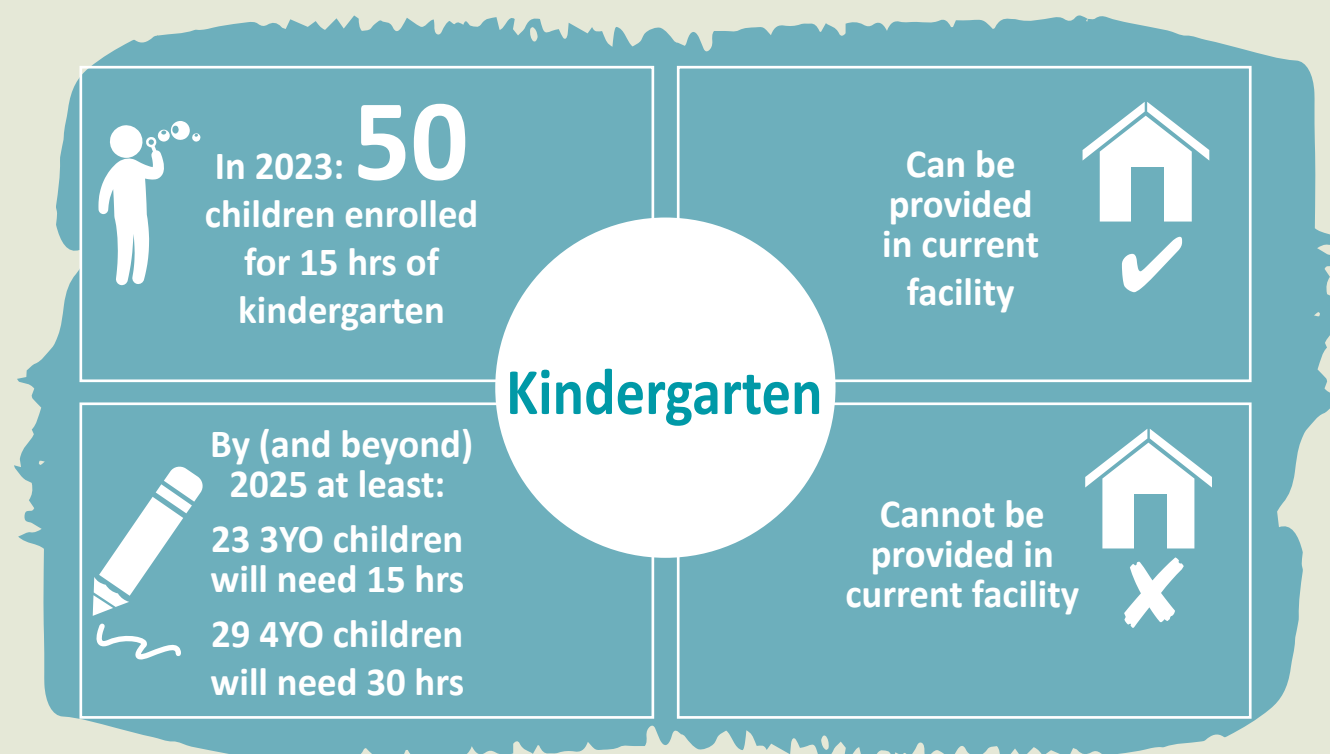
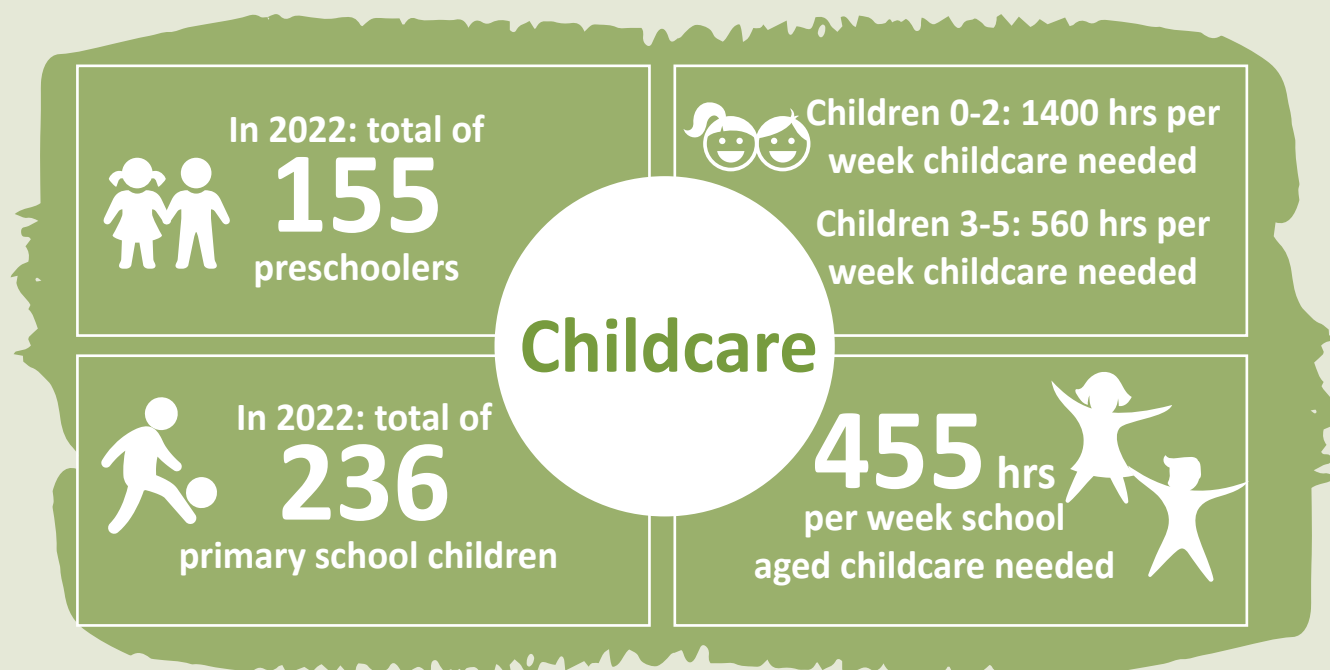
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Cohuna, Leitchville and Surrounds District community – what reforms are impacting on them, who are the children and families and what early childhood education and care services do they need?

A. Visual Snapshots

Quick statistical overview



Children
have poor
development



Part of a
disadvantaged
region

The District

(Cohuna,
Leitchville and
surrounds)



92
single
families

430



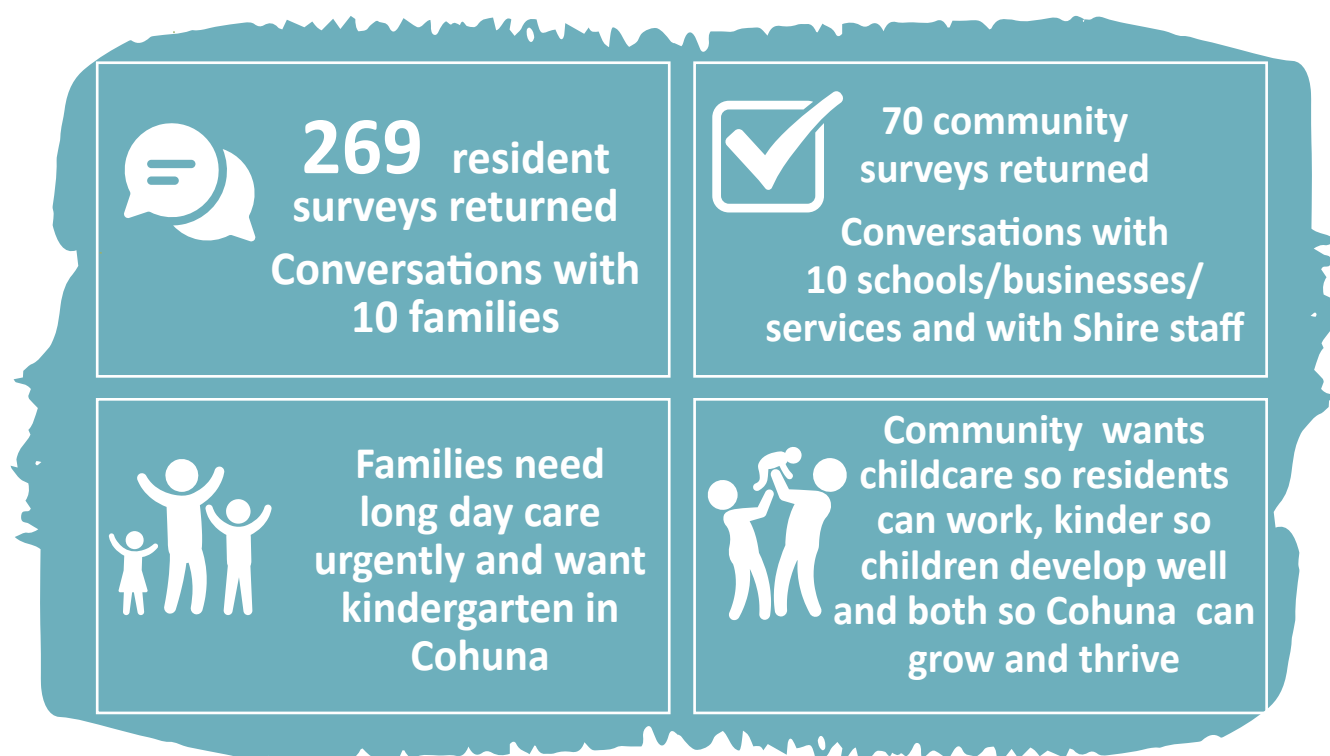
locals provide
unpaid childcare



High child
protection
notifications



Quick consultation overview



Quick model overview

- Commencement of model implementation subject to Department of Education and Training/Gannawarra Shire Council joint planning process (e.g., Kindergarten Infrastructure Planning Process -KISP)
- Childcare place allocation dependent on enrolments, staff availability and staged to meet required staff/child ratios

Room 1: Multi-age group room	Outside kinder care 3/4YO >33 children – start with smaller numbers
	3YO kinder: > 33 children
Room 2 Pre prep room	4YO kinder (pre-prep) >33 children
	Before/After school care >30 children – start with smaller numbers
Room 3 Childcare room	childcare 0-2: >16 children – start with smaller numbers
Room 4 MCH office	As scheduled
Room 5 Sensory multipurpose room	Specialist visits/sensory room/MCH &Supported Playgroups/meetings >15 children

B. Executive Summary

This report documents the “Exploring Care and Education in Cohuna” Project. It provides a detailed overview of identified and projected need for childcare in Cohuna, Leitchville and Surrounds District (The District) and for kindergarten in Cohuna. It examines recent key local, state and national policy, socio demographic data and reports on an extensive consultation process with local residents, schools, service providers and businesses. It provides details of a potential, sustainable model for early childhood education and care that meets the defined need and policy environment. Appendix 1 provides all the details of the potential model. Appendix 2 provides all the needs analysis information. Key findings from the project are summarised below.

Government policy supports strengthening early childhood education and care for The District:

Early childhood education and care is a major focus for policy makers and governments in Australia, as there is now irrefutable evidence that investment in the early years has long term benefits for children, families, communities and the economy. The Australian government is responsible for childcare. It is now providing cheaper childcare for families and large-scale workforce reforms. The Victorian government is responsible for kindergarten. It is rolling out free kindergarten for families with 15 hours weekly for three-year-old children by 2029 and a 30 hours weekly of “pre-prep” kindergarten for four-year-olds, 2025 - 2032. It is investing more than ever before in early childhood facilities with a focus on funding co-located services on or adjacent to schools. These policy reforms will have long term benefits and lift educational, employment, economic and social outcomes. However, there are short term challenges facing the early childhood sector nationwide. There is a critical workforce shortage, thin markets, high fees, ageing facilities and viability issues for service providers. These are often compounded in rural areas. The recent report “Enabling Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Rural Areas”¹ provides an excellent insight into the issues facing rural councils, focusing on Gannawarra Shire, Buloke and Swan Hill. Gannawarra Shire Council is in a good position to overcome these challenges. It can become a leader in pre-prep rollout, governance and policy reforms. It already has the market share of early childhood services and can move forward and take advantage of new funding opportunities in a non-competitive environment. Local government in Victoria is a major early childhood education and care provider, infrastructure owner and planner. It is often the only provider in a rural municipality, giving local residents the services they need, to participate fully in education, work and community life. Gannawarra Shire is the only provider and employer of early childhood education and care in the municipality. It provides childcare in Kerang, family day care across the

municipality and 15 hours weekly of three- and four-year-old kindergarten in Kerang, Leitchville, Koondrook and Cohuna. Whilst it faces many challenges, there are positive signs that the reforms may position the Shire as an employer of choice, an early implementer of pre-prep and an affordable and viable service provider for the future.

Cohuna is central for ‘The District’ and for the municipality:

Cohuna is the major town within the District and is an education, health, industry and business centre. It has a high employment rate and a growing population of children aged 0-11 (17% growth between 2016 and 2021). Recently, it was demonstrated how important Cohuna is, in continually providing education, business, health and community services, when Kerang was disconnected through the flood crisis.

Local children, however, experience high developmental vulnerabilities compared with shire, state, regional and national levels. This concerning developmental gap needs to be addressed.

A kindergarten crisis looms:

In Cohuna, fifteen hours weekly of kindergarten can only just be provided now - for the 50 three- and four-year-old enrolled children in the aging, standalone one room kindergarten facility. However, when four-year-old kindergarten extends to 30 hours weekly post 2025 (pre-prep), the facility will not meet the new requirements for the projected 53 children who will need it. There is no space to add on an additional room, without demolishing the maternal and child health or the Shire’s service centre. Whilst there are kindergarten vacancies in Leitchville, there is a clear preference of Cohuna families to access kindergarten in Cohuna, so their children can seamlessly transition on to their local school. Joint planning with Department of Education and the Shire is vital to ensure that demand for pre-prep places can be met.

