

Introduction

The City of Whittlesea welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (also known as the Universal Access National Partnership or UANP) Review.

Context

Background

The City of Whittlesea is in Melbourne's metropolitan northern fringe, about 20 kilometres from the city centre. It is one of Melbourne's largest municipalities, covering a land area of approximately 490 square kilometres.

The majority of the City of Whittlesea population live in the urban areas. This is split across major established area precincts, the current growth area precincts, and significant future growth projected in the north of the municipality.

The Wurundjeri Willam people are the original inhabitants of the area and the traditional owners of this land.

City of Whittlesea is experiencing rapid population growth: In 2019 the estimated resident population of the City of Whittlesea is 229,791 and is expected to grow to 382,439 by 2040 (a 66.4 per cent increase).¹

In 2019, it is estimated that 3,706 children will be born, (71 births per week) and by 2040 this will increase to 5,709 births (109 births per week). By 2040 there will be approximately 52,483 more children and young people up to the age of 25 years than in 2019 and 20,590 more families.²

Emerging trends & Issues

The rapid population growth presents significant challenges including how demand for social, health and human services far outpaces availability. It is important to note that the historical under-investment and lack of timely infrastructure delivery in growth municipalities has had detrimental impacts on the wellbeing of our communities and families³. With further growth, this pressure is anticipated to continue to increase.

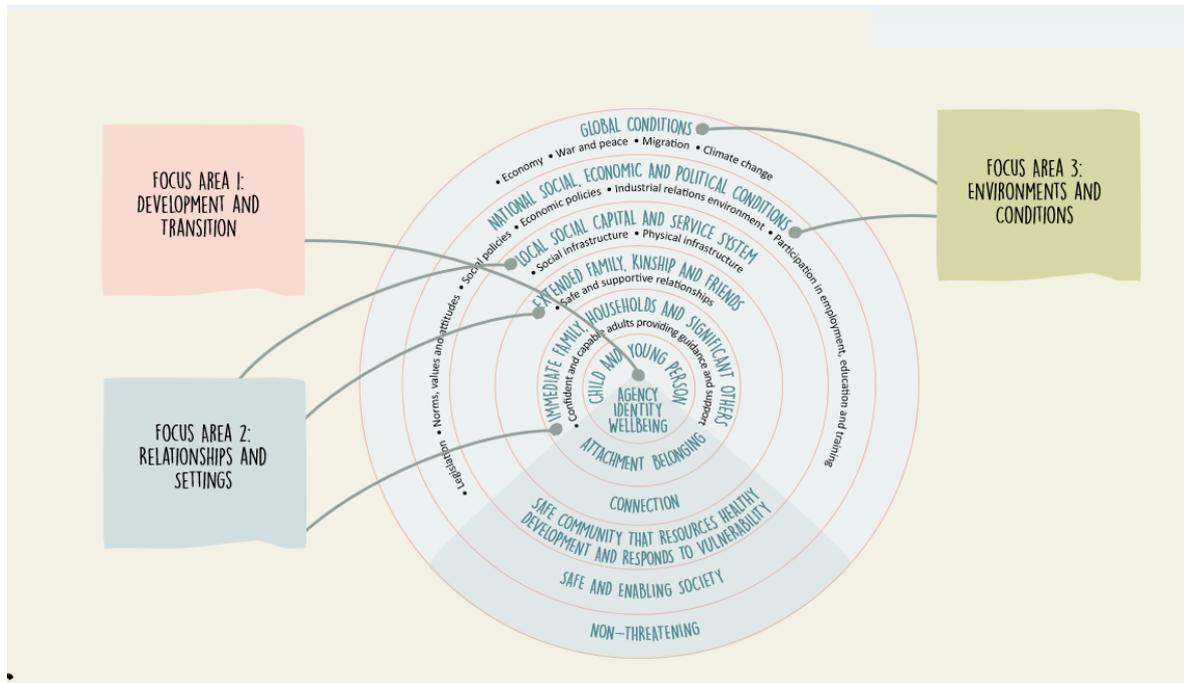
As with other interface growth councils, the City of Whittlesea community is dynamic and has many strengths, however it is also characterised by relatively low average incomes, poorer education and health outcomes, higher unemployment and higher levels of youth disengagement from education and employment when compared to Metropolitan Melbourne⁴. Residents in growth areas indicate that while they embrace the opportunity to be part of an evolving community, some families experience significant challenges and vulnerabilities.⁵

