

6.2.7 Koo Wee Rup Region Feasibility Study Outcomes

Responsible GM: Lili Rosic
Author: Caroline Gillies

Recommendation(s)

That Council:

- Notes the Koo Wee Rup Feasibility Study, and infrastructure required in the region to facilitate access to 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten in accordance with the State Government's Best Start Best Life reforms.
- Advocates to the State Government to fully fund and deliver a two-room kindergarten facility at Koo Wee Rup Primary School by the commencement of the 2024 school year.
- Delegates authority to the CEO, and her delegate, to negotiate the terms of the Heads of Agreement associated with the new facility on the school site.

Attachments

Nil

Executive Summary

Council is supporting early years kindergarten service providers operating from Council's facilities to implement the state government's 3-year-old kindergarten reform of 15 hours of free kindergarten per week for all 3-year-old children by 2029. In 2022, the State Government introduced further reforms, Best Start Best Life reforms, which includes free 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten from 2023, and the introduction of "Pre Prep" as 30 hours per week for 4 year old kindergarten to commence in Cardinia from 2032.

A Kindergarten Infrastructure and Services Plan was completed in 2021, which identified the need to increase service capacity in the Southern Region of the municipality. A feasibility study for the Koo Wee Rup Region (incorporating the townships of Koo Wee Rup, Lang Lang and Bayles) was completed late-2022, to assist Council to identify the current and future kindergarten infrastructure needed to service the region.

The feasibility study identified that in the KWR region, a new kindergarten facility will be required by 2024, and upgrades to Council's existing kindergarten facilities will be required in subsequent years to implement the Best Start Best Life reforms and policy and enable all 3- and 4-year-old children to attend kindergarten. Significant funding will be required to facilitate the delivery of the infrastructure.

Council officers have commenced conversations with the Department of Education and Training to design and deliver a modular-constructed Kindergarten on School Site (KOSS) at Koo Wee Rup Primary School to meet demand in 2024. The DET has advised officers that to proceed with the delivery of this modular unit, a Heads of Agreement detailing Council's commitment to lease and oversee operations of the facility must be signed. The Heads of Agreement stipulates that Council contributes to the loose item fit-out of the facility, manages central enrolment/registrations and oversees responsibility of maintenance of the facility for the life of the lease. It is proposed that the CEO, or her delegate, negotiates the terms of the

Agreement. It is intended that council's responsibility is limited to including the new facility in its central enrolment/kindergarten bookings program and that the state government fully funds the modular facility including the maintenance and fit out.

A further report on the significant capital upgrades that will be required across the Shire and the financing and funding that will be required from the state government to deliver the kindergarten Best Government Best Start Best Life reforms will be presented to Council at a future meeting. Council officers estimate that approximately \$64M will be required to deliver the 3-year-old kindergarten reform. The cost to deliver the 4-year-old kindergarten reform is still being determined and expected to be a similar cost.

Background

In 2018, the State Government announced the introduction of 3 year old kinder reform, commencing with a minimum of 5 hours per week in 2021 and increasing to 15 hours per week by 2029. In order to plan for the rollout of 3 year old kinder, each Council has a Kindergarten Infrastructure and Service Plan (KISP), which was prepared in partnership with Council and the Department of Education and Training. In 2022, the State Government introduced further reforms through the Best Start Best Life reforms, which includes free 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten from 2023 and the introduction of "Pre Prep" as 30 hours per week for 4-year-old kindergarten.

Cardinia's KISP identified the need to increase service capacity in the Southern Region of the municipality, namely around Koo Wee Rup, Lang Lang and Bayles which currently consists of three separate kindergarten facilities.

Enrolment trends over the past few years have demonstrated that service demand is increasing faster than anticipated by the KISP. The latest Best Start Best Life reforms are and will continue to impact service demand in the Koo Wee Rup Region.

A Feasibility Study of the Koo Wee Rup Region (incorporating the townships of Koo Wee Rup, Lang Lang and Bayles) was completed in late-2022, to assist Council to understand the current and future kindergarten facility requirements in the region to deliver the Best Start Best Life state government policy. The study also included a condition assessment of the existing kindergarten facilities.

This KWR region has three Council owned Kindergarten facilities and two private, for-profit childcare centres. To the north of the Koo Wee Rup Region there are a further three Council Kindergartens and two private for-profit childcare centres located in the rural townships of Bunyip, Garfield and Nar Nar Goon.

There are currently an equivalent of 2.8 Council kindergarten rooms (Koo Wee Rup, Lang Lang and Bayles) across the region which is based on 30 licenced places per room. The feasibility study identified the following increased capacity is required to meet demand:

- A total of 4.3 kindergarten rooms are required by 2024 to meet current demand based on an offering of 15 hours of funded kindergarten for both 3 and 4 year olds. This is projected to grow to a total of 5.1 kindergarten rooms by 2029 when the 3 year old reform is required to be fully implemented.
- With the roll out of the 30 hours of 4 year old kindergarten reform required to be implemented by 2032, a total of 8.2 total rooms will be required across the region.
- The peak in 3 and 4 year old population is not expected to be reached until 2040 where an equivalent of 9.2 rooms will be required. It will be extremely difficult to meet

this demand without significant funding from the state government. How the private sector will respond to this increased demand is unknown at this time. Families not requiring lengthy days of child care may prefer to attend a free sessional kindergarten service rather than pay child care fees.