¹ Enabling Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Rural Areas, Final Report, Regional Development Victoria for the Loddon Mallee RDA Committee, Loddon Mallee Regional Partnership and Mallee Regional Partnership, 25 June 2022

There is a longstanding, urgent childcare crisis:

There is no childcare centre and only a limited, small supply of family day care for The District. The Mitchell Institute has identified it as an area of “Childcare Desert².” There are 155 children aged 0-4 (pre-schoolers) and 236 children aged 5-11 (primary school children)³, who have little or no access to the childcare that families need. This equates to demand of 2,000 hours per week for pre-schoolers and 460 hours per week for primary school children⁴. Even with family day care, at least 80 children and their families are missing out every day on the childcare they need. Once 30 hours of pre-prep is introduced this may be partly alleviated, but only for the four year old age cohort.

Community consultation confirms the childcare need:

The case for childcare in Cohuna was very strongly made through the consultation process. This included through surveys and one to one discussion with families, schools, businesses, service providers, residents and council staff. 269 resident and 70 community surveys were returned – an excellent response - despite the flood crisis.

The community has an ongoing and vigilant interest in early childhood education and care provision. Families strongly emphasised the need for childcare, 8am – 6 pm daily, for pre-schoolers and primary school children, to be based in Cohuna. Ideally it should be provided immediately, but ultimately permanently, in an integrated facility with support services, maternal and child health, kindergarten and childcare for pre-schoolers and school aged children. Families emphasised they are suffering from unsustainable work, travel and childcare arrangements, and many are at breaking point. Businesses, schools and service providers confirmed that the lack of childcare for locals is the major issue for the sustainability and prosperity of the town and that this has been the case for many years. They are regularly losing skills, employees and business as families move out of ‘The District’ to towns that can provide the childcare they need. Prospective employees don’t move to the area when they realise there is no childcare. The situation is critical.

Some “verbatim” comments have been included in the consultation part of the needs analysis report (Appendix 2). These provide an insight into the on the ground experiences of residents, businesses and service providers. Council staff confirmed the need for childcare in Cohuna. Existing childcare has extensive waiting lists, and they can see the impact that hours of travel and balancing informal childcare arrangements has on the health and wellbeing of local children and their families. Council staff also stressed the challenges of supplying a stable, sufficient early childhood workforce base.

Residents, schools, services, business all expressed commitment to actively supporting any initiatives that would solve the childcare crisis for Cohuna.

The case for developing new models of early childcare and education as a priority is clear:

In summary, there is an established, quantified, and qualified need for childcare and future kindergarten provision. It must be urgently addressed for the benefit of children, communities and to meet the requirements of government directions.

Whilst childcare needs are immediate, the demand for pre-prep places chronologically falls close behind. There is an opportunity for supply solutions for these two service demands to be planned and implemented together. Given the research and consultation undertaken in this project, Gannawarra Shire Council is in a good position to work with Department of Education and Training and lead implementation of pre-prep roll out and childcare provision for ‘The District’.

There is no short term childcare solution:

Considerable thought was put into finding an immediate childcare solution to ease the pressure. However, any centre-based childcare or family day care options investigated would not suit the needs of families, nor enable employment/contracting of suitable staff.

² Childcare Deserts and Oases – how accessible is childcare in Australia

³ Based on 2021 census data and birth notifications

⁴ Australian government utilisation trend data

An integrated facility is the best solution:

Current policy supports the development of integrated service provision for children and young families. This can most easily be done in a “one stop shop” facility that has integration at the heart of its policy and practice. Research unequivocally determines that the best outcomes for children happen when universal platforms (maternal and child health, kindergarten, and school) are linked⁵, and additional supports (such as family support, allied health, and child protection) are built around them. The model outlined supports current evidence, government policy trends and Gannawarra Shire’s corporate directions. It is the preferred model identified by local residents, businesses, schools, and service providers. Importantly, it positions itself well for the impending pre-prep reform due to roll out from 2025 and government funding priorities.

A longer term well planned early childhood education and care model—planning must start now:

Appendix 1 outlines the detail for an operating model called the “Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Centre”, to be located at the Cohuna Consolidated School. It will comprise one 33 place pre-prep room that can also be used for after school care; one 33 place multi-age room for 3 year-old kindergarten, and outside kindergarten hours childcare; one 16 place childcare room for 0-2 year olds; one Maternal and Child Health office and one 15 place sensory multipurpose room for playgroups, ancillary services and meetings.

It aims to meet, as realistically as possible, the identified childcare demands for The District, the kindergarten demands for Cohuna for 2025 and beyond, and the support needs of families.

There could not be a better time to be constructing such a centre, as there is capital funding available for facilities for pre-prep and including childcare, where there is none. In order to maximise on these opportunities – quick and early engagement with the school, DET and VSBA is essential. A detailed planning, construction and costing is needed using Shire/VSBA building and planning expertise. A formal School/Shire “Letter of Intent” and a Community/School/Shire Governance Group will position the Shire well as a frontrunner in any grants application process. Planning the facility is dependent on outcomes of any required Shire/Department of Education joint planning processes (Such as the Kindergarten Infrastructure Services Plan)

Growing Gannawarra in Practice:

The model aligns with the Growing Gannawarra 2021-2025 Council Plan in its priorities of financial sustainability and community partnerships. It enables the Shire to be a leader across the region in integrated service provision and pedagogy. It creates the opportunity to demonstrate active governance by establishing a Growing Gannawarra Early Years Governance Group. This group can support the Shire as the centre is planned and developed by building on the expertise, energy and enthusiasm of local schools, businesses, and service providers.

Financial and staffing sustainability is key:

The model is realistic rather than ambitious. To ensure success and sustainability, it proposes childcare fees set at government subsidy rates and encourages rigorous planning and monitoring of utilisation – with awareness that every place used generates \$30k income p.a. or loses \$30k if not used. The financial model should ensure that the centre can operate at cost neutral once it is established and operating at 85% capacity. Fees will still be affordable for families with the new childcare subsidy rates introduced by the Australian government, and free kindergarten introduced by the Victorian Government.

Childcare places need to be allocated according to enrolment and staff availability. To ensure it can operate from day 1, it recommends commencing with small numbers, then building up in stages according to the required educator to staff child ratios. This can assist the governance group to support the Shire to build a quality, enduring, staff base – working on “grow your own” practical workforce solutions.

“There will be a focus on ‘grow your own’ as a practical workforce solution”

⁵ https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research-projects/Integrated_child_and_family_services/

The Cohuna Consolidated School is the best site: A number of sites were investigated for the proposed centre.

- The current kindergarten site is not big enough. It would not be practical for school aged care and is not a preferred option.
- St Mary's Primary School has a block of land available. However, it is unlikely there is adequate space for fencing, grounds, the facility and car parking. Traffic management could prove difficult. Preliminary indications are that the Sandhurst Parish is not supportive. It may be interested only if it included management of both Leitchville and Cohuna kindergartens. Further investigation into this site may be warranted but it is not a preferred option.
- Westbrook Street / King Edward Street blocks. This land has kindly been offered by Mawson's Concrete and Quarries. Initial inspection of this site indicates it is a large site that would be suitable for an integrated facility. However, it may not be the preferred option. It is in an industrial area, not close to either school so it would not meet the government criteria for funding an integrated centre

- Cohuna Consolidated School has some large spaces available and is the preferred option. One available space is adjacent to the road and close to existing plumbing infrastructure. There appears to be more than enough space for the facility, playgrounds, car parking, and ease of access. There is another large area in the school grounds that could also be suitable. The school has indicated it would be interested in further discussion.

Funding for capital works is available:

The Victorian Schools Building Authority (VSBA) is rolling out modular facilities – including kindergarten rooms, childcare, maternal and child health and consulting areas – quickly, efficiently and at little cost. Generous co-contribution capital grants are also available for building new integrated centres. Local community groups, businesses and services are willing to contribute funding.





C. Recommendations

Gannawarra Shire Council immediately:

1.	Commences planning for the Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Centre as outlined in the detailed Model Report, in partnership with Department of Education and Training. The aim should be implementation for the 2025 school/kindergarten year, subject to the outcome of any required DET/Shire joint planning processes.
2.	Works closely with the Cohuna Consolidated School Council and Principal on the development of the proposed model at an agreed site at the school– initiated through a formalised Letter of Intent.
3.	Meets with DET, Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA), Cohuna Consolidated School Principal and President to progress developing the centre as a VSBA modular facility with 2x33 place kindergarten/childcare rooms, one x 16 place childcare room, a maternal and child health consulting room and a 15 place room for supported playgroups/professional consultations and meetings.
4.	Develops detailed design and construction plans for the facility in consultation with VSBA.
5.	Develops a “Growing Gannawarra Early Childhood Reference Group” with parent, community, business, school and Council representation. Initially to support the planning, development and management of the Centre and ultimately to lead the region in innovative early childhood governance, integration, pedagogy, pre-prep and workforce initiatives.
6.	Ensures its enrolment policy enables small, realistic start-up numbers, with childcare places allocated according to staff availability - then increasing to full capacity in stages according to enrolments and the required educator to staff child ratios.

D. Meeting immediate childcare demands for The District

Considerable thought has been put into developing an immediate solution to the urgent childcare situation for families. Increasing Family Day Care (FDC) places could potentially provide some relief as it is a model that provides care for children aged 0-11 and does not require facility construction. The Shire is continually working on increasing FDC Educators in Cohuna. However, there is a national decline in the FDC Educator base. The FDC sector relies on an aging group of contractors, many of whom are not interested in undertaking increasing regulatory and curriculum requirements. FDC educators also suffered through inequitable government support through the COVID pandemic, and many have recently left the sector. Whilst increasing FDC Educators could partially relieve the pressure, it is not anticipated that increasing FDC in Cohuna could possibly meet the high childcare demands identified.

Any centre-based childcare options investigated, using the current kindergarten facility, would not suit the needs of families, nor enable employment of suitable staff.

For example, using the existing kindergarten facility to provide an earlier starting time (8.30 am) may allow for wraparound childcare after kindergarten. This model is likely to fail as it would be impractical for families and the Shire:

- It could **only provide care for kindergarten aged children** after their kindergarten session – not for the whole family,
- It could **not provide any childcare children 0-2 years**, as the facility would not meet regulatory requirements for this age group.
- The facility **would not be ideal** for school aged children's needs and transport from school would be an issue,
- It would be **extremely difficult** for the Shire to attract/recruit/maintain additional staff for after kinder care sessions of two or four and a half hours.

Whilst the immediate childcare needs of families are heartfelt – valuable shire and community resources could be wasted investing in interim solutions that could fail.

It is clear that a longer term, well planned and executed effort is required, particularly as the 30-hour pre -prep kindergarten requirement looms, and the need for an enduring, sustainable childcare service has been proven to be needed. The next section of this report outlines a potential phased in model for such a service.

APPENDIX 1: Model Report details

1. Meeting kindergarten/childcare needs long term

An integrated approach supports transitions from birth through to primary school years

Current policy supports the development of integrated service provision for children and young families. This can most easily be done in a “one stop shop” facility that has integration at the heart of its policy and practice. Research unequivocally determines that the best outcomes for children happen when universal platforms (maternal and child health, kindergarten, and school) are linked⁶, and additional supports (such as family support, allied health, and child protection) are built around them. This makes the whole early childhood system friendlier and easy to use. Important early childhood transitions are more seamless for children and their families. Professional collaboration is enabled and enhanced, allowing emerging tools, such as [Child Link](#) to strengthen teamwork for the benefit of children and families.

The Victorian Government, Department of Education and Training (DET) has a longstanding policy commitment to locating kindergartens in or adjacent to school sites.⁷ This has galvanised into the impending “pre prep” reform, with the preference to build kindergartens on school sites and the ministerial portfolio now named Ministry of Early Childhood and Pre-Prep⁸.

Childcare (and playgroups) are core components of this integrated system and must be included. Whilst not considered universal platforms— the families using childcare (and playgroups) are the same families attending maternal and child health, kindergarten, and school.

The proposed model needs to meet the early childhood education, care, and support needs of all families with children 0-11, no matter what age bracket these children fall in:

- Local families need care for all their children, regardless of age. The 17% growth of this age cohort between the 2016 and 2021 speaks for itself and was solidly confirmed in the needs analysis and consultation process. The strongest childcare demand is our youngest (under two years) and oldest (primary school) cohorts, so these age groups must be included.
- The greatest kindergarten demand comes from the impending 30 hours pre-prep program and the inability of the current facility to meet future demand.
- Many children and families need additional support from time to time as they progress through the child development years. This should be provided as easily as possible in a non-stigmatised, accessible way.

The integrated approach in practice

The proposed model is the “Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Centre.” It aims to meet, as realistically as possible, the identified childcare demands for The District, the kindergarten demands for Cohuna for 2023 and beyond, and the support needs of families. It will provide maternal and child health, kindergarten and childcare in the one facility. It includes a shared, child friendly “sensory multipurpose room” for visiting services such as child protection and speech therapy and can accommodate key programs including playgroups and first parents’ groups. This room can also act as a staff/governance meeting room. The model supports current evidence, government policy trends and Gannawarra Shire’s corporate directions. It is the preferred model identified by local residents, businesses, schools and service providers. (Northern District Community Health has indicated interest in being part of the model, as have all three Cohuna schools and leading businesses). Importantly, it positions itself well for the impending pre-prep reform due to roll out from 2025.

NB: This report does not detail building, planning, construction, furnishing and costings of building a new centre. This requires specific shire building and planning expertise - once the model has been agreed on. It will require early engagement with the Victorian Schools Building Authority (VSBA) for planning and funding support.

⁶ https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research-projects/Integrated_child_and_family_services/

⁷ <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/capitalprogram.aspx> and <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/parents/childergarten/allaboutkinder.pdf>

⁸ https://m.vic.gov.au/contactsandservices/directory/?ea0_lfz149_120.&roleWithSubordinates&3f21261a-764e-4486-a0f5-8142cb99132f

2. Estimated projected demand

It is estimated that in 2023 there will be 155 children aged 0-4⁹ and 236 children aged 5-11 in The District¹⁰. Table 1 below provides predicted service demand. This is not based on actual numbers of children in each age cohort, but rather a conservatively estimate from kindergarten enrolments, FDC supply, 2021 census data, birth notifications and government childcare utilisation trends. (Refer Appendix 2, Needs Analysis Details.)

Table 1: Predicted kindergarten and childcare demand*

Year	Kindergarten 4-year-old: places needed	Childcare 4YO outside pre- prep hours: places needed	Kindergarten 3-Year-old: places needed	Childcare 3YO outside kinder hours: places needed	Childcare 0-2: places needed	School aged childcare: places needed
2025	22 (30hrs pw)	10 (20hrs pw)	29 (15 hrs pw)	13 (35 hrs pw)	26 (50hrs pw)	35 (12.5 hrs pw)
2026	29(30 hrs pw)	13 (20 hrs pw)	23 (15 hrs pw)	10(35 hrs pw)	26 (50hrs pw)	35(12.5 hrs pw)

*NB: Demand for childcare in The District may well be higher than these estimates due to:

- Very modest estimates of outside kinder care - based on parent preferences in surveys and Government utilisation trends
- families who use informal childcare now taking up formal childcare if it were available in The District,
- comparatively higher employment rates,
- families limiting their work because there is no childcare, the 19% growth trend for Cohuna children 0-4 and 17% growth trend for children 5-11 identified in Appendix 1, Table 5 of the needs analysis report.



⁹ 2021 Census + birth notifications adjusted (Refer Table 4 and 6, Needs Analysis Report)

¹⁰ 2021 Census + birth notifications adjusted (Refer Table 4 and 6, Needs Analysis Report)

3. What might an operational model look like?

It is recommended that the operating model commences for the 2025 kindergarten/school year as part of the initial rollout of pre-prep.

- At full capacity the centre will cater for 66 places for children aged 0-4 (1:11 child/staff ratio), 16 places for children aged 0-2 (1:4 child/staff ratio) and 30 places for school aged children (1:15 child/staff ratio).

(Refer Table 2 for operational model details.)

Table 2: Cohuna Integrated early childhood centre operating model 2025 implementation: when pre-prep rollout is in place

Room	Times	Monday	Tuesday	Wed	Thurs	Friday
Room 1: Multi-age group room	8am -6 pm	Outside kinder care 3/4YO >33 children***	Outside kinder care 3/4YO >33 children***	Outside kinder care 3/4YO >33 children***	Outside kinder care 3/4YO >33 children***	Outside kinder care 3/4YO >33 children***
Room 1 Multi-age group room*	8.30am – 4 pm (7.5 hrs)	3YO kinder: > 33 children		3YO kinder: > 33 children		
Room 2 Pre prep room**	9am -3pm	4YO kinder (pre prep) >33 children	4YO kinder (pre prep) >33 children	4YO kinder (pre prep) >33 children	4YO kinder (pre prep) >33 children	4YO kinder (pre prep) >33 children
Room 2 Pre prep room*	3.30pm -6pm	After school care >30 children***	After school care >30 children***	After school care >30 children***	After school care >30 children***	After school care >30 children***
Room 3 Childcare room	8am -6pm	childcare 0-2: >16 children***	childcare 0-2: > 16 children***	childcare 0-2: > 16 children***	childcare 0-2: >16children***	childcare 0-2: >16 children***
Room 4 MCH office	MCH: KAS visits	As scheduled	As scheduled	As scheduled	As scheduled	As scheduled
Room 5 Sensory multipurpose	Specialist visits/ playgroups/ meetings >15 children	Specialist visits/sensory room >15 children	MCH/ Supported Playgroups	Specialist visits/sensory room	Specialist visits/sensory room	Specialist visits/ sensory room

* Multi-age group room can be used for outside kinder care and include any overflow from 0-2 room

**School aged childcare could operate in pre prep after 4-year-old kindergarten (pre-prep). Before school care could also operate from this room, and/or in Multi-age group room

***Smaller start-up numbers with allocation of places subject to staff availability and increased in stages to meet required child/staff requirements

4. A purpose-built facility

The Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Centre will be a new facility that can provide:

- **Room 1: Multi-age room:** 33 place room for three-year-old children (15 hours per week) and outside kinder care for three- and four-year-olds. A concertina door between Room 1 and 2 would be ideal to enable flexible childcare arrangements including family groupings.
- **Room 2: Pre-prep room:** 33-place room for four-year-old kindergarten (30 hrs per week pre-prep) and after school care*. A concertina door in the middle of the room could separate out kinder preparation area and after school quiet indoor activities.

*It should be noted that school aged children have specific needs regarding equipment, space and programming. It is envisaged that the program would only need to use the pre-prep room for quiet activities. It could use the kitchen area for after school cooking/snacks and the school playground for recreational activities.

- **Room 3: Childcare room:** 16 place room for children 0-2 - with a middle concertina door for separating out rest activities. A concertina door between Room 2 and 3 would also be ideal to enable flexible childcare arrangements including family groupings.
- **Room 4: MCH Consultation room:** for parent Key Ages and Stages visits.
- **Room 5: Sensory multipurpose room:** for up to 15 children for support services, consultations/staff/governance meetings and MCH/Supported Playgroups.

NB: Whilst the facility will have capacities as outlined above, allocation of childcare places needs to be done according to staff availability and increased in stages to meet required child/staff ratios.

5. Planning the facility

The Shire has the expertise to oversee, plan, construct and seek funds to develop Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Centre. Early engagement with Department of Education and Training is essential to progress the development of the facility and would be subject to the outcomes of any required joint Shire/DET planning processes (such as the Kindergarten Infrastructure Services Plan – or KISP.) The Shire, in partnership with DET are in the best position to guide and advise on requirements, plans, funding, and opportunities.

6. Funding the facility

1 Modular Kindergarten Program

Ideally the Shire should maximise the opportunity to work with the Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA) and its [Modular Kindergarten Program](#). This may provide funding for all or part of the facility. The modular option is a cost-effective construction option that is gaining popularity and should be vigorously pursued in the immediate future. Architects have designed 3 templated floorplans to suit the needs of most kindergartens. By making the modules offsite, there is less disruption for kindergartens and their communities. Children can get access to their new high-quality learning environments more quickly, sometimes in less than half the time of a traditional build. Construction time, costs and safety risks are reduced. Grants for a modular kindergarten can fund a templated one-, two- or three-room kindergarten building and outdoor learning area(s). A carpark may also be included but is dependent on space and considered on a case-by-case basis. MCH, childcare facilities, consultation rooms can also form part of the modular building, working with VSBA.

2 New Integrated Facility Capacity Building Program

Funding of est. \$2m is available through the VSBA's [Building Block Grants](#) program for Integrated Children's Centres - for new community hubs, bringing together a range of professional services to deliver education, care, health and support services to children and their families.¹¹ Successful applications favour integration, location on school sites, access for all abilities, environmental sustainability, improving access to the community and being ready for construction.

Early engagement with Department of Education and Training, the VSBA and the school (if the proposed site is a school site) is a high priority to progress the development of the centre. Exploration of all funding streams should be pursued vigorously. As well as the VSBA - [Australian Government Grants](#), the Coleman Foundation and other non-government organisations could be investigated.

¹¹ Integrated Children's Centres funded through Building Blocks must provide or intend to provide:

- a funded kindergarten program for three and four-year-old children. This can be sessional and/or integrated with long day care.
- must be a new building and cannot be an extension or refurbishment of an existing facility.
- long day care (unless there is no projected demand in the local area).
- Maternal and Child Health services.
- allied health services for early years (e.g., early childhood intervention services).
- family services.
- flexible, multi-purpose spaces and other services that meet the needs of the local community, including one or more of the following services: supported playgroups or community parent-led playgroups; parenting groups or programs; occasional care; family day care program coordination; community meeting space, outside school hours care; or adult education programs, counselling services.

7. Costing the construction

It is difficult to estimate costs of construction at this point in the project. A concept design, site determination and detailed design and construction costs are needed to determine the potential investment required. However, some examples of costs for similar types of services are:

Modular kindergartens

- \$1.2M for the Wycheproof Early Learning Hub: funded through VSBA, Drought Communities Program and community fundraising, this joint project in partnership with Buloke Shire Council provides a 22-place kindergarten room, a 12-place long-day-care room, a maternal child health centre, a nature-based outdoor learning area and onsite car parking.
- VSBA built a new modular building and improved the outdoor play space in Beaufort for the preparation for the roll-out of subsidised kindergarten for three-year-olds. The building provides families with an additional 33 kindergarten places and helps cater for population growth in the community.

Integrated Children's Centres

- \$2.5M for an upgrade of the Chiltern Community Centre building, located opposite the Chiltern Kindergarten, to create the Chiltern Early Years Hub. This project renovated the community building to include two children rooms, a sleeping room and amenities. The project will provide long day care to children aged six weeks to four years of age, and will allow the kindergarten program to increase its hours and days of operation
- \$4.7M for construction of the Merrifield Community Centre in Hume City Council. The centre will have 2 preschool rooms, allowing it to offer 66 funded kindergarten places for 3 and 4-year-olds. It will also include maternal and child health services and consulting suites for specialist services. Multipurpose activity rooms will support community activities, such as playgroups, training and education, and community meetings.
- \$2.5M for Kalkee Rd Community Children's Hub (2016/2017 Horsham Rural City Council budget). The hub provides 3-year-old and 4-year-old kindergarten, after kindergarten care, Maternal and Child Health, supported playgroup, immunisation, toy library and early intervention.
- \$7M for The Maiden Gully Early Years Hub, City of Bendigo, to include a kindergarten, childcare for children aged birth to five years old, allied health services and medical practitioners, with an enrolment capacity of 59 children.



8. Siting the facility

A number of potential sites were examined:

Modular kindergartens

- **Existing Cohuna Preschool site.** The current site houses the maternal and child health and a single room kindergarten licensed for 30 places. This is not the preferred site:
 - The current building is old and the site too small to build two kindergarten rooms let alone childcare or support services for children and families.
 - The maternal and child health building and kindergarten are not physically linked.
 - Demolition/reconstruction of a new site could pose contamination/asbestos issues. It would also mean that there would be no service offering during construction.
 - It does not align with the latest policy and funding opportunities that favour integrated early childhood education and care on/in close proximity to school sites
- **St Mary's Primary School site.** A vacant block next door to the school, owned by the Parish has potential. Careful measurement would be needed in the first instance, to ensure it could fit the indoor, outdoor and parking space requirements of the proposed model:

It may be possible to develop a partnership with the Sandhurst Catholic Early Childhood Education & Care Limited (SCECE&C)¹² which has responsibility for early childhood education and care in the Sandhurst Diocese – including St Mary's Cohuna.

For example - the new Echuca West Community Children's hub is a partnership project between Shire of Campaspe and the SCECE&C. Campaspe Shire will provide the land,

with SCECEC to build and operate the community hub which aims to provide a kindergarten, children's services centre, maternal and child health rooms and support visiting allied health services, creating an education precinct in Echuca's west. NB: Shire of Campaspe does not operate kindergartens – so this governance model works well for this municipality. It appears the Diocese would only be interested in an early years hub in Cohuna if it included Cohuna and Leitchville kindergartens - not just childcare. Careful consideration would be needed by the Shire for this consideration. It has the potential to reduce the economies of scale that come with operating all kindergartens and would create staffing competition with the Kerang Centre. It also would create competition for workforce. To date, the Diocese has so far (or committed to) the construction and management of early years hubs in Bendigo, Echuca West and Nagambie.

- **Westbrook Street / King Edward Street blocks.** This land has kindly been offered by Mawson's Concrete and Quarries. Initial inspection of this site indicates it is a large site that would be suitable for an integrated facility. However, it may not be the preferred option. It is in an industrial area, not close to either school so it would not meet the government criteria for funding an integrated centre.
- **Cohuna consolidated primary school.** Preliminary inspection of the school indicates there is at least two areas suitable for siting the model. The preferred area is adjacent to the road and positioned between the oval and covered in outdoor area. A second area is at the back of the school. The school council president has been made aware of the site visit and the school is open for further discussion.

¹² Our Story - Sandhurst Catholic Early Childhood Education and Care Ltd. (scecec.org.au)

9. Growing Gannawarra in practice

[Growing Gannawarra Council Plan 2021-2025](#) is the springboard for the Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Centre. Its focus on “inclusive services and assets that enhance the health and wellbeing, cultural heritage, connectivity and productivity of our communities”¹³ is encapsulated in the proposed new centre. It will bring community, families, business, and council together by practicing the values¹⁴ of “trust, respect, collaboration and innovation” in the planning, governance, operation, and monitoring of the centre.

Governance

As the Shire operates the kindergartens, family day care, the childcare centre in Kerang and maternal child health and playgroups, the proposed model would be managed by Gannawarra Shire Council. If the centre is established at the school site, the construction and ongoing operational costs would be undertaken through a [Community Joint Use Agreement](#) between the Shire and the School. In this case, it is important to commence negotiations with the school as early as possible. A joint Letter of Intent and community/school/council governance group - together with “shovel ready” design and construction plans - will demonstrate that the project is at a mature stage and worthy of fast-tracked funding.