The City of Whittlesea acknowledges a broad definition of vulnerability as being relevant within a growth interface council context. Vulnerability includes social and geographic isolation, family violence, financial pressure, food insecurity, mental health, and being time poor.

Life Course

At the City of Whittlesea, we consider the needs of children from the early years, through the middle years, into older adolescence and young adulthood.

The health, development and wellbeing of children and young people, and the functioning of their families is shaped by environmental factors. These factors that impact on positive development of children and young people are illustrated below⁶: Reference Bronfenbrenner (1979)



Local Government's role

City of Whittlesea has the capacity to influence many of the determinants of health, wellbeing and positive development through a broader role as:



Response to Key Consultation Questions

Question 1:

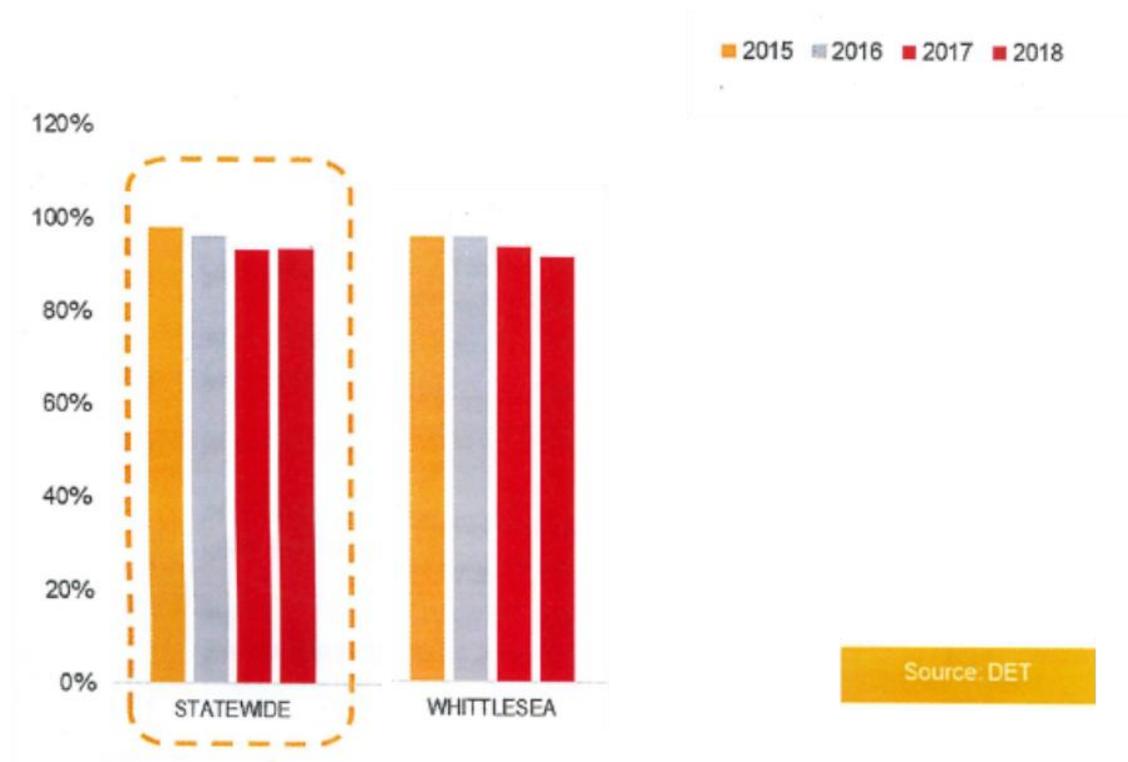
To what extent have UANP policy objectives, outcomes and outputs been achieved?

City of Whittlesea would agree that the outcome of providing universal access to and improving participation of all children in affordable, quality early education programs has been met as per the National Report: National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education - 2016 and 2017.

Within the City of Whittlesea:

- On average, 78% of eligible four-year-old children attend sessional four-year old kindergarten programs in Council facilities across the municipality, with long day care services providing families an alternative through their funded kindergarten programs.
City of Whittlesea as evidenced in the graph below is in line with Victoria State averages.

Proportion of eligible children enrolled in a funded four-year-old kindergarten program in the year before school



- Our service partners provide flexible session times to allow for more accessibility and choice. Families have options such as two days by 7.5-hour sessions or a range of three or four days of shorter sessions.
- Fees for 2019 within the Council facilities for those who do not receive any further subsidy range from \$1,360 to \$1,980 per annum and are not seen as a barrier to participation.
- Since the introduction of Universal Access and targeted programs City of Whittlesea has seen significant increase in the participation of Aboriginal and vulnerable children reflected in the table below.

LGA and Year	No. of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) enrolments	No. Early Start Kindergartens enrolments reported as BOTH ATSI and CKCP
Whittlesea 2015	40	196
Whittlesea 2016	45	223
Whittlesea 2017	57	239
Whittlesea 2018	71	242

Source DET April 2019

City of Whittlesea acknowledges that the challenges of this review are the degree to which the agreed objectives, outcomes and outputs of the UANP have been achieved through part funding of 600 hours per year of preschool by the federal government.

Many initiatives funded at a State or Territory level and supported through the work of local government and service providers have a significant impact on achieving the outcomes to the participation and access by vulnerable and disadvantaged children and Indigenous children. Referral pathways through Supported Playgroups and Maternal Child Health services promoting universal access is noteworthy as many children living in families experiencing disadvantage do not have home environments that provide opportunities that promote learning and development. These children are also less likely to participate in early childhood education and care services.

Program of Note

The Victorian Government has developed a Compact between state and local government who together provide collective stewardship of the early years' system. It sets out a shared partnership approach and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of state and local government in relation to the early years, as well as shared purpose, principles and strategic priorities. The Compact recognises the 'key role local government plays in supporting and responding to the needs of children and families at the local level.'⁷

City of Whittlesea is committed to maximising participation in the universal services of kindergarten and Maternal and Child Health. As the local fund holder for the Victorian Government's Best Start initiative, City of Whittlesea has responsibility to maximise children's participation in early childhood education, including kindergarten and supported playgroups, and Maternal and Child Health services for vulnerable community members. 'Best Start is a Victorian Department of Education and Training

place-based prevention and early intervention initiative focused on strengthening Early Childhood Education services for children and families. Best Start aims to give every child in Victoria the best start in life by optimising their learning and development and encouraging agencies and services to work together to address challenges faced by families and communities.’⁸

City of Whittlesea’s approach is aligned to the broad themes of the Department of Education & Training’s (DET) reform agenda of:

- Supporting higher quality services and reducing disadvantage in early education
- Providing more support to parents
- Making early childhood services accessible and inclusive
- Building a better service system.

Question 2:

What should the UANP target and measure, and how should data be collected and used?

UANP should target and measure key data around participation number of all eligible children and further analysis regarding the participation of vulnerable, disadvantaged and Indigenous children.

This set of measurements would allow for targeted campaigns where participation was below the national average.

Examples include:

- Proportion of eligible children enrolled in a funded four-year-old kindergarten program in the year before school
- Proportion of children known to child protection (CKCP) enrolled in a funded four-year-old kindergarten program in the year before school
- Number of Indigenous children enrolled in a funded four-year-old kindergarten program in the year before school.

Further sub set data can be collected to measure vulnerability and disadvantage with that information being able to inform where further funding could be provided for high need areas.

Examples include:

- Proportion of children enrolled in kindergarten whose placements attract a kindergarten fee subsidy (KFS)
- Proportion of kindergarten children with a disability.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides vital information relating to children’s development outcomes and vulnerability and should be part of the story in tracking the success of Universal Access.

As a national measurement to monitor Australian children's development this data is an effective and efficient tool. By providing a common ground on which people can work together, the AEDC results can enable communities to form partnerships to plan and implement activities, programs and services to help shape the future and wellbeing of children in Australia.

It is also important to measure that services are high quality and inclusive to support achievement of outcomes:

Examples include:

- Proportion of funded kindergarten programs meeting or exceeding National Quality Standard Area 1 (educational program and practice)
- Proportion of funded kindergarten programs meeting or exceeding National Quality Standard Area 7 (Leadership and Service management)
- Proportion of parents satisfied with their kindergarten service
- Collection of fees charged
- Number of funded kindergarten programs and places provided by local government, schools, not-for-profit community organisations (early years manager or parent volunteer committee) and private for profit organisations.

Question 3:

Are the current UANP arrangements efficient and effective and how could the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of UANP funding be improved?

City of Whittlesea does not receive funding directly under the current UANP arrangements, but we provide the following feedback from our service partners:

- Performance-tied funding frameworks have a place, but not necessarily when the benefits from an incentive/program have a long-term application.
- The capacity to respond at a local level requires flexibility so funds that are tied to a specific indicator limit the ability to address issues that arise for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities
- It has been our observation as we establish new services, that service providers have reported delays in receiving funding which has a financial impact on service viability. The feedback given is that the systems used at a State level need to improve to increase efficiency and accuracy of funding provided.

Question 4:

How does the preschool system operate across States and Territories and settings?

City of Whittlesea would highly recommend the current strength of the delivery model in that it avoids a one-size-fits-all approach be maintained.

The City of Whittlesea leases at low cost, 35 facilities to community-based, not-for-profit organisations that have experience in the provision of early childhood education services for children, with a focus on delivery of 4 and 3-year-old sessional kindergarten. Of those services, 11 are managed by not-for-profit early years manager organisations, five are managed by Not for Profit organisations, 16 services are managed by volunteer parent committees and three services are managed by government schools.

This method contributes to the output of the UANP by implementing accessible, quality early childhood programs which meet the needs of parents and communities at a cost which does not present a barrier to participation, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Question 5:

Based on your experiences, should changes be made to future national policy on preschool for children in the year before full-time school, and why? What improvements would these changes make? What works well with the current UANP arrangements?

Future National Policy

Under the current National Partnership Agreement, the Federal Government provides funding for five hours with the State Government contributing funding for 10 hours of kindergarten per child every week. The community and local governments provide a further 35 per cent towards the total funding required for 15 hours of attendance through parent fees and fundraising. The current National Partnership Agreement is due to expire in December 2019 and no indication has been provided that Federal Government funding will continue beyond this time.

City of Whittlesea seeks a long-term commitment from the Federal Government to fund five hours of four-year-old kindergarten per week for every child in the year before they start primary school. This will mean that each child has universal access to attend a total of 600 hours of kindergarten during this period.

An ambitious future policy would be to take the next step with expanding universal access to two years for every child in the years before they start primary school. Evidence also shows that two years are better than one when it comes to early learning. Taking part in a quality kindergarten program at

an earlier age leads to positive effects on child development. It has even greater benefits for children who need extra support, or are in vulnerable circumstances.

Why universal access is important to the City of Whittlesea

- **Our local children are in high need of access to quality early childhood education.**

Results from the AEDC show that children living in Thomastown, Lalor, Epping and Mill Park experience higher levels of developmental vulnerability in two or more domains when compared to results from Victoria.¹⁰

- **Our families can't afford to cover extra child-care fees should they lose a day of kindergarten.**

Fourteen per cent of our households are experiencing mortgage stress¹¹ and 32 per cent are experiencing rental stress,¹² rates that are significantly higher than for Greater Melbourne (11 per cent and 27 per cent respectively). Working families could face an extra \$2,000 per year in child care costs (even after subsidies) and many of our families won't be able to afford those costs.

- **High levels of family violence.**

The City of Whittlesea has the highest rate of family violence in the northern region and one of the highest in Metropolitan Melbourne (1,401 per 100,000 of population, compared to Victoria 1,285).¹³ The most vulnerable children have the most to benefit from 15 hours a week of preschool.

What works well with the current UANP?

Access to early childhood education to all children, regardless of personal circumstances.

Universal access means that services are available to all children, irrespective of their particular circumstances.¹⁴ Participation is not based on personal circumstances - for example, it is not just available to children of working families.¹⁵ A universal approach has the best opportunity to reach all children who will benefit most from access to high-quality early education care, with significant potential to boost participation of children experiencing disadvantage.¹⁶

Improvements that could be made?

The City of Whittlesea strongly supports governments and providers building a better understanding of users and their needs, putting users at the centre of service provision, and an outcome focus. Funding that could be more flexible to support the integration of local place-based delivery would be highly desirable.

The nature of the current UANP arrangements makes it difficult for providers to balance the interests of organisational financial sustainability with opportunities for better collaboration and partnerships that may optimise services.

In many instances, the current models of funding don't incorporate any consideration of the costs of incentives to outreach to vulnerable or new communities. This particularly constrains the reach of services in remote, regional or growth areas.

Additional models of funding could be used to encourage services to adapt earlier to local service's needs.

Services for children, young people, their families and the community should be effective and efficient and aimed at improving outcomes for the whole population, as well as addressing those most in need.

City of Whittlesea's goal is to use an integrated approach involving key partners and stakeholders to ensure that early childhood education services, and secondary and/or support services for the community are accessible, responsive and supportive of the community.

City of Whittlesea's community facilities in the growth corridor are designed to provide universal services (early childhood education and Maternal and Child Health Services) targeted at children and families with young children, and in some facilities, consulting spaces that can provide direct services to children, young people, families and the community with problems and conditions that are either mild or moderate (secondary services) or chronic, complex and severe (tertiary services).

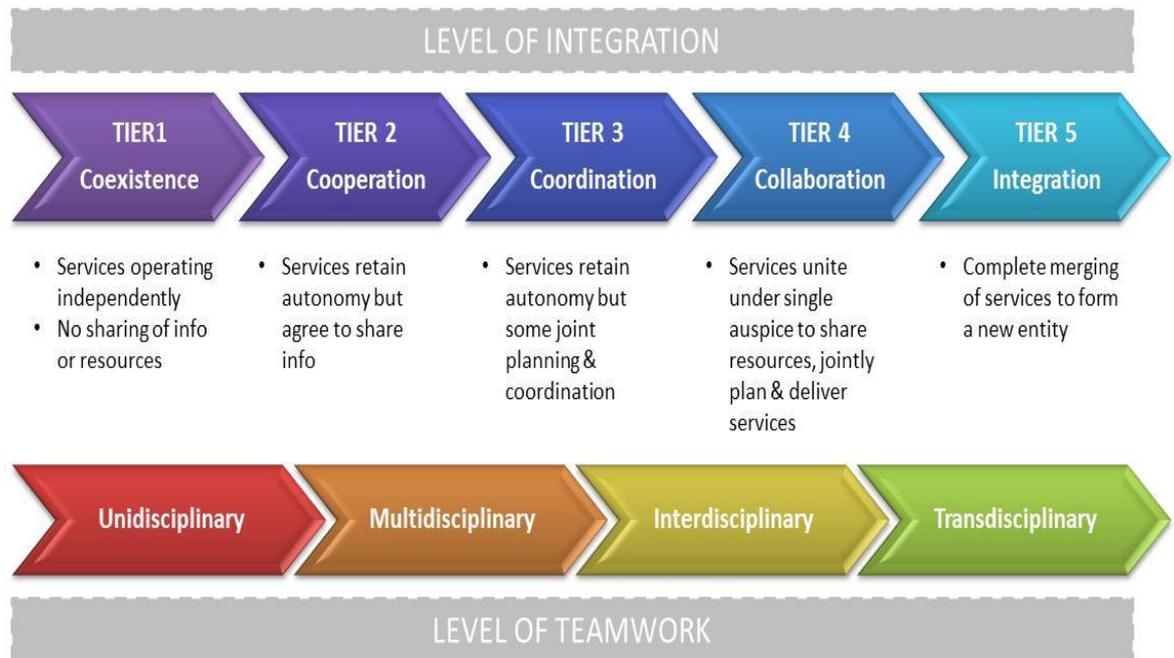
The **integrated tiered system**:

- Has the capacity to respond to emerging problems and conditions, rather than waiting until problems become so entrenched and severe that they are finally eligible for service
- Focuses on targeting problems as they emerge through the secondary and tertiary layers, rather than people as risk categories, thus avoiding unnecessary stigmatising
- Aims to strengthen universal and secondary services, facilitating collaboration and capacity to deliver prevention and early intervention strategies
- Would have outreach bases co-located with universal services to facilitate collaboration and consultant support.

Innovative models of service delivery, reflective of the place-based approach, and that describe a collaborative and integrated way of working, will support City of Whittlesea's strategic direction.

City of Whittlesea's goal is to continue to move towards integrated service provision to respond to changing families and the community, which have become more complex and diverse.

The following figure shows the continuum of integration, with the aim of City of Whittlesea's integrated service delivery approach achieving Tier 3, however moving towards elements of the collaboration which exists in Tier 4.



Further Information

For further information regarding this review input please contact Wendy Castles, Manager Family, Children & Young People on 9404 8880 or wendy.castles@whittlesea.vic.gov.au.

¹ Forecast id (2019). *City of Whittlesea Population Forecasts*. Accessed Oct 2019: www.forecast.id.com.au/whittlesea

² Forecast id (2019). *City of Whittlesea Population Forecasts*. Accessed Oct 2019: www.forecast.id.com.au/whittlesea

³ See of example, Parliament of Victoria, Outer Suburban/Interface Serviced and Development Committee (December 2012)

⁴ Norooha, j. (2013). *One Melbourne or two? Implications of Population Growth for Infrastructure and Services in Interface Areas*

⁵ City of Whittlesea (2015). *Growing Pains*. Melbourne. City of Whittlesea

⁶ Brofenbrenner, U (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. ((ISBN 0-674-22457-4)

⁷ State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training (2017). *Early Years; COMMUNIQUE ONE; This is the first communique from the Early years Compact Board which met FOR THE FIRST TIME on 18 August 2017*. Accessed 17 May 2018:

⁸ State Government of Victoria, Department of Education and Training (2018). *Best Start Reflections 2017*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Training

⁹ Department of Health and Human Services (2016). *Roadmap for Reform; strong families, safe children*. Melbourne: Department of Health and Human Services

¹⁰(AEDC) Commonwealth of Australia (2015). *Australian Early Development Census: Community Profile 2015*. Available: www.aedc.gov.au/ClientData/CommunityProfiles/20075.pdf [accessed January 2017]

¹¹ Atlas id (2017). *City of Whittlesea Mortgage Stress*. Available: www.altas.id.com.au/whittlesea [accessed October 2017].

¹² Atlas id (2017). *City of Whittlesea Rental Stress*. Available: www.altas.id.com.au/whittlesea [accessed October 2017].

¹³ Crime Statistics Agency Victoria (2017), *Number and Rate per 100,000 population of family incidents by Local Government Area July 2011 to June 2016*. Data request April 2017. Data extracted from LEAP on 18th April 2017 and is subject to change.

¹⁴ *Early Learning: Everyone Benefits (2017)*. State of early learning in Australia 2017. Canberra, ACT: Early Childhood Australia.

¹⁵ *Early Learning: Everyone Benefits (2017)*. State of early learning in Australia 2017. Canberra, ACT: Early Childhood Australia, p.12.

¹⁶ *Early Learning: Everyone Benefits (2017)*. State of early learning in Australia 2017. Canberra, ACT: Early Childhood Australia, p.12.