The feasibility study recommends the following sequencing of works to meet capacity demand for the region as part of the reform:

1. Urgent and immediate delivery of a new modular-construction kindergarten in Koo Wee Rup township to meet local needs
2. Delivery of additional kindergarten room in the Lang Lang township, with the most appropriate, cost effective option determined as a new 2 room kindergarten facility at an existing Council owned site by 2025/26.
3. Redevelopment of the existing Koo Wee Rup kindergarten and MCH facility into a 2-3 room integrated facility by 2026/27
4. Delivery of minor improvements at the Bayles kindergarten facility to address building accessibility, compliance and condition/maintenance issues by 2027/28.

These works are not committed and significant funding will be required to build this infrastructure.

A modular dual room Kindergarten on School Site (KOSS) delivered on the Koo Wee Rup Primary School site by 2024 is considered the preferred option to address the immediate capacity shortfall, noting Koo Wee Rup is experiencing the greatest demand within the region.

The feasibility study also found that the three existing kindergartens in the KWR region will require significant upgrades to meet contemporary building regulations, kindergarten regulations and child safe standards. Additionally, significant early years infrastructure redevelopment will need to occur in both Koo Wee Rup and Lang Lang before the completed roll-out of the state government's Pre-Prep reforms, enabling all 4-year-old children to attend 30 hours of funded kindergarten by 2032.

It is proposed that council advocate to the Department of Education and Training (DET) to fully fund and deliver a modular-constructed two-room facility by 2024. Council officers have commenced conversations with the DET to investigate the feasibility of a modular Kindergarten on School Site (KOSS) at Koo Wee Rup Primary School. Initial siting and planning investigations are underway to assess vegetation, drainage and site level issues. At this stage, this site remains the most viable option to deliver a long-term solution for kindergarten in Koo Wee Rup.

Council officers have been advised that where the DET provides a modular kindergarten facility on a school site, Council is required to contribute funding to the fit-out of the facility, as well as ongoing operations and maintenance for the life of the lease. It is proposed that the CEO, or her delegate, negotiates the Heads of Agreement and that council's contribution is limited to including the new facility in its central enrolment program.

The delivery of the modular kindergarten will enable the immediate shortfall in kindergarten places within the region to be alleviated and facilitate 3- and 4-year-old children within the region to access kindergarten in 2024, in accordance with the Best Start Best Life reforms.

Policy Implications

This work aligns the following Cardinia Shire Council documents:

- Child Youth and Family Strategy 2017-2021

- Liveability Plan 2017-2029
- Asset Management Policy 2018
- Kindergarten Central Registrations Policy and Procedures 2022

Relevance to Council Plan

2.1 We support the creation of liveable spaces and places

2.1.1 Advocate, plan for and deliver accessible community infrastructure and services that address community need.

Climate Emergency Consideration

Any capital works projects will consider sustainable design options.

Consultation/Communication

In developing the KWR feasibility study, workshops were conducted with external stakeholders to gain a better understanding of specific issues and social trends at a local level that impacts on demand for early years services.

Stakeholders engaged included the following:

- Bestchance – Early Years Manager for the three existing kindergartens, where consultation included management staff and educators
- Westernport Childcare – Private Long Day Care Provider in Koo Wee Rup and Lang Lang
- Koo Wee Rup Regional Health Service
- Local primary schools
- Parents and carers of children registered for kindergarten in the Koo Wee Rup Region (current and future enrolments, identified through Cardinia Shire's Central Registration and Enrolment Scheme)

Financial and Resource Implications

Delivery of the Best Start Best Life reforms will require significant capital investment. An immediate infrastructure solution is required to meet demand for kindergarten in the KWR region. While the Department of Education are willing to fund the \$2.5m - \$3m for the design and construction of the facility, there is an expectation that Council contributes to the fit-out of a facility, as well as the ongoing operation and maintenance of the facility. This is estimated at a minimum \$170,000-\$200,000 for fit-out, and approximately \$6,500 - \$7,000 per annum for operations and maintenance, some of which can be recuperated.

Furthermore, additional kindergarten infrastructure (new and upgrades) will be required within the Koo Wee Rup region and across the Shire to accommodate future demand, and to meet contemporary building regulations, kindergarten regulations and child safe standards.

In a rate capped environment, to fully fund the additional financial resources required to transform Council's aged kindergarten buildings into contemporary facilities, able to support implementation of the State Government's Kindergarten Expansion Reform is beyond Council's financial capacity. Funding will be sought from the State Government to deliver these reforms.

Conclusion

The Koo Wee Rup Region Feasibility Study outlines the current and projected shortfalls in kindergarten places across the region over the next 20 years

Advocacy to the State Government to fully fund and deliver a two-room kindergarten facility at Koo Wee Rup Primary School by the commencement of the 2024 school year is recommended. It is proposed that the new facility is included in Council's Central Enrolment Program to facilitate families to access 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten.