



Yarra Ranges Council

Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021–2025

Final Evaluation Report



Acknowledgement of Country



Yarra Ranges Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nations as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of these lands and waterways. We pay our respects to all Elders, past, present, and emerging, who have been, and always will be, integral to the story of our region. We proudly share custodianship to care for Country together.



Artist credit: Ash Firebrace is an Aboriginal artist who lives and works on Wurundjeri Country.

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Executive Summary

The *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* requires local governments to develop a Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan every four years, following general council elections. Councils must annually review and report against the progress of their plans.

In 2021, Yarra Ranges Council (Council) endorsed and began implementing the Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021–2025 (the Plan). This Evaluation Report highlights key initiatives delivered by Council over the past four years, with a particular focus on those that will continue into the next iteration of the Plan. It serves as the final review and complements the Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021–2025 Progress Report Year 2, which outlined initiatives delivered in the first two years of the Plan.

This Evaluation Report does not include all actions undertaken by Council over the past four years. Instead, it spotlights examples of significant achievements across the seven health and wellbeing priorities, the Community Grants Program, advocacy priorities, and the Health & Wellbeing Advisory and Steering Committees. Throughout the lifespan of the Plan, Council has played a vital role in fostering collaborative partnerships and advocacy across the region, engaging with other levels of government, services, and community groups. Council also plays an essential role in delivering services, facilities, and infrastructure that support the health and wellbeing of the Yarra Ranges community.

To view Council's Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025, Action Plan, and Mid-term Summary report, visit: [Health and wellbeing plan Yarra Ranges Council](#)



Priority 1: Respond to public health emergencies

Goal: Communities recover from Covid-19 and other emergencies.

Healing in Our Gardens

Healing in Our Gardens was a Council-led program, supported by Habitat for Humanity and community volunteers, launched in September 2022. It helped residents affected by the June 2021 storms through garden-inspired, trauma-informed events, rebuilding social connection and restoring hope.

More than 50 residents attended the launch, including Mayor Cr Jim Child and award-winning landscape designer Phillip Johnson. Over 160 families participated, receiving support to restore their storm-affected gardens. The program gained national recognition, featuring on Gardening Australia on ABC, highlighting the impact of community generosity in helping residents heal and rebuild.



Improving Council's Response to Emergency Events

Council plays a key role in responding to emergency events by coordinating relief efforts, deploying staff, and ensuring timely public communication. During an emergency, Emergency Relief Centres (ERCs) provide shelter, food, and support, with Council staff assisting on-site. In power outages, Power and Shower locations are identified and promoted. Council also shares real-time updates from emergency services via social media and website alerts, ensuring residents stay informed and supported.

Building Local Emergency Preparedness Skills

Immediately following COVID-19 lockdowns and the June 2021 storms, Council hosted a suite of free workshops to help community members build personal capacity to respond when local emergency needs arise. Opportunities included Chainsaw Training, Mental Health First Aid, and Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP). Council also invested in programs such as the 'Dad's Bush Playgroup', run with EcoExplorers and Mountain Men, supporting mental health recovery and community connection.

Priority 2: Tackle climate change and its impact on health

Goal: People and businesses are resilient, prepared, and able to mitigate the potential health impacts of climate change.

Firestick Program to Heal Country

Council is expanding its planned burning program, supported by the Firesticks Program and Fire as a Land Management Tool Policy. The program recognises fire's vital role in supporting community and environmental health and is backed by Council's Nature Plan 2024–2034, which outlines resourcing for burns on Council-managed reserves.

In June 2024, Council achieved a milestone with its first cultural burn on Council-managed land at Spadonis Reserve. Led by Wurundjeri Custodian and Firesticks Officer Darren Wandin, and supported by the Bushlands Team, the burn was calmly delivered, aiming to reduce weedy grasses and stimulate native growth. Cultural burns help communities adapt to the health impacts of climate change by fostering a deeper connection to land and promoting environmental stewardship.



My Energy and Water Saver Kit

Yarra Ranges Council, in partnership with Knox and Maroondah councils, has been offering free energy and water saving kits through local libraries. Residents can borrow a kit to assess their home, business, or community space for leaks, high energy use, and design flaws. This initiative supports businesses and households to save money, reduce emissions, and increase the community's adaptation to the health impacts of climate change. The kits have been borrowed 564 times from Your Libraries between their introduction in 2022 and March 2025.

Preparing Residents for Extreme Weather Events

To help residents and businesses prepare for extreme weather events, Council provides resources on its website, including Auslan videos and preparation advice for fires, floods, storms, heatwaves, and power outages. During emergencies, public spaces like libraries offer refuge for those without adequate heating or cooling. Council also maintains 19 Neighbourhood Safer Places (also known as Bushfire Places of Last Resort) across the municipality.

Priority 3: Increase healthy eating

Goal: People have the capacity to consume healthy food, built on a sustainable system providing access to healthy, affordable food for all.

Community Gardens Network

Less than two years ago, Council launched the Community Garden Network, bringing together existing community gardens around Yarra Ranges to connect, share resources, and support each other. The network meets monthly for one hour, featuring guest speakers, grant opportunities, and skills development.

In addition to establishing the network, Council has also recently developed guidelines for creating new community gardens and a dedicated webpage on the Council website that shares information and videos to showcase each garden. This network has since inspired new community gardens to be created, such as in the Hills and Urban region.

Another major achievement was Council helping to establish insurance for community gardens, the first of its kind in Australia, setting a national precedent. By fostering connection and sustainability, this initiative strengthens local food resilience and community wellbeing.



Gardens for Harvest

The Gardens for Harvest Program is offered free to residents of Yarra Ranges. It provides workshops and newsletters from growing, harvesting to preparing food. Many workshops are held in Community Gardens, leveraging the gardens and offering collaboration opportunities. Membership has increased by 55% since 2021, with now more than 1700 subscribers.

Addressing Local Food Insecurity

Council mapped the local food system to identify key challenges such as affordability and access to fresh food, as well as mapping key strengths such as community gardens and emergency food relief. Insights informed Council's submission to Victoria's Food Security Inquiry, calling for investment in food infrastructure and support for regenerative farming. This advocacy supports healthier, more resilient communities in the face of rising living costs and climate change.

Priority 4: Increase active living

Goal: People have capacity to walk and be physically active in an inclusive culture.

Creating a Place for Women in Sport

Council's Sport and Recreation Team have been working closely with local clubs to improve outcomes for women and girls, particularly in traditionally male-dominated sports. Initiatives include Active Bystander Training, RespectED programs (facilitated by Respect Australia), Fair Access Policy education, and support to develop Gender Equity Action Plans.

In partnership with Knox and Maroondah councils and Inspiro Health, Yarra Ranges Council helped develop the Sport for All Gender Inclusive Toolkit – a practical resource supporting clubs to create safer, more inclusive environments. Council also adopted the Melbourne East Region Fair Access Policy, committing to ongoing work towards equitable access. Yarra Ranges currently leads the eastern region in AFL participation for women and girls but acknowledges there's more to do to achieve true gender equity in sport.



Increasing Accessible Footpaths to Encourage Walking

Council has identified 246 km of missing footpath links across 570 projects, with planned upgrades prioritising routes near activity centres, schools, and community services, and meeting universal access standards. Features such as pram-friendly crossings, clear sightlines, and improved lighting make walking safer and easier for everyone, encouraging active, healthy lifestyles across the community.

Belsay Reserve Chirnside Urban Park

The transformation of Belsay Reserve on Kimberley Drive has turned an empty space into a vibrant, flight-themed park that promotes active play and outdoor recreation. Featuring a balloon play structure (the first of its kind in Australia), the reserve also includes a flying fox, trampolines, sensory play areas, wetlands, walking trails, accessible equipment, and barbecue facilities. This playspace is one of the ways Council is encouraging active, healthy lifestyles for people of all abilities.

Priority 5: Improve mental wellbeing and social connections

Goal: People have good mental wellbeing through strong community connections, family supports and ease of access to mental health services.

Pathways for Carers

Pathways for Carers is a monthly program supported by Council for carers of people with disability or mental health challenges. It provides unpaid carers with opportunities to socially connect and enjoy light physical activity in nature. One runs in Mt Evelyn, led by Mount Evelyn Community House and Reading Room, and the second in Healesville, in partnership with Healesville Living and Learning Centre and VMCH Carer Supports.

Each month, 20-30 carers participate, walking together before gathering for morning tea, sponsored by Bendigo Bank, Beechworth Bakery, and VMCH. Guest speakers from local carer support, community health, and disability services are invited to share about their relevant services. Running for nearly 10 years, carers have reported that the program has helped reduce their feelings of isolation and increased their likelihood of seeking support.



The Big Anxiety Festival

As part of The Big Anxiety – Melbourne Naarm in 2022, Council hosted a regional arts festival reimagining mental health care for the 21st century through creative expression. Exhibitions, public programs and events explored themes of emotional wellbeing, trauma, and community recovery post-disaster. Evaluation of Yarra Ranges programs showed 100% of people surveyed saw the value of creativity in supporting mental health, 76% felt more connected to community, 66% gained a better understanding of mental health, 44% were more likely to seek support, and 43% learned where to access local services.

Neighbourhood Houses

Neighbourhood Houses are at the heart of Yarra Ranges communities, bringing people together to connect, learn, and contribute through social, educational, recreational, and support activities. Welcoming people of all ages and abilities, these 12 community centres support mental wellbeing by building relationships, strengthening belonging, and reducing loneliness. In 2023, they generated over \$52 million in community value, including \$6 million from improved quality of life through social connection, with 3,682 participants engaging in activities each week.

Sit, Meet, and Eat, Community Spaces in Upwey

The Sit, Meet and Eat Community Spaces project in Upwey transformed two key locations, Main Street and Morris Road, into welcoming, accessible places that support social connection and community wellbeing. Designed to reflect and uplift the township's "village" like character, the spaces bookend the main trading area and offer flexible seating, shade, and all-abilities access. They can be activated by local businesses with tables and umbrellas or used informally by the community as places to rest, meet friends, or simply watch the world go by.

Funded through the State Government's COVIDSafe Outdoor Activation Program, the project builds on the success of temporary carpark dining introduced during lockdowns, providing permanent infrastructure that fosters stronger community connections and supports local economic and mental health recovery.



Environmental Volunteers

Council supports over 60 environmental volunteer groups, including Friends Of and Landcare Groups. Volunteers spend their time weeding, planting, collecting litter, and educating the community about local flora and fauna. Many volunteers report that time in nature and connecting with others gives them a sense of belonging, new friendships, and improved mental wellbeing.

Middle Years (MY) Conversations

As part of the Upper Yarra Partnership, Council led the Middle Years Conversations project, involving 182 students from eight primary schools in the Upper Yarra and Valley regions. The sessions, co-designed with Youth Ambassadors, helped children explore their wellbeing after COVID-19 and identify what supports their mental health. Six schools then implemented student-led projects, including sensory gardens and mindfulness spaces, which helped students feel proud of their achievements and more connected to school life.

Priority 6: Prevent violence against women and children

Goal: Women and children live free from abuse and violence in a culture of gender equity and respect.

Community Changemakers Program

The Community Changemakers Program supports emerging leaders from diverse backgrounds who are passionate about creating positive change. This biennial initiative offers 20 fully funded places for Yarra Ranges residents to build skills and meaningful connections. Through online and in-person sessions, participants explore asset-based community development, community engagement, cultural safety, diversity and inclusion, advocacy, and public speaking.

By amplifying the voices of people with lived experience of discrimination and systemic barriers, this program fosters a culture of gender equity, inclusion, and respect – which is key to preventing violence at a grassroots level. Many participants reported increased confidence and growth in their leadership journey. Others emphasised the power of collaboration and recognising individual strengths. One participant shared:

“I realised that my perspective and experiences are valuable, and I have the ability to make a difference.”



Margins to the Mainstream

Margins to the Mainstream (M2M) was a regional project led by Women's Health East and Women with Disabilities Victoria, with Yarra Ranges Council on the Advisory Group. It aimed to prevent violence against women with disabilities by challenging ableism and sexism. Ten women formed an Experts Group, participating in initiatives such as co-designing 16 social media tiles and six videos, shared widely during a 16 Days of Activism campaign in 2021.

Dad's Chat

Dad's Chat is a four-week strength-based workshop for dads and male carers, focused on communication, emotional regulation, child development, parenting styles, and attachment. It was developed after consulting with over 130 men across Yarra Ranges and Maroondah Council regions. In Term 1 2025, 37 participants reported stronger bonds with their children, improved communication, and greater connection with peers and community.

Priority 7: Reduce harmful alcohol and drug use

Goal: People are safe from the harmful effects of alcohol and other drugs.

Local Drug Action Group

The Local Drug Action Team (LDAT) Program supports communities to work together to prevent and minimise the harm caused by alcohol and other drugs. The 2024 Community Action Plan (CAP), developed with community partners including Eastern Health, EACH, the Department of Education, Victoria Police, and Inspiro, was approved in February 2024.

In response to local school needs, two student and one parent educational sessions were delivered in the Upper Yarra region, engaging 72 participants (46 students and 26 parents). Surveys showed that 68% of parents reported increased confidence in supporting their child, and 67% of all participants reported improved knowledge of alcohol and drug harms. A new CAP is being developed for early 2025.



EMR Alcohol Flagship Group

Council is an active member of the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) Alcohol Flagship Group, which brings together local councils to collaborate on alcohol-related harm prevention.

Through this group, Council has shared its Food Systems Mapping, highlighting local alcohol outlet data, and has contributed to discussions on alcohol policy and Liquor Accords. The group also provides opportunities to connect with organisations like Turning Point and strengthen relationships with neighbouring councils to support regional approaches to alcohol harm reduction.

Spot Checks on Tobacco Retailers

Council is funded by the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) to conduct spot checks aimed at preventing tobacco sales to minors and reducing harm from smoking. Since 2021, 239 retailer spot checks and 142 test purchases have been conducted, with only eight resulting in illegal sales. A further 182 checks at outdoor dining areas found no patrons smoking, suggesting education efforts have been effective in driving behaviour change. Council continues to educate businesses on recent legislative reforms, including the ban on e-cigarette sales outside pharmacies and new tobacco licensing requirements.

Health & Wellbeing Advisory Committee

The Health and Wellbeing Advisory Committee (HWAC) was inducted in January 2023 and meets every six weeks. It brings together 12 community members who represent all nine wards in Yarra Ranges. They provide advice, input and community voice to inform Council programs, plans and policies.

To date, the HWAC has contributed to a range of Council initiatives, including the Aquatics Strategy, Housing Strategy, Lilydale Lake Masterplan, and Disability Action Plan. The committee has also participated in a combined advisory committee meeting and supported mental wellbeing initiatives such as the Mental Health First Aid delivery and Living Stories Project. Additionally, they have provided guidance on consultation approaches for the upcoming Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025-2029.

Council has seven formal advisory committees, each offering valuable insights and diverse lived experiences. These committees are deeply valued and play a vital role in shaping Council's work.



Health & Wellbeing Steering Committee

The Health and Wellbeing Steering Committee was established in 2023 and meets quarterly. It brings together key service partners to support alignment in planning and delivering health and wellbeing outcomes. The committee fosters shared advocacy, strengthens collaboration and provides a service-sector perspective to Council's programs, plans and policies.

Community Grant & Partnerships

Between 2021–2025, Yarra Ranges Council has distributed over \$5.4 million in funding across 770 approved grants, supporting community-led initiatives that foster inclusion, resilience and wellbeing.

The Community Grants Program is a key delivery mechanism for the Health & Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025 with criteria that prioritise accessibility, equity, and connection. Almost all funded projects help build a sense of belonging – one of the most powerful ways to improve community health outcomes.

Council supports creative, strengths-based initiatives that tap into community knowledge and respond to local needs, helping to build more connected, inclusive and vibrant communities across Yarra Ranges.

	No. of Grants	Fund
2023-2027 Partnership Grants		
Connected & Healthy Communities	22	\$1,468,000
Creative Communities	18	\$764,000
Annual Grants		
Community Development	170	\$876,663
Arts & Heritage	91	\$623,845
Festivals & Events	73	\$556,085
Monthly Grants	493	\$399,844
Recreation and Sport Capital Development Grant	53	\$731,769
Total	920	\$5,420,206

Examples of Projects Funded



Accessible arts and storytelling workshops



Nature walking groups



Community gardens



Community dinners and cooking classes



Outdoor music and arts events



Publishing local histories and zines



Uniforms and travel bursaries for young athletes



Life skills and outdoor education for youth



Emergency relief and legal assistance



Mentoring programs and peer support groups

Community Voices and Feedback

"[This cooking program] definitely allowed for skills learning, how to cook easily simple but healthy meals for one person"

"...what is really special to me is to see the new connections made around the table, hearing the introductions and little chatter of a new connecting community"

Advocacy Priorities

Council plays a vital role advocating for systemic change to improve the conditions that shape community health. During the Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025, Council committed to four key advocacy priorities addressing the social determinants of health, systemic and accessibility barriers across the region.



Improving Access to Mental Health Services

Improving access to mental health services became a major initiative of the Council Plan 2021-2025. As part of this commitment, Council delivered the Living Stories Project. Launched in October 2023, this project amplified the voices of six residents with lived experience of mental health challenges. These stories were a powerful tool in destigmatising mental illness and encouraging help seeking.

Council also improved local access to information by updating its website with clear, comprehensive mental health support listings and creating two print brochures, one for the general community and one tailored to young people.

Following advocacy to be included in the State Government's rollout of adult mental health services, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Local opened in Lilydale in 2024. This free service for people aged over 25 years offers support onsite or via outreach across Yarra Ranges, improving their accessibility.



Increasing Social and Affordable Housing and Reducing Homelessness

Council has taken a proactive approach to address housing affordability and rising rates of homelessness. In 2022, Council appointed a Homelessness and Housing Officer and refreshed the Yarra Ranges Homelessness Protocol in 2023 strengthening relationships with local homelessness services to provide outreach and rapid response.

Since 2019, Council has committed over \$2 million in grant funding to local organisations supporting people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. Council also adopted a 15-year Housing Strategy in 2024 to guide the type and location of new housing, including actions to support social and affordable housing.

Council continues to partner with the Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance and Homelessness Charter Group to advocate for increased social and affordable housing in the region.



Securing Funding for an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Service

Improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing became a major initiative of the Council Plan 2021-2025. Council partnered with Oonah Health & Community Services Aboriginal Corporation to support the establishment of the Healesville Belonging Place – a purpose-built, integrated Aboriginal health facility.

Council supported Oonah through business planning, a feasibility study, and schematic design. In 2023, the planning application was submitted. While Council's primary role has now concluded, it continues to support Aboriginal health and self-determination.



Improving Public Transport Access

Council has long advocated for better transport options in outer Yarra Ranges, where limited services affect access to work, education, and community life. A major achievement during the Health & Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025 was the development of Connected, the Yarra Ranges Integrated Transport Strategy 2020-2040, which now guides long-term transport planning and investment.

The strategy responds to community feedback calling for improved public transport, safer walking and cycling links, and more accessible neighbourhoods. It provides a shared roadmap to deliver a safer, healthier, and better connected Yarra Ranges for all.

Key Learnings

The most effective outcomes of the Health & Wellbeing Plan 2021–2025 have come from collaborative, place-based approaches that reflect the strengths and assets of Yarra Ranges communities. Initiatives that applied a health equity lens – considering factors like age, gender, culture and place – led to more accessible and inclusive outcomes. Council has also strengthened its focus on evaluation, sharing key learnings with stakeholders and closing the loop by reporting back to the community on the outcomes of key initiatives. This work is integral to building more meaningful community partnerships and guiding future investment informed by evidence-based practice.

Conclusion

The Yarra Ranges community has faced many challenges over the lifespan of the Health & Wellbeing Plan 2021–2025. Events such as COVID-19, frequent extreme weather – including the June 2021 storms – and the loss of funding for essential services like the Youth Health Hub have significantly impacted people's health and wellbeing.

Despite this, the community has shown great resilience. This strength provides a solid foundation for addressing key health and wellbeing issues over the next four years through Council's upcoming Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2025–2029. Council remains committed to ensuring community voice and lived experience continue to shape policies, procedures, and programs. Strategic partnerships and advocacy on key health and wellbeing issues will remain a priority to improve outcomes for all Yarra Ranges communities.



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