Growing Gannawarra Early Years Governance Group

Given the keen community interest, there is an opportunity for a “Growing Gannawarra Early Years Governance Group” to be established, building on the GROW Gannawarra and Strong Youth Strong Communities Council as part of its One Year Action Plan¹⁵ (Goal 1, Strategic Priority 4). The concept is not new as there was a similar governance group set up when the centre in Kerang was built¹⁶. Initially it could support the Shire in the planning, establishment, equipping, fundraising, and ongoing operation of the new Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Centre. It could be aligned with the Gannawarra Local Agency Meeting (GLAM).

More broadly, it could play a leadership role across the Shire for early years integration, innovative projects, funding, and cross council regional governance initiatives. Harnessing the community energy from Cohuna for the Governance Group could position Gannawarra Shire Council as a leader in practicing key local recommendations from the “Enabling Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Rural Areas Final Report”¹⁷. It could spearhead early years initiatives specific to Gannawarra that align with the Loddon/Buloke Strong Families Strong Children¹⁸ projects. These could include Gannawarra leading the region in Pre-prep implementation, a cost neutral approach to early childhood provision, collaborative governance, workforce, and integration arrangements. The opportunity is there to act on. Residents are keen and willing. Businesses have offered financial support. Northern District Community Health has offered to furnish the sensory multipurpose room and participate in such a governance group.

The recent flood crisis, where Kerang was cut off, has demonstrated how important Cohuna is for the municipality. It can act as a satellite centre as it provides core business, health, and education services.

Ensuring strong leadership and pedagogy

The Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Centre will ensure the highest quality of early childhood education through the leadership of two, degree qualified early childhood teachers who will demonstrate pedagogical programming which aims to lift the developmental vulnerabilities identified in the 2021 Australian Early Development Census. (Refer Appendix 1, Needs Analysis Report Section 4.3). The three-year-old kindergarten teacher will work full time to meet the National Quality Framework Teacher requirements (regulation 132) for centre-based care. The teacher will work closely with the 4-year-old kindergarten teacher and the program leaders in the outside kindergarten care program, forming part of the staff-child ratio. A childcare coordinator will also support this leadership team. Additional non-contact time is provided for the three-year-old kindergarten teacher and the Childcare Coordinator to undertake these leadership roles.

¹³ Council Plan Strategy Statement

¹⁴ Council Plan Values

¹⁵ [final_action-plan-year-one.pdf](#) (gannawarra.vic.gov.au)

¹⁶ Consultation with Mandy Hutchinson, ex Director Gannawarra Shire Council.

¹⁷ Enabling Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Rural Areas, Final Report, Regional Development Victoria for the Loddon Mallee RDA Committee, Loddon Mallee Regional Partnership and Mallee Regional Partnership, 25 June 2022

¹⁸ SFSC Loddon - North Central LLEN ([ncllen.org.au](#)) and SFSC Buloke - North Central LLEN ([ncllen.org.au](#))

¹⁹ Early childhood teacher requirements ([education.vic.gov.au](#))

10. Solving the staffing dilemma

As discussed in the needs analysis report – the national staff shortage of early childhood professionals is real – but should not be seen as a barrier for staffing the new Cohuna Integrated Early Childhood Centre. Staff recruitment planning can commence as soon as the model has been approved. A “Grow your own” (e.g. school/education partnerships, scholarships, national/state initiatives, traineeships, subregional workforce models) approach for the early years workforce can be targeted, profiled and promoted, as part of the Shire’s broader workforce strategy ([Council Plan](#), One Year Action Plan Goal 3, Strategic Priority 3). Attraction, recruitment, and retention of all staff at the centre can be a priority of the “Growing Gannawarra Early Years Governance Group” which can galvanise efforts and spread the load across the Shire, community, service providers, businesses and residents. Including workforce as part of the non-contact time role for early childhood leadership staff can also support efforts at a centre level. Early appointment of the leadership team, prior to the centre opening can provide an important, positive return for council’s initial investment. Developing and implementing an enrolment policy that starts with smaller, achievable numbers, includes place allocation dependent on staff availability and increased in stages to meet staff/child ratios will mean staffing can be realistic and allows for a steady development of a durable staff base. Whilst the staffing dilemma is not easily solved - using a strengths-based approach, a sharp workforce focus, grass roots collaboration/governance and existing corporate strategies can assist the Shire to become an employer of choice for the new centre.

11. A sustainable service for the future

A sustainable operational service is important for service longevity, community trust and careful management of ratepayer’s funds. It is achieved when income received balances the expenditure outlaid. This is particularly important to meet the Shire’s corporate commitment to sustainability, as outlined in its Council Plan, (Goal 3 “Sustainability”). A sustainable service will remain for children and families for the long term. It will maximise the careful use of council’s rate base which has to cover the many fiscal demands of providing services for its residents.

NB: To manage costs associated with the initial planning, construction, equipping and establishment of the centre, funding support from the Victorian School Building Authority and community fundraising efforts through the Growing Governance Early Years Governance Group can minimise council outlay.

Managing operational costs

Once the centre is ready for operation, a phased childcare implementation could commence. It is recommended to start with 8/12 children 0-2, 22 children 3-5 and 22 school aged children. This will need to be adjusted according to staff availability and to meet required child/staff ratios.

- Example 1, childcare room (0-2 years):
 - Enrol 8 children = 2 educators
 - Enrol 12 children = 3 educators
 - Enrol 16 children = 4 educators
- Example 2, multipurpose room:
 - Enrol 22 children = 2 educators (3-5 years)
 - Enrol 33 children = 3 educators (3-5 years)

Given that staffing costs are more than 90% of any early years centre budget, capping places to meet staff/child ratios enables robust development, review and monitoring of the service budget. It should be remembered that every childcare place utilised adds \$30k pa. income, or not utilised loses \$30k pa. income²⁰. Vigorous, regular monitoring of utilisation/enrolments/waiting lists is essential to ensure all places are filled. This benefits both families and service providers.

It is not a difficult process as the Childcare Subsidy System (CCS) can easily produce such reports for regular consideration by management.

²⁰ Based on one full time place @ \$127 per day – the recommended daily childcare fee.

Fees

A daily fee is ideal as it reduces the variability of income, and full day care for children aged 0-4 (outside kindergarten times) was the option preferred by 80% of families surveyed.

If deemed appropriate, half day fees could be charged. Casual childcare fees (minimum 2 hours) may also need to be applied. They are not considered part of a financially viable service offering but could be used on a discretionary basis to meet family need. Ideally after school care could be charged by the session. Before school care, if required could be charged by the hour.

In setting a fee that is affordable for families and enables service viability – it is important that government funding is maximised. The current subsidy from government²¹ is \$127 per day for children 0-4 (\$12.75 ph.) and \$11.15 per hour for school aged children. The introduction of 90% of childcare subsidy up to \$80,000 family income²² from July 2023 and additional CCS for families with more than one child provides an opportunity to address fees in a way that increases revenue without impacting on families.

For example, the median family weekly income in Cohuna is \$1,358, or \$70,616 per annum²³. If childcare fees were set at government subsidy rates the average Cohuna family will pay:

- \$12.70 per day or \$63.50 per week for children 0-4.
- \$2.78 per day or \$14 per week for school aged children



²¹ Child Care Subsidy rates will increase from 11 July - Department of Education, Australian Government

²² Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Cheaper Child Care) Bill 2022 – Parliament of Australia (aph.gov.au)

²³ 2021 Cohuna, Census All persons Quick Stats | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)

APPENDIX 2: Needs Analysis Details

1. Policy

1.1 Background

Cohuna - Leitchville and District (The District) is bounded by the locality of Koondrook in the north, the Murray River and the New South Wales border in the east, Deep Creek, Gunbower Creek, Shelley's Road, the Murray Valley Highway, Hancock's Road, Kow Swamp and Box Creek in the south, and Pyramid Creek, Flannery's Road, the locality of McMillan's, Cohuna-McMillan's Road, Kelvins Road, Farrells Road, the locality of Gannawarra and Gunbower Creek in the west.

The District is primarily an agricultural area. Cohuna has the main educational and health services for The District. It has large industries that represent Northern/Central Victoria and NSW - such as AWMA Water Control Solutions and Mawson's Concrete and Quarries. It is also the main retail centre for The District. Cohuna is located 32 kilometres from Kerang and 65 kilometres from Echuca. The recent floods have highlighted the importance of Cohuna, situated above the major flood line, as a central service provider - when Kerang was cut off and the business centre of Echuca was non-functional.

Cohuna is a major growth area within Gannawarra and there has been continued demand for childcare. The only childcare service in The District is Family Day Care (FDC). Demand is high and a number of Educators have recently left the FDC sector, reducing the overall availability of FDC in the community.

In recent years, community members have continued to voice their need for additional childcare services in Cohuna. Most recently there have been a number of private investors explore the market, however, none of these have eventuated. In 2021, Council in partnership with the community, sought funding to explore the co-location of kindergarten and long day care in Cohuna. This proposed project has been successfully funded through a Victorian School Building Authority, Building Blocks planning Grant.

Quality early childhood education and care has been universally recognised as critical for supporting young children to reach their full potential so they can successfully and actively participate in school and adult life²⁴. It also plays a vital role in enabling parents to participate in the workforce²⁵. It is fundamental to building the economy of our nation – locally, state-wide and nationally. There are not only benefits for children in the areas of cognitive, educational and social gains but also savings in public expenditure through increased retention rates in schools, lower welfare and criminal justice expenditure and broader benefits of human capital development. Consequently, childcare and preschool (often called kindergarten in Victoria) has been a central plank in the Australian, Victorian and Local Government policy reform agendas over recent years with continual progress in access, equity, affordability and workforce.

There are challenges facing the early childhood sector nationwide. There is a critical workforce shortage, fees are unaffordable for many families, kindergarten facilities are ageing and there are viability issues for service providers. These are often compounded in rural areas. However, there are new policy agendas, as outlined in the following pages, that may have long term benefits for families, service providers and the early childhood workforce.

²⁴ <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/ec-reform-plan.pdf>

²⁵ Overview and recommendations - Childcare and Early Childhood Learning (pc.gov.au)

1.2 Childcare reforms

Childcare policy is mainly the responsibility of the Australian Government. In May 2022, the Australian Government committed to a range of measures for the early childhood sector that built on the more flexible and affordable childcare changes initiated in the Jobs for Families Package, 2016²⁶. Ultimately these measures should support affordability of childcare for families and greater sustainability for providers. Refer Table 1 for details.

Table 1: New Childcare Reforms

From July 2023:	Other measures:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximum Child Care Subsidy (CCS) rate to 90% for families earning \$80,000 or less 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Larger childcare providers to publicly report revenue and profit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CCS rates for around 96% of families with a child currently in care earning under \$530,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every approved provider providing real-fee data, quality ratings, fee increases published on Starting Blocks²⁹
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher CCS rates for families with two or more children aged 5 years or under in care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stopping providers from offering non-educational enrolment inducements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early Childhood Legislation Amendment will include new requirements²⁷ for safety, health and wellbeing; new oversight and compliance tools; new workforce requirements for Family Day Care and alleviating staffing requirements during short term absences.²⁸ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigating pricing in the childcare sector through the ACCC³⁰.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A new Early Years Strategy³¹ to set out a whole-of-government approach to the early years and examination of their programs and funding that impact early childhood development.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The National Workforce Strategy (2022-27) and the National Children's Education & Care Workforce Strategy (2021) aim at building the capacity of the early childhood education and care workforce.³²
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposed Fair Work Legislation Amendments (Secure Jobs Better Pay Bill 2022) may result in better pay and conditions for early childhood workforce.³³

²⁶ Job for Families childcare package delivers choice for families | Former Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries (dss.gov.au)

²⁷ Explore the DRIS | National Quality Framework Review (nqfreview.com.au)

²⁸ Early Childhood Legislation Amendment Act 2022 (Vic)

²⁹ StartingBlocks.gov.au is a free national website that helps parents choose the best education and care for their children. It's the only place to find information about approved early childhood services.

³⁰ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Price inquiry

³¹ Early Years Strategy

³² National Workforce Strategy | ACECQA

³³ Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs, Better Pay) Bill 2022 – Parliament of Australia (aph.gov.au)

1.3 Kindergarten (preschool) reforms

Kindergarten policy is primarily the responsibility of the Victorian Government who has committed to major reforms since the release of the Education State Early Childhood Reform Plan and the expanding of the delivery of three-year-old kindergarten across the state. The reforms make kindergarten free for families, address staff shortages, improve facilities and increase hours. This should enhance children’s developmental outcomes, assist families to better meet work commitments and improve the quality and quantity of the early childhood workforce. Refer Table 2 for details.

Table 2: New Kindergarten Reforms

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition Four-Year-Old Kindergarten to Pre-Prep with 30 hours of play-based learning by 2032³⁴. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Skills Plan³⁵ to build the early years workforce including scholarships, free TAFE courses and incentives to attract, retain staff in hard- to- staff locations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish 50 government-owned and affordable childcare centres. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in the construction of new and expanded kindergarten facilities facilitated through the Building Blocks³⁶ investment and Modular Kindergarten³⁷ programs which includes funding to support the development of kindergartens on school sites, as well as grants for new and existing providers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From 2022, every three-year-old Victorian child across the state will have access to at least five hours of kindergarten delivered by a qualified teacher. Kindergartens will then scale up their hours to reach the full 15-hour program by 2029. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent VSBA infrastructure policy supports the development of integrated facilities rather than standalone service buildings collocated on school sites. There is considerable evidence³⁸ to support facilities that enable smooth transition from the universal platform of maternal and through to kindergarten, then school – with additional supports provided to families who need them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All early childhood education and care providers that deliver a funded kindergarten program in Victoria will be eligible to receive “Free Kinder funding from 2023. • Free Kinder funding will be available in both standalone kindergarten and long day care settings for children enrolled in a funded kindergarten program. • A 15-hour per week program will be available to four-year-old children and a 5-to-15-hour program will be available to three-year-old children per week. 	

³⁴ <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/free-kindergarten-thousands-victorian-children>

³⁵ Early Childhood: Best Start, Best Life | Victorian Government (www.vic.gov.au)

³⁶ <https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/building-blocks-grants-capacity-building>

³⁷ <https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/modular-kindergarten-facilities>

³⁸ Centre for Community Child Health” Integrated Child and Family Services”, Emma Sydenham and Sue West

1.4 Implementation of reforms at a local government level

The reforms, however, have come with implementation issues. In childcare - low wages, staff shortages, thin markets where for profit childcare services avoid, COVID 19, increasing regulatory demands and fee increases have meant supply of quality places is unevenly distributed. In kindergarten – expansion of kindergarten places in both three- and four-year-old kindergarten has resulted in staff shortages, programming challenges for teachers and largescale facility pressures – with most kindergarten buildings being standalone, old and unsuitable for the trend to provide integrated services for families.

These issues are further exacerbated for rural municipalities where small numbers (thin markets) difficulties in attracting/ training staff and long travel distances make childcare unsustainable for the for-profit market and a heavy reliance on Local Government who has often stepped in an attempt to provide their local residents with childcare.

The role Victorian local government plays across Victoria in the provision of early childhood education and care is critical and considerable as confirmed by a 2020 Report to MAV³⁹. Refer Table 3 below.

Table 3: Local Government and Early Childhood Education and Care 2020

• 60 councils run 440 ECEC services in total	• 52 councils provide services that are regulated under the Victorian Children's Services Act
• 43 councils deliver Kindergarten and/or Long Day Care services	• Local government in Victoria is the biggest single owner of Early Childhood infrastructure and the biggest investor (est. \$1.6b)
• 28 councils provide Family Day Care	• Local government owns an est. 1150 facilities from which ECEC services are delivered (excluding MCH) which is 44% of the ECEC infrastructure provided in Victoria.
• 35 councils deliver Long Day Care services only	
• 25 councils deliver Kindergarten services only	
• 21 councils deliver Out of School Hours Care	
• 48 councils provide a Central Registration and Enrolment system for their families	

The investment councils make is particularly relevant to the childcare market. In the case of rural councils, they are usually the only provider of family day care, kindergarten and long day care so their role is critical. Councils are often the one provider willing to take on service delivery. Council delivered services provide geographical loyalty over time whilst for profit childcare can move in and out of communities as profit, loss and corporate policy determine. It gives ratepayers access to services they need to prosper. It contributes to building social, human and economic capital for the municipality which are general commitments outlined in a council's corporate vision, directions and plans.

³⁹ Report to MAV 2020, Local government and Early Childhood Education and Care from 1900-2020. June 2020 (unpublished), Jan Barrett

1.3.1 Gannawarra Shire Council

Gannawarra Shire Council is an example of how rural Local Government steps in to ensure their ratepayer base has equitable access to early childhood education and care. For many years it has been operating Maternal and Child Health and Family Day Care across the Shire, Long Day Care in Kerang and three-year-old and four-year-old kindergarten in Leitchville, Kerang, Cohuna and Koondrook. There is also a Long Day Care Centre in Barham – over the river in NSW. For rural councils such as Gannawarra Shire, balancing affordability for families with viability for council and its rate base is an ongoing challenge. The municipality is geographically dispersed with some families having to travel close to 100 kilometres a day (e.g., Leitchville to Kerang) to access childcare which adds further pressures to families, children, staffing and cost.

The recent report “Enabling Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Rural Areas”⁴⁰ provides an excellent insight into the issues facing Gannawarra Shire (and including Buloke and Swan Hill) and offers solutions including:

- Incentivising rural staff accreditation and retention
- Providing medium term assurance of rural service availability & reliability
- Harmonising regulation and funding streams across government, and
- Flexibly operating and pricing rural service delivery

The report lists off each of the specific interventions, along with their respective funding sources and the anticipated cost of the interventions applied in the Buloke, Gannawarra and Loddon Shires over a 10-year period. This is predominately an advocacy report but will be considered when developing model options for Cohuna as part of this project.



⁴⁰ Enabling Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Rural Areas, Final Report, Regional Development Victoria for the Loddon Mallee RDA Committee, Loddon Mallee Regional Partnership and Mallee Regional Partnership, 25 June 2022

2. Relevant sociodemographic data⁴¹

The sociodemographic data, provided below, gives as solid a base as possible for quantifying need and creating a picture of the children and families in The District. It is of course based on retrospective data. However, it is fortunate that there is recent Census and Australian Early Development data to draw from.

2.1 Our children and families

The 2021 Gannawarra Shire Profile ID⁴² reveals that there are 371 preschool and school aged children living in the Cohuna - Leitchville and District (The District). 135 of these are children 0-4, and 236 are primary schoolers. The majority of the children in The District live in Cohuna (76%). There has been a slight drop in population since the 2016 census – a total of 15 children. (Refer Table 1 below)

Table 4: Cohuna/Leitchville and District children by service age group⁴³

Cohuna - Leitchville and District - Total persons (Usual residence)	2021			2016			Change
	Number	%	Gannawarra Shire %	Number	%	Gannawarra Shire %	2016 to 2021
Babies and pre-schoolers (0 to 4)	135	4.2	4.5	140	4.4	4.8	-5
Primary schoolers (5 to 11)	236	7.3	7.7	245	7.6	7.8	-9
TOTAL	371			385			-14

However, further examination of the ABS published Community Profiles for both 2016 and 2021 for Cohuna and Leitchville towns provide greater insight into the changes in population by age. (NB This only covers children living in Cohuna and Leitchville – not the whole District). It is provided to illustrate the changes in age cohorts from 2016 to 2021 as identified in the ABS data (Refer Table 5 below).

⁴¹ ID community, demographic resources, Gannawarra Shire, ABS, 2021

⁴² Service age groups | Gannawarra Shire | Community profile (id.com.au)

This data shows that Cohuna's town population of children aged 0-4, between 2016 and 2021 increased by 19%, with primary school aged children increasing by 15%, whilst Leitchville's town child population decreased slightly overall by 1.4%.

Table 5: Cohuna/Leitchville towns only: children by age – ABS 2016c/w 2021						
Age (years):	Cohuna 2016 ⁴⁴	Cohuna 2021 ⁴⁵	Change	Leitchville 2016 ⁴⁶	Leitchville 2021 ⁴⁷	Change
0	9	19	+10	5	6	+1
1	25	22	-3	3	4	+1
2	20	23	+3	7	0	-7
3	17	21	+4	0	6	+6
4	15	17	+2	3	8	+5
0-4 years	86	102	+16 (19%)	18	24	+4
5	25	23	-2	5	7	+2
6	16	22	+6	6	4	-2
7	19	24	+5	7	10	+3
8	19	22	+3	9	5	-4
9	21	22	+1	7	5	-2
10	18	25	+7	9	5	-4
11	14	14		7	8	+1
5-11 years	132	152	+20(15%)	51	44	-7
TOTALS						
Children 0-11	218	254	+36 (+17%)	69	68	-1

⁴⁴ 2016 Cohuna, Census Community Profiles | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)

⁴⁵ 2021 Cohuna, Census Community Profiles | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)

⁴⁶ 2016 Leitchville, Census Community Profiles | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)

⁴⁷ 2021 Leitchville (L), Census Community Profiles | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)

The data below indicates that there were a further 28 children born in The District since the 2021 Census was taken, most of whom were born in Cohuna. These figures need to be adjusted with the 2021 census data to provide a more current picture of child population 0-4.

Table 6: Birth notifications for The District					
Year		Cohuna	Kerang	Koondrook	Total
2016-17	Birth notices	25	56	9	92
	Total including enrolments	33	64	13	110
	No. or infants born 2012/2013	26	45	10	83
	No. or infants born 2013/2014	46	65	13	125
2017-18	Birth notices	24	65	10	102
	Total including enrolments	35	77	24	136
	No. or infants born 2013/2014	47	67	14	129
	No. or infants born 2014/2015	41	54	15	111
2018-19	Birth notices	33	70	5	110
	Total including enrolments	37	77	8	125
	No. or infants born 2014/2015	42	56	15	115
	No. or infants born 2015/2016	43	72	12	133
2019-20	Birth notices	21	48	11	80
	Total including enrolments	27	49	15	91
	No. or infants born 2015/2016	9	5	2	22
	No. or infants born 2016/2017	26	49	11	86
2021-22	Birth notices	28	62	9	99
	Total including enrolments	30	66	13	109
	No. or infants born 2016/2017	23	42	11	76
	No. or infants born 2017/2018	21	50	17	88

2.2 Numbers of children by age cohort

Based on the Gannawarra Shire Profile ID, birth notifications and census adjustments⁴⁸, we can estimate that in 2022 there are 155 children pre-schoolers and 236 primary schoolers across The District. It should be noted that this is a modest estimate. For example, it does not consider the 19% growth trend for Cohuna children 0-4 and 17% growth trend for children 5-11 identified in Table 5.

2.3 School data

Cohuna Primary School has 150 enrolments which is increasing (9% over the past three years⁴⁹).

St Mary's Catholic School has 114 students, whilst Leitchville Primary School has 10 students.

2.4 Other statistics about local families

There were 286 couple families with children and 92 single families with children – the majority of whom comprised families with younger and mixed aged children. Regional comparisons show The District has comparatively higher numbers of total stepfamilies (8.3% c/w 7.9%) and a lower number of blended families (2.4% c/w 4.4%). Employment rates in The District are comparatively high (96% c/w 94% regionally) and unemployment rates are comparatively low (3.9% c/w 6% regionally). An analysis of the jobs held by the resident population in The District in 2016 shows the three most popular occupations were Managers, Technicians/Trade Workers and Labourers. Overall, 8.3% of total couple families with children were stepfamilies, and 2.4% were blended families, compared with 7.9% and 4.4% respectively for Regional VIC.



⁴⁸ Based on Census Data Analysis, Gannawarra Shire Profile ID data, birth notifications adjusted according to latest MCH figures.

⁴⁹ DET Regional data and consultation with School Principal

2.5 Advantage and disadvantage

Tables 7 and 8 below indicate that families in The District, compared with the Shire as a whole, enjoy a high standard of living with regards to employment, income levels, home ownership etc. However, compared with its regional state and national counterparts, Gannawarra Shire and The District are more disadvantaged than regional, state and national counterparts.⁵⁰

Table 7: Cohuna and District Population Profile⁵¹ (Based on 2016 Census)

Place of usual residence	Number	District %	Gannawarra Shire %
Indigenous population	30	1.2	1.9
Australian-born	2,136	87.8	86.5
Speaks language other than English at home	37	1.5	1.9
Overseas born	120	4.9	5.2
Couples with children	222	21.0	22.2
Couples without children	348	32.9	31.0
One parent families	75	7.1	7.0
Lone person households	329	31.1	30.5
Group households	18	1.7	1.9
Attending university or TAFE institution	44	1.8	2.0
Employed	951	96.7	95.3
Unemployed	32	3.3	4.7
Total labour force	983	47.2	52.0
Not in the labour force	951	45.7	40.4
Separate houses	1,115	92.9	94.7
Medium and high density	64	5.3	3.5
Housing Tenure			
Owned	504	47.5	45.6
Purchasing	279	26.3	24.5
Renting	184	17.3	19.8
Household Income			
Less than \$650 (low)	293	29.7	28.5
\$650 to \$1,449 (lower middle)	366	37.1	37.3
\$1,449 to \$2,499 (upper middle)	155	15.7	15.9
\$2,500 or more (high)	66	6.7	6.8

⁵⁰ SEIFA by profile area | Gannawarra Shire | Community profile (id.com.au)

⁵¹ Locality snapshots | Gannawarra Shire | Community profile (id.com.au)

Australia	Victoria	Regional Victoria	Shire	Cohuna and District
1003.1	1009	959	934	934.8

*The Gannawarra Shire Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) measure the relative level of socio-economic disadvantage and/or advantage based on a range of Census characteristics. The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD), contains indicators of disadvantage and additional indicators of advantage (e.g., professional occupations, high income, higher education levels, larger houses).



2.6 Australian Early Development Census

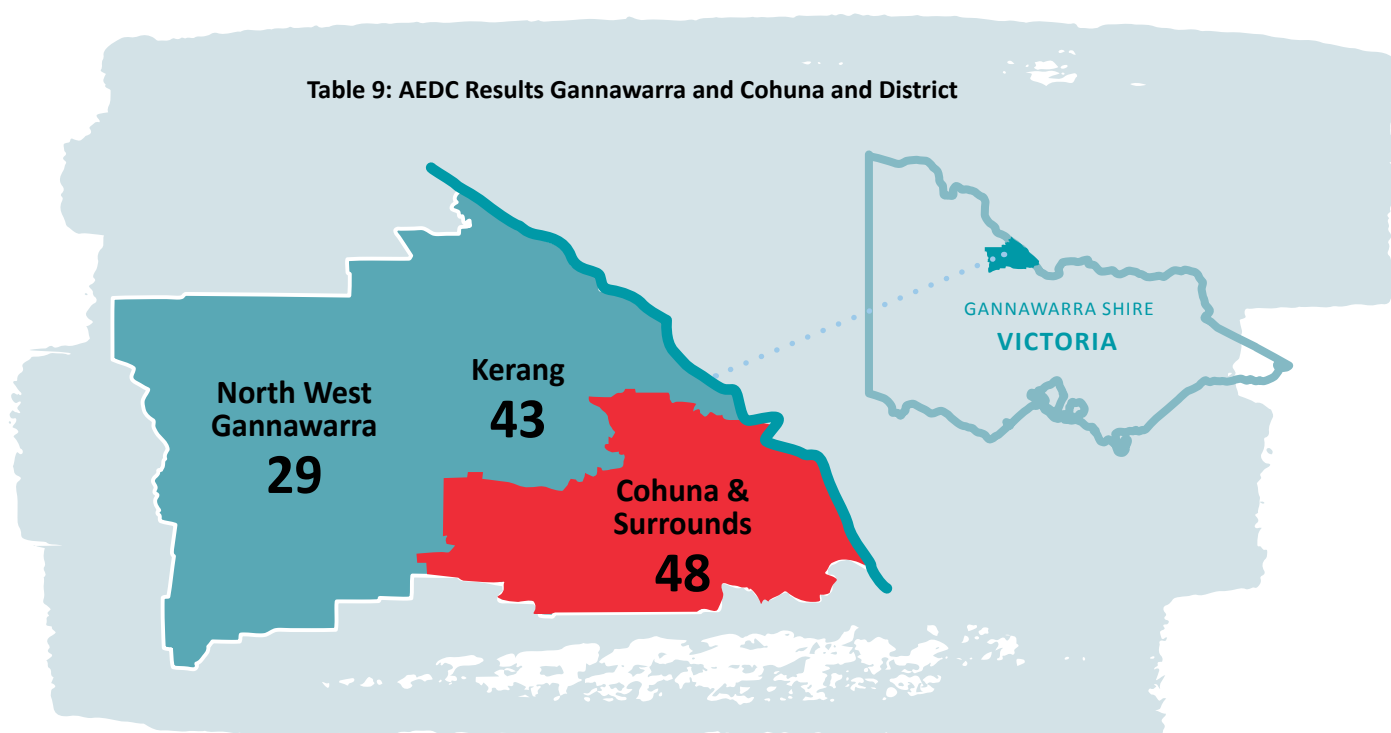
In 2009, Australia became the first country in the world to collect national data on the developmental health and wellbeing of all children starting school. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data collections are every three years, with the most recent in 2021.

The AEDC measures the development of children in Australia in their first year of full-time school and collects data across five key domains, which are closely linked to child health, education, and social outcomes.

Table 1 and 2 below indicate a concerning level of vulnerability across children living in The District (Area highlighted in red on map indicates greatest vulnerability, blue indicates least vulnerability). They are more developmentally vulnerable than their counterparts in every other part of the Shire. The AEDC results also show that children across the Shire performed better developmentally than across Victorian and Australia. However, Cohuna and District children are more vulnerable across all domains.⁵²

Research shows that quality, formal early childhood education and care supports optimal developmental outcomes for young children – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For Cohuna and District families – the only access to this is through kindergarten services in Leitchville and Cohuna. The lack of quality childcare provided may be a contributing factor to the poorer results for this District.

Table 9: AEDC Results Gannawarra and Cohuna and District



⁵² AEDC Community Profile 2021, Gannawarra, Victoria

Table 10: Vulnerable on one or more domain(s) and two or more domains at the national, state/territory, community, and local community levels

Region (including local communities)	Vulnerable on one or more domain(s)						Vulnerable on two or more domains					
	2015		2018		2021		2015		2018		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Australia	62,960	22.0	63,448	21.7	63,264	22.0	31,754	11.1	32,434	11.0	32,718	11.4
VIC	13,465	19.9	14,232	19.9	13,777	19.9	6,707	9.9	7,231	10.1	7,085	10.2
Gannawarra	27	28.7	12	12.5	22	19.1	12	12.8	7	7.3	10	8.7
Cohuna and surrounds	5	13.5	2	5.6	15	32.6	2	5.4	1	2.8	6	13.0
Kerang	16	51.6	5	18.5	4	9.8	8	25.8	2	7.4	4	9.8
Northwest Gannawarra	6	23.1	5	15.2	3	10.7	2	7.7	4	12.1	0	0.0

3. Early childhood education and care in the Cohuna/Leitchville District

The sociodemographic data, provided below, gives as solid a base as possible for quantifying need and creating a picture of the children and families in The District. It is of course based on retrospective data. However, it is fortunate that there is recent Census and Australian Early Development data to draw from.

3.1 Childcare

Many families use childcare to support their work-related needs, and this is increasing.

- Formal childcare includes long day care, family day care and outside school hours care and is government regulated. Families receive fee subsidies from the Australian Government based on their income and hours of work. The majority of children attend long day care, followed by outside school hours care, then Family Day Care. The latest national figures identify that 45% of all Victorian children aged 0-4 use commonwealth funded childcare (does not include state funded preschool utilisation) and 15% of Victorian children aged 5-12 use commonwealth funded school aged care⁵³. In regional areas (such as Gannawarra), children use long day care for an average 28 hours per week and school aged childcare for 13 hours per week⁵⁴.
- Informal childcare includes grandparents, babysitters and other private arrangements. Approximately 32% of Australian children access informal childcare arrangements.⁵⁵

Childcare in The District

- Formal childcare: There is no long day care centre in Cohuna and at present there are 5 Family Day Care Educators who work a total of 43 days a fortnight (only 1 educator works full time which leaves a large gap in service provision. There are 15 children on the Family Day Care waitlist wanting a minimum of 43 days of care.
- Informal childcare: Table 1 below indicates that unpaid childcare undertaken by persons over 15 living in The District is significant – higher than Kerang which has centre based and Family Day Care options available for local families.

It should be noted that The District has no centre based childcare and minimal, decreasing Family Day Care availability. The appears to be a high reliance on informal care in order to try and meet gaps in childcare provision

Table 11: Unpaid childcare⁵⁶

Own child/ children only	Other child/ children only	children and other child/ children	Total	Did not provide childcare	childcare not stated	Total	% of total pop Cohuna and District	c/w % of total pop Kerang	% of total pop Australia
281	134	16	434	1,479	170	2,080	21%	17%	26.3%

⁵³ Early childhood education and care - Report on Government Services 2022 - Productivity Commission (pc.gov.au)

⁵⁴ Child Care in Australia report March quarter 2021 - Department of Education, Australian Government and Child Care in Australia report June quarter 2021 - Department of Education, Australian Government

⁵⁵ Childcare and early childhood education - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au), 2021

⁵⁶ <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/community-profiles/2021/SAL20604>

3.2 Childcare supply and demand

Using the utilisation data from the Australian Government outlined in section 3.1, it could be **modestly*** estimated then, that for The District, childcare requirements (demand) are:

- **Children 0-4:** at least 28 hrs per week of long day care for 70⁵⁷ children is needed = 1,960 hrs per week = 39 EFT places
- **Children 5-12;** at least 13 hrs per week of outside school hours care for 35⁵⁸ children is needed = 455 hrs per week

*NB: demand for childcare in The District may well be higher than Australian Government estimates due to:

- families who use informal childcare now taking up formal childcare if it were available in The District,
- comparatively higher employment rates,
- families limiting their work because there is no childcare,
- the 19% growth trend for Cohuna children 0-4 and 17% growth trend for children 5-11 identified in Table 5.

3.2.1 Gaps in childcare supply for children 0-5 with FDC and Pre-prep

With only a supply of an est. 215 hours⁵⁹ per week of childcare (Family Day Care) for The District, there is a very significant shortfall in childcare supply – est. 1,820 hrs per week for children 0-4 and 385 hrs per week for outside school hours care. One Cohuna business alone has provided data that shows that 21 Cohuna children aged 0-4 need long day care and 16 school aged children need care before and after school. This shortage of childcare in The District impacts on families, business, community and the local economy. Impacts are further discussed in Section 6 – Community Consultation.

When pre prep kindergarten is introduced, this demand could be reduced but it depends on parent preferences/need and so is difficult to estimate at this point.

3.3 Kindergarten (Preschool)

In Victoria refers to a Victorian government subsidised program provided for the two years prior to school entry, delivered by a degree qualified early childhood teacher, for a minimum of 5 hours per week for three-year-old children and 15 hours per week for four-year-old children. The programs can be delivered in standalone sessional settings or integrated with childcare and are government regulated.

Kindergarten in The District:

The Shire currently provides three- and four-year-old kindergarten programs in both Leitchville and Cohuna. Leitchville Preschool Play Centre, which has been recently upgraded (Service Approval No SE-00002912) is licensed for 33 children and provides three- and four-year-old kindergarten for 15 hours per week. Cohuna and District Preschool Centre (Service Approval NO SE-00002911) is licensed for 30 children and provides three- and four-year-old kindergarten for 15 hours per week.

Cohuna and District Preschool is an old building that was built in the 1960's. The service has 30 approved places. At the beginning of 2020 there were 23 four-year-old children enrolled and 12 three-year-old children. Council currently offers 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten over 3 days (Monday, Wednesday and Thursday) and three-year-old kindergarten on a Tuesday and Thursday for 10 hours a week. Families in Cohuna have an option of attending kindergarten either in Cohuna or Leitchville (16 kms away). The facility will be undergoing minor refurbishment to the outdoor space to make it more accessible for children of all abilities, but no expansion of the facility to increase places.

⁵⁷ 45% of The District's 55 children 0-4

⁵⁸ 15% of est. 236 of The District's primary school aged children 5-11

⁵⁹ 43 days of care per fortnight provided by FDC = est.215 hrs per week

3.4 Kindergarten supply and demand

The Shire has reported that current 2023 kindergarten enrolments for Cohuna are 27 (3yo) and 23 (4yo). This has almost tripled from 2022 numbers. Consequently, in 2023 there will be a 15-hour program for four-year-old children and another for three-year-old children to accommodate the demand. Indications⁶⁰ are that in Cohuna alone:

- **By 2025**
 - an est. 29 three-year-old children and 22 four-year-old children will need kinder
- **By 2026**
 - An est. 23 three-year-old children and 29 four-year-old children will need kinder

The facility has not been upgraded and there is only a single room licensed for 30 children. Increasing capacity through facility expansion may prove difficult without removal of the maternal and child health centre (This will be further detailed in the Facility Report section of the report).

The current facility will just meet the preschool needs of families with three- and four-year-old children for 2023. Whilst the numbers of three- and four-year-old children vary from year to year – it can be reasonable estimated that the introduction of 30 hours of pre-primary school in the future will mean the current facility will not be able to cater for 45 hours of kindergarten required.

⁶⁰ Based on 2021 Cohuna, Census Community Profiles | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au) and birth notifications – does not take into account people moving in and out, children from other feed in towns such as Burkes Bridge, growth predictions, or families choosing to use Leitchville kindergarten.



3.5 Workforce supply and demand

Attracting and retaining early childhood staff is a major issue that plays out at the national, state and local level.

The workforce issues are complex and entrenched. In essence they largely relate to⁶¹:

- Poor and inconsistent remuneration,
- Lack of professional recognition,
- Low attraction and retention rates,
- Limited opportunities for leadership and strengthening capability,
- Lack of supported professional wellbeing,
- Limited qualification and career pathways,
- Lack of comprehensive supply and demand data and
- Irregular monitoring and evaluation.

They have been the basis for numerous plans and reviews by the Australian and Victorian Governments. The most recent September 2022 National Plan⁶² sets out a comprehensive agenda to raise the profile of the early childhood workforce to address these issues.

It has been recently stated that Australia's childcare sector is emerging from the Omicron wave in "crisis", with more than one in 10 centres needing a government waiver to legally operate because they do not have enough workers.⁶³

The workforce issues are particularly compounded in rural areas such as Gannawarra Shire. Challenges such as transport, housing and isolation add to the workforce challenges and "further compromise the reliability of rural service delivery"⁶⁴.

However, unlike some neighbouring councils, Gannawarra Shire is a provider of family day care, childcare and kindergarten - so it already has an early childhood staff base to build on. Councils are often seen as an "employer of choice" in the early childhood sector. Councils, often one of the largest employers in a local rural area, can have a competitive edge when attracting, employing and retaining staff. They can support career development across their own workforce. They are in a good position to "grow their own" early childhood workforce - using some of the incentives and interventions highlighted in the early childhood workforce reforms.

Consequently, there is some positives for the Shire to address their workforce challenges. The barriers should not stop strengthening and expanding early childhood education and care provision to meet the needs of local residents. Rather, it could build on its competitive edge and market itself as a sustainable early childhood employer in the local community.

⁶¹ Shaping Our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022–2031 (acecqa.gov.au)

⁶² Implementation and Evaluation Plan Shaping Our Future National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy

⁶³ Australian childcare 'in crisis', as new figures show 11 per cent need special federal government waiver to legally operate - ABC News

⁶⁴ Enabling Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Rural Areas, Final Report, Regional Development Victoria for the Loddon Mallee RDA Committee, Loddon Mallee Regional Partnership and Mallee Regional Partnership, 25 June 2022

4. Community consultation

4.1 1:1 consultation with families

Eight in depth discussions were held with a range of potential and current families. The messages were clear and consistent. Childcare is a major issue for local families. It is a barrier for the workforce participation of women and for their health and wellbeing. Anxiety is mounting and there is a high level of frustration as families feel forgotten – they have been pushing for childcare solutions for many years. They acknowledge that may not be enough early childhood staff to meet any additional childcare provision in the Shire; but believe this cannot be seen as a barrier to meeting their urgent childcare needs. Key messages from the consultations include:

- Families are putting off having children as they cannot find childcare.
- The current Family Day Care service is almost impossible to access with long waiting lists. Any vacancies are snapped up within minutes.
- Families are paying high amounts for private childcare arrangements.
- A large number of families are leaving town because there is no childcare available.
- Families are reducing their work hours and days because there is no childcare – impacting on their finances and their employers.
- Families and children are having to travel over an hour a day to access childcare in Kerang, Koondrook and Barham.
- Families heavily rely on grandparents to provide regular childcare which means they have no one to cover when children are sick or there is an emergency. Many grandparents are still working themselves and the continual juggling and uncertainty of childcare arrangements creates tensions and hardship for parents and grandparents alike.
- There are many families who would like to return to The District for family and employment reasons but cannot do so without childcare.
- The lack of childcare overall places undue pressure on working families and impacts on their children. It takes \$\$ out families, of the community. It impacts on local residents and their ability to lead an active and productive life socially, physically and mentally in the community.

- This is not a recent issue – it has been going on for over 15 years. Families in The District feel let down, forgotten and frustrated.
- There is a pressing need to provide childcare immediately. People are desperate and sick of nothing happening.

“Everywhere in the Shire there are waiting lists as long as your arm!”

(Mother with one two-year-old and one child on the way.)

“I cannot keep relying on my mum and mother-in-law. They are getting older and need to get on with their own lives. I need then as back up -not as regular childcare providers. I’m exhausted from sitting down every night and planning for tomorrow - which can then all fall in a heap from one day to the next”.

(Mother with one two-year-old and one child on the way.)

“We need two incomes to survive. I have been offered full time work, but I can’t take it because I have no childcare. We need childcare locally and we need it now!”

(Professional mother – unable to return to work).

“I am paying privately for someone to care for my two children. It makes it so hard financially.”

(Mother – unable to return to work full time).

“My husband and I have agreed we can’t have children until there is childcare. We will move to somewhere that has childcare to start our family – even though all our friends and family are in Cohuna.”

(Young couple, wanting to start a family).

4.2 Resident surveys

There was an excellent response to the resident survey with 269 responses to the survey, which represents approximately 25% of The District's resident population.⁶⁵ There was a good cross section of respondents, including families from the whole District, working and non-working families, residents with and without children, and parents with toddlers, kindergarten aged and primary school aged children:

- The majority (70%) came from Cohuna residents.
- Working couples (60%), relatives regularly caring for children (16%) and single parents (10%).
- 70% from residents with children and 30% from residents without children.
- Most families had children under three years, then school aged children and children aged three to five.

The themes coming out of the surveys align with the individual consultation with families. Families want to use childcare, kindergarten and school based in Cohuna. The existing and only childcare in the town – Family Day Care – is avariciously take up by families. A significant proportion of families are having to use childcare elsewhere in the Shire or are unable to access childcare at all.

There was a strong preference for families to access kindergarten, again based in Cohuna, for 30 hours a week when it becomes available. The surveys also demonstrate the high level of interest and focus on Cohuna having childcare on a regular and daily basis for all age groups i.e., children aged 0-3 years, before and after kindergarten hours and care for school aged children – particularly after school.

Tables 12 – 18 below provide an overview of key questions asked of residents in the survey. The tables also show the preferences of Cohuna residents as well as The District as a whole. Some comments directly from residents illustrate the high level of need for childcare services and kindergarten to be provided to meet the needs of residents now and in the future.

"It is important that children are not affected by long commute to/from day-care and education at a young age. Sitting in a car going to Echuca every day for day-care is not good for the child. Having a long day-care and kinder option in Cohuna would minimise this affect and also keep workers being able to stay working locally. When I have children, I will have no choice but to leave Cohuna if there is no day-care within Cohuna itself".

"As a local teacher, there is a high demand for me to return to work and a financial need for our family. Without more childcare options such as a centre in Cohuna, our family will be forced to leave the Gannawarra Shire in the next 3 years to look for work elsewhere in an area with better childcare services so that we can feel financially able to grow our family. It is sad, as the town offers a lot of great family activities and a nice lifestyle".

"We need something because this town has nothing! As both of us are self-employed we need to work to keep a roof over our head so care for children is a must in this town!".

"It just need to happen; Cohuna is so desperate to have a childcare centre!!".

"Leitchville also exists, and we pay rates".

⁶⁵ Household type | Gannawarra Shire | Community profile (id.com.au)

Table 13: Resident preferences for Kindergarten location

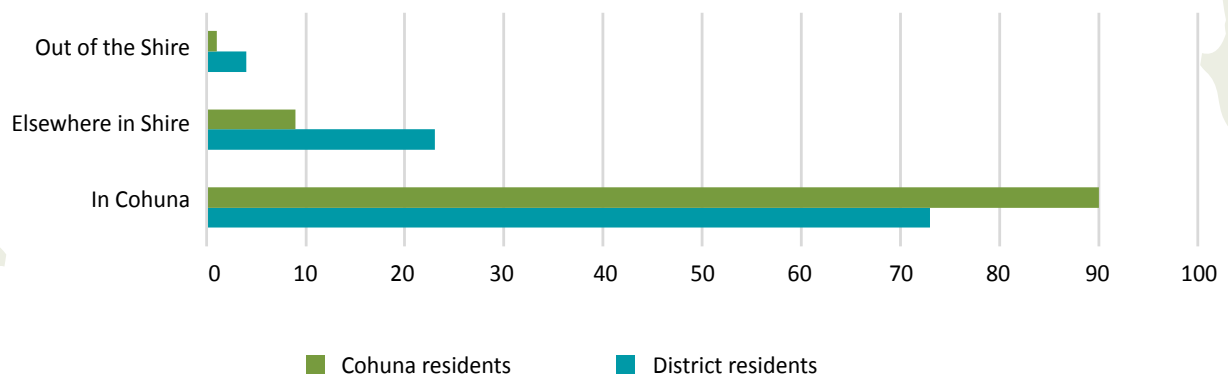


Table 14: Number of respondents using childcare

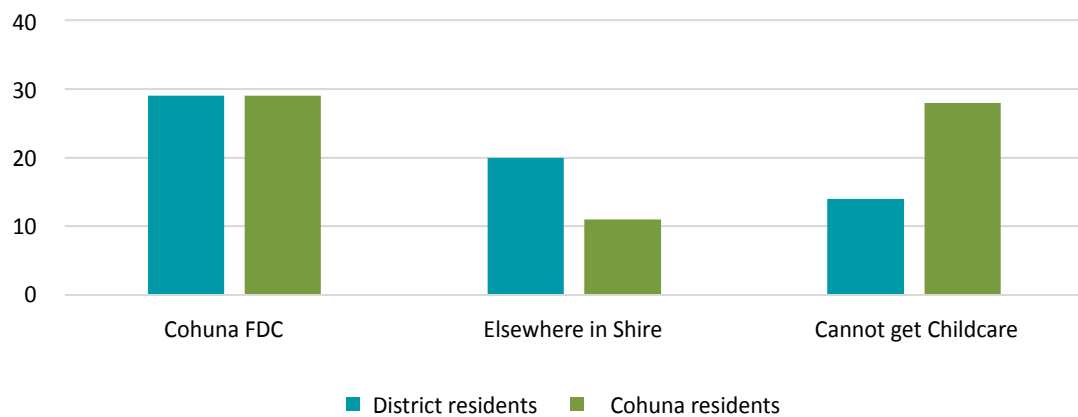


Table 15: Family preferences for kindergarten hours

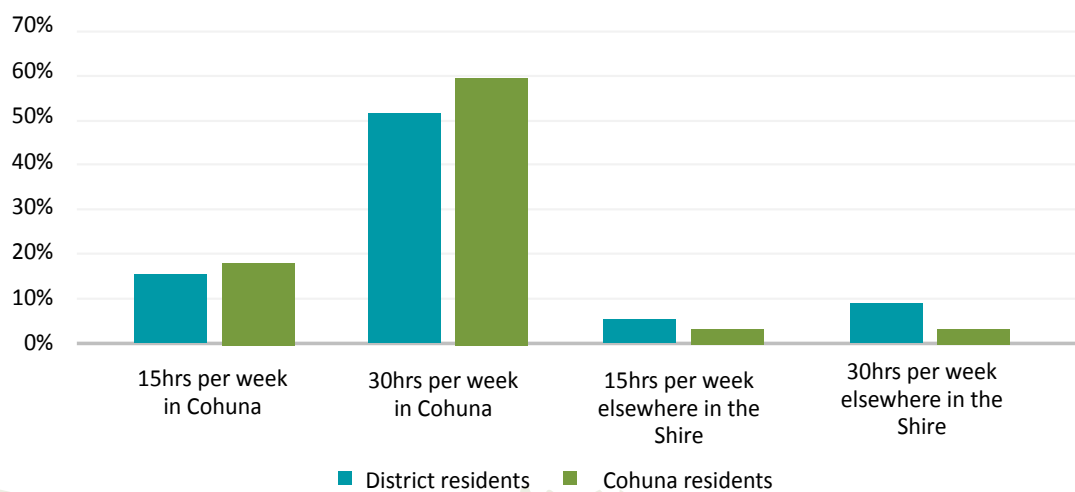


Table 16: Percentage of respondents needing childcare for children 0-3

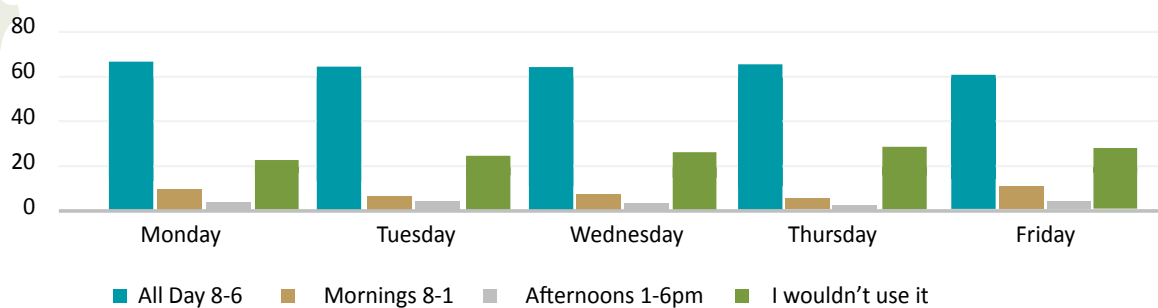


Table 17: Percentages of respondents needing childcare for children 3-5 (when not in kindergarten)

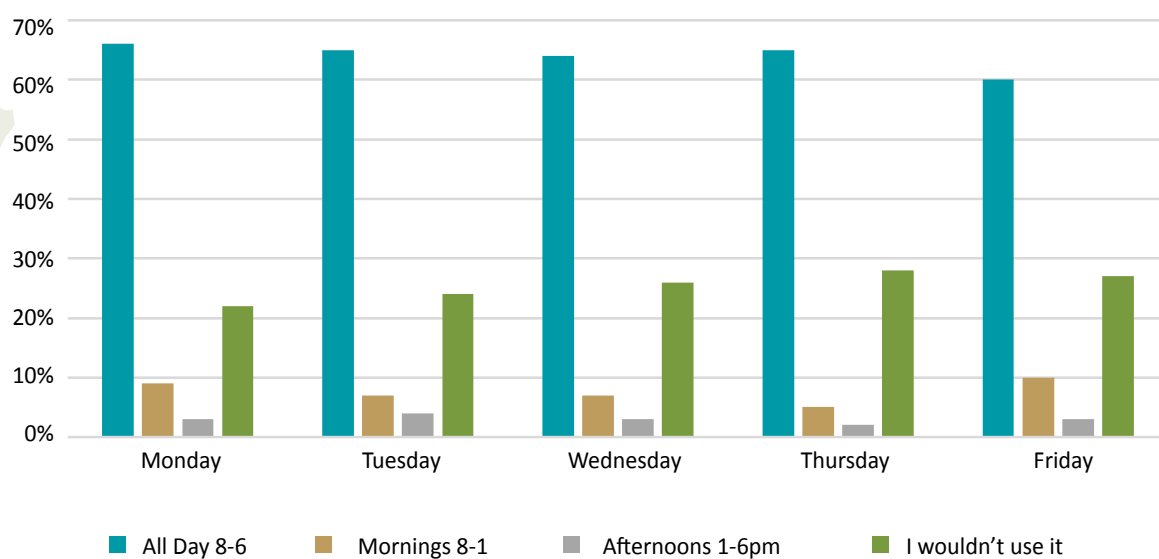


Table 18: Percentage of respondents needing childcare for school aged children

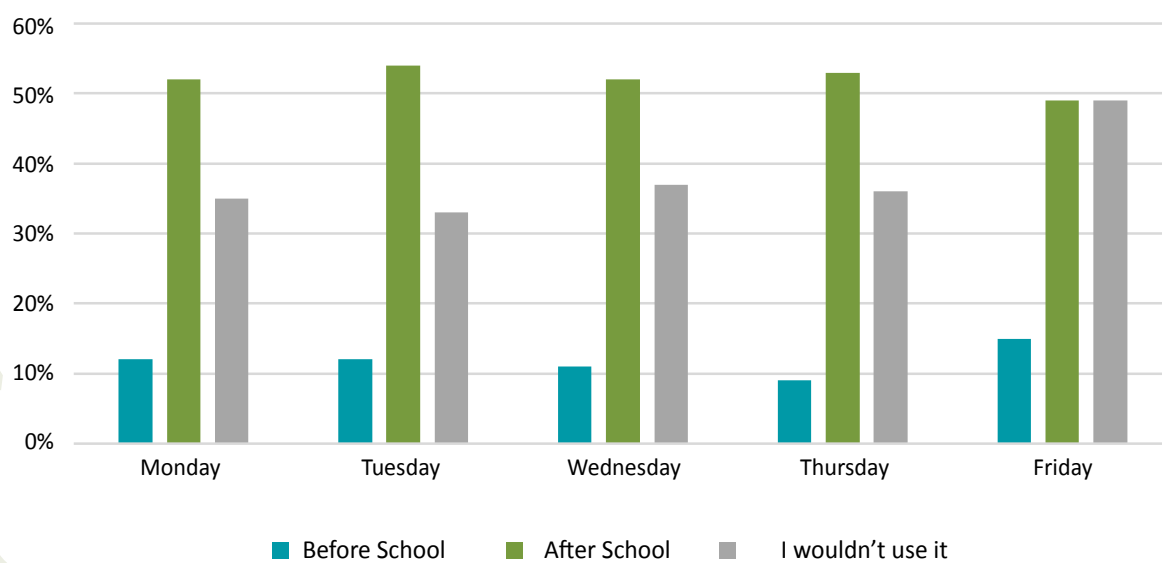
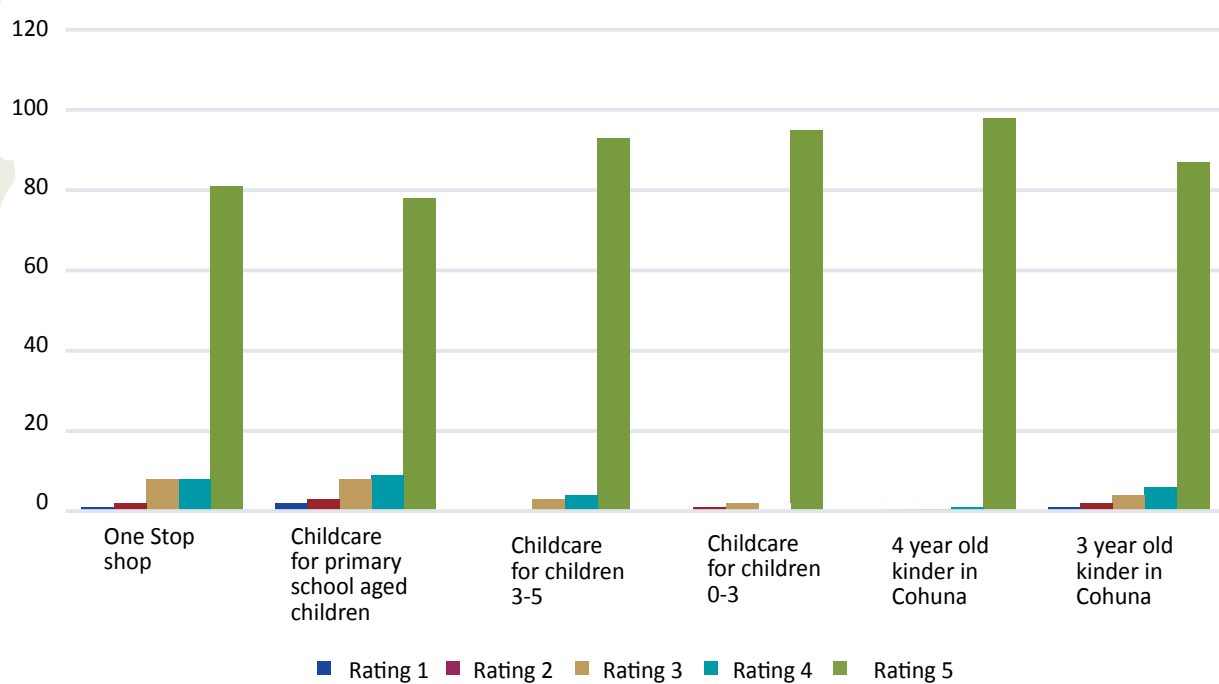


Table 19: Importance of services (rating 1-5 with 5 being most important)



4.3 Consultation with service providers, businesses and community groups

Eight in depth discussions were held with a range of businesses and service providers – including Mawson’s, AWMA Water Control Solutions and all three Cohuna schools. Again, the messages were clear and consistent. Childcare is a major issue for services and businesses and in turn for the local economy. Schools, businesses and services cannot attract and retain staff because there is such limited childcare options. They try to be as flexible as possible to meet their employees working needs – but they cannot always manage this - as they have business to run or services to deliver. Some of the larger businesses talked about losing highly qualified staff such as engineers and health professionals. These employees have moved to the town without fully understanding the lack of childcare. Others do not come at all because they will not be able to work. Key messages from the consultations include that schools, businesses and services:

- Have united in trying to get childcare solutions so they can keep their businesses viable,
- Are willing to help however they can – including providing land and financial support for new facilities, toys and equipment,
- Reiterate this is a problem that has been ongoing for many years,
- Keep losing their valuable skills base – teachers, health professionals, workers are all impacted,
- They are aware that their employees often have to travel an hour before and after their shifts to access childcare,
- They are not able to properly plan to attract, employ and retain staff with no constant childcare base to build on,
- The town suffers economically because residents and businesses are not reaching their full economic potential,
- The reliance on informal care such as grandparents creates tensions in the workplace,
- There is available land to build a facility – on local school sites, council land adjacent to the existing kindergarten and maternal and child health or private land in the town,
- Sufficient housing is another impediment facing The District.

“Build it and they will come. I could find 23 children for a centre if it was available right now.”

(business owner)

“Staff rostering is a nightmare. It should be about the children, but it ends up being about childcare.”

(School principal)

“Cohuna needs a purpose-built facility, and it needs it as soon as possible.”

(Health service provider)

“The facility should be integrated so it can provide all the supports in one place that local families need.”

(school principal)

“I will have to reduce my hours and look after my grandchild work so my daughter can return to work.”

(teacher)

“Lack of childcare is the biggest impediment to our business.”

(business owner)

“The whole town suffers in so many ways because there is just nowhere for families to go when they need childcare.”

(Business owner)

“Why has it come to this? It’s not a new problem and it should have been addressed years ago!”

(Health service provider)

Mawson’s are willing to assist and expedite this project through provision of suitable land, funding and construction materials.

(Large business)

4.4 Community surveys

There was also an excellent response to the community survey with 60 returns – which is testament to the high level of community interest. Particularly as the timelines coincided with the recent flood crisis. There was a good cross section of respondents, including schools, large businesses, small businesses local health services, church and community groups.

As with the resident consultation – the themes were clear. Cohuna urgently needs childcare to sustain the local businesses, schools and services that residents and the Shire as a whole rely on for good liveability, economic and social outcomes. Cohuna is the main town in The District but is losing and not attracting the employment base and the skills, experience and knowledge that go with it. The community is keenly committed and invested in achieving the childcare solutions it needs. It is willing to help wherever it can to achieve this. There was a clear message that the community has waited long enough and that something must be done and quickly. Tables 19 – 22 below provide an overview of key questions asked of the community in the survey.

Full survey analysis presentation can also be found [here](#)

“We will not be able to attract or retain business owners, doctors, nurses, teachers, trades, and even farmers with the current lack of childcare options in this town. We have heard the same story over and over from families wanting to relocate to Cohuna. “We’d love to move & take up these opportunities with money incentives (like the schools & hospitals that offer an extra 50k for applicants), but without care for the kids there is no point even considering it”. As a business owner, we would be happy to donate money to the running of a childcare centre as a yearly sponsor as I’m sure other businesses would do, if it brings new life to the town!”

“Opening hours need to be at 8am to 6pm. With people on farms, businesses and such 9-4 would not be suitable, people need to be able to drop off children and then still travel to work in.”

“These are essentials services for child development and critical for employment opportunities for families under enormous pressure mentally and physically to sustain their families.”

“This facility is essential for Cohuna to grow on so many levels.... Kerang get all the advantages.”

“Please do not delay by more red tape, this is a human need (and already had years of discussion).”

“Childcare is desperately needed in Cohuna if we expect to attract and retain staff for all business’s in around Cohuna. It’s simply a no brainer to build such a facility. Stop talking and take action and build what is sorely lacking in this town.”

“NDCH provide school readiness support across Gannawarra, including speech therapy, occupational therapy and paediatric physiotherapy and would be happy to collaborate to be part of a one stop shop model. We also provide support to Aboriginal families through playgroups and youth activities. We have staff who need access to childcare to work.”

“As a manager of a business who has staff struggling to work due to not being able to get care having these facilities is key for business to continue and staff to be able to work. Hard to work if you can’t get care and don’t have family to help out.”

Table 20: service preferences

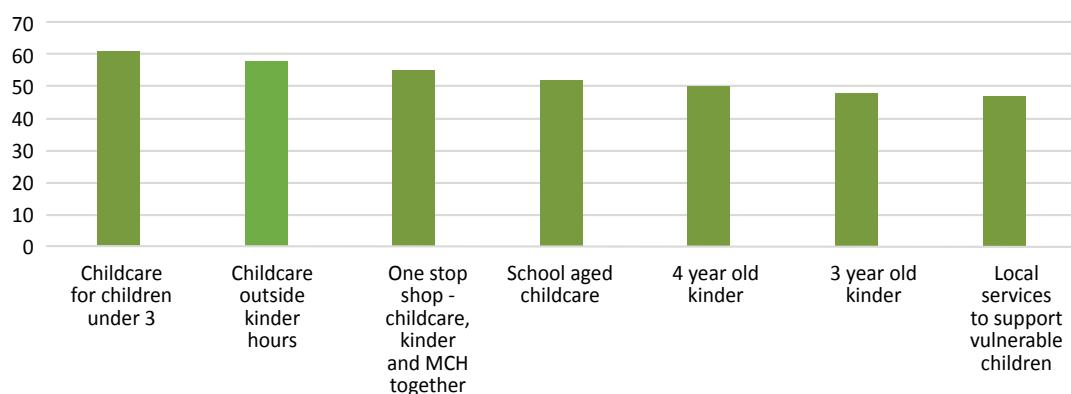


Table 21: benefits of services

helps families with work

retains/attracts families to town

helps retain our staff

builds local business

helps local economy

helps children develop

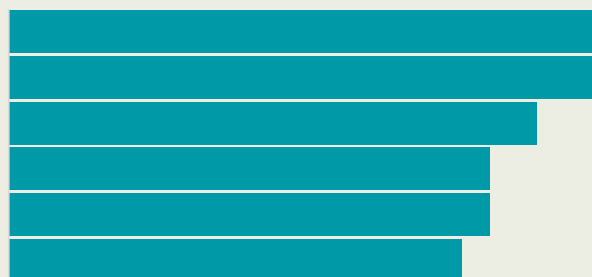
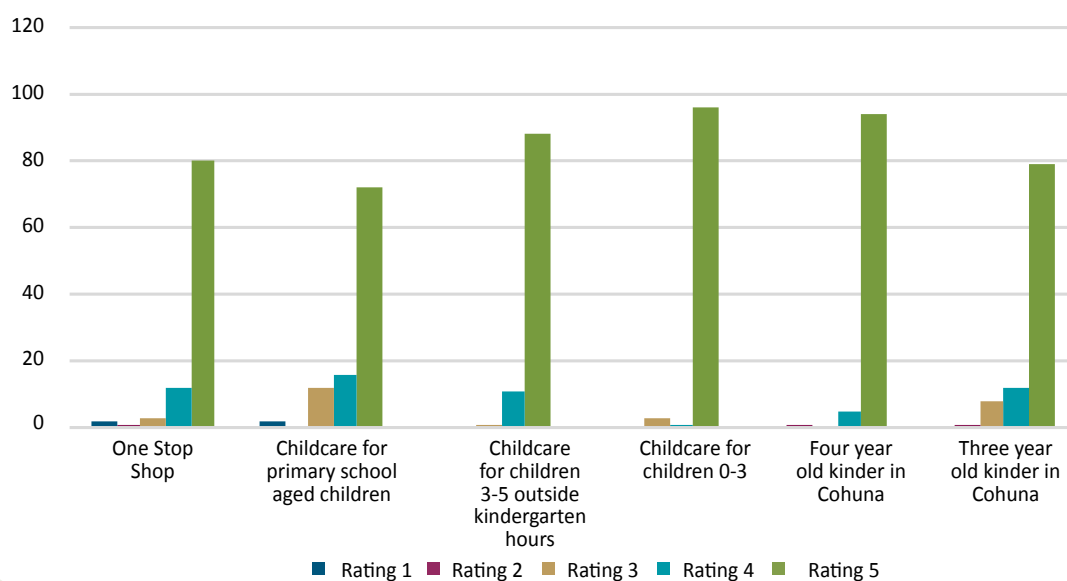


Table 22: importance of services



4.5 Consultation with Gannawarra Shire Council

1:1 discussions were held with key Shire staff, including the Manager of Children's Services, Maternal and Child Health Coordinator, Family Day Care Coordinator and Teachers at Cohuna and Leitchville.

Staff also acknowledged that the need for childcare in Cohuna was evident. However, they raised concerns about staffing any new service offers as they are already understaffed as it is. They mentioned that childcare has been tried before – out of school hours care at the local Catholic

School – but it did not take off despite families saying they wanted it. Some staff expressed concern of the impact of childcare on young children and also of the need to have childcare and kindergarten separately. All staff acknowledged that if childcare was available in Cohuna – it may well expand the numbers of families to The District and increase sustainability of viability of Cohuna and Leitchville schools and kindergartens in the long term.

Because of the flood crisis – there was not an opportunity at this point to discuss the project with senior management.



