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Kindergarten cluster management is one of the key platforms in early childhood education and care from which the integration of services, partnerships with families and community and reform of the workforce in early childhood education and care services in Victoria can be realised.

The Kindergarten Cluster Management Policy Framework emphasises the importance of kindergarten cluster management as a key strategy to build a stronger and more responsive and effective kindergarten system across the state.

The framework redefines Victoria's approach to the management of kindergartens. This contemporary framework for kindergarten cluster management progresses the Government's agenda for system improvement as outlined in the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development and responds to the review of kindergarten cluster management undertaken in 2007. Significantly, the framework will also contribute to the reform of the sector that is required to meet the forward-looking national early childhood reform agenda.

The new approach to kindergarten cluster management acknowledges and promotes the lead role of local government in the planning and coordination of services for young children and their families.

In addition, Government policy also recognises that community service organisations and parents have an important role in the management of kindergarten services and commits to the continuation of this partnership approach.

Partnerships with families, the community and all levels of government, coupled with effective management, form the foundation of kindergarten cluster management in Victoria.

The framework outlines five key components to guide all organisations involved in kindergarten cluster management. Kindergarten cluster managers will:

- be geographically based
- demonstrate robust governance and support infrastructure
- participate in local partnerships
- provide professional development opportunities and career pathways for kindergarten staff
- foster a culture of continuous improvement.
Introduction of kindergarten cluster management

Kindergarten cluster management (initially referred to as group employment) was developed in response to the Kirby Review of Preschool Education in 2001. It was introduced in 2003 to reduce the administrative and management burden on kindergarten parent committees, strengthen the management and delivery of community-based kindergarten programs and provide kindergarten staff with professional employment arrangements. The initiative provided resources to support groups of four year old kindergarten programs being brought together under the management of a single organisation.

Policy and legislative context

Early childhood has been the focus of considerable policy and legislative attention in Victoria in recent years. A range of documents provide the overarching policy and legislative context for the new policy framework for Kindergarten Cluster Management. These are summarised at appendix 1. They include:

• *A Fairer Victoria*
• *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*
• Council of Australian Governments’ early childhood reform agenda
• The *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*
• Victorian State—Local Government Agreement
• *The Victorian Government’s Action Plan: Strengthening Community Organisations*
• The *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*
• The *Children’s Services Act 1996* (the principal Act) and the *Children’s Legislation Amendment Act 2008*

Review of kindergarten cluster management

A review of kindergarten cluster management was completed in 2007. It found that the initiative has resulted in significant benefits to families, kindergarten staff and the community. This was particularly evident for kindergarten clusters that had strong arrangements in place for governance. It also found that some cluster managers experienced significant challenges in relation to governance and sustainability. As well, some had limited experience in early childhood service delivery, experienced difficulty in managing change, and had limited engagement in local planning processes.

*The Government Response to the Review of Kindergarten Cluster Management* (2008) confirmed the initiative as a key strategy in building a stronger early childhood education and care service system. It outlined the need for a
contemporary policy framework for kindergarten cluster management that aligns with the current early childhood policy agenda.

The Government Response promoted the opportunity for kindergarten cluster managers to support key policy directions such as the integration of early childhood education and care, strong local service networks that include other early childhood services and schools, and effective local planning.

Since the completion of the review, the Government has already introduced a range of initiatives to address some of the challenges faced by kindergarten cluster managers. Appendix 2 provides details of these initiatives that complement the increase in funding available per location that was provided to kindergarten cluster managers in the 2007–08 State Budget.

The Government Response also identified mechanisms to improve the administration and monitoring of kindergarten cluster management that are the focus of current work by the Department.

Profile of kindergarten cluster management

Kindergarten cluster management has enjoyed steady growth since its introduction in 2003. As at August 2009, 51 kindergarten cluster managers throughout Victoria were in operation with 591 funded kindergarten programs participating in cluster management. This equates to 47 per cent of the 1254 community managed funded kindergarten programs in Victoria.

Local councils (16 rural and nine metropolitan) make up 49 per cent of kindergarten cluster managers, accounting for 253 kindergarten programs. The remaining kindergarten cluster managers are community-based, not-for-profit organisations, including church organisations, community health services, family support agencies and kindergarten associations.

There are presently ten externally managed kindergarten cluster services: seven in metropolitan areas and three in non-metropolitan areas. Together they manage 140 kindergarten programs.

There are presently four amalgamated kindergarten cluster services: one in the metropolitan area and three in the non-metropolitan area. Together they manage 18 kindergarten programs.

There are presently 13 federated kindergarten cluster services: two in the metropolitan area and 11 in the non-metropolitan area. Together they manage 180 kindergarten programs.

The largest kindergarten cluster manager organisation manages 47 kindergarten programs and the smallest manages three kindergarten programs.
Vision for kindergarten cluster management

The development of a strong and effective kindergarten cluster management system that:

• underpins the delivery of high-quality kindergarten programs across Victoria
• is available to every community-based kindergarten in Victoria
• provides leadership for reform in early childhood education and care.

Kindergarten cluster managers will:

• have a strong presence in their local community
• have robust governance and support infrastructure
• demonstrate leadership to their staff
• have a commitment to the ongoing improvement of services.

Most importantly, kindergarten cluster managers will have a core interest in improving outcomes for all children, including those more vulnerable within the community.

The framework outlines the five key components that constitute contemporary kindergarten cluster management:

• geographically based clusters
• demonstration of robust governance and support infrastructure
• participation in local partnerships
• provision of professional development opportunities and career pathways for kindergarten staff
• fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Within these components are service specifications that all kindergarten cluster managers must meet. These specifications will guide the future decisions in relation to the provision of kindergarten cluster management in Victoria.
Part 2: Key components of kindergarten cluster management

1: Geographically based clusters

A kindergarten cluster manager may operate across municipal boundaries, but will be required to actively support and contribute to the community in each of those municipalities. This includes active participation in Municipal Early Years Planning with the local council and maintaining a strong local presence in the areas in which they operate.

A limited number of kindergarten cluster managers within a municipality is desirable. This will encourage larger kindergarten clusters within each municipality and facilitate more effective relationships with local government and other place-based initiatives.

Each local council will be invited to become a kindergarten cluster manager if they have not already elected to do so.

Existing kindergarten cluster managers will be required to seek approval from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) prior to adding locations in a new municipality. In effect, DEECD, in consultation with local councils, will approve only a small number of kindergarten cluster managers to operate within each municipality. In some instances, there may be one in a municipality.

The specifications for cluster management service delivery directly related to geographically based clusters are:

- Links to local government including Municipal Early Years Plans
- Links to local early childhood services

2: Demonstrating robust governance and support infrastructure

Effective kindergarten cluster management requires governance structures that provide efficient and professional leadership and management systems. Robust governance arrangements incorporate mechanisms and processes for management and accountability which enable organisations to operate effectively within regulatory and legislative frameworks to meet the needs of local families and communities.
Currently, some kindergarten clusters operate under a federated model. The review indicated that federated models in many cases were not meeting the needs of parents and staff and continued to rely greatly on parent volunteers for management and administration roles. The intention of kindergarten cluster management is that it frees up teachers to teach, and provides parents with more time to participate in their child’s kindergarten experience. In response to these issues, all new cluster management models will be required to demonstrate effective, established governance structures and practices; access to established organisational expertise; and limited reliance on volunteers for governance roles.

Existing federated models will be actively supported to establish more robust governance arrangements to achieve the desired outcomes of kindergarten cluster management and support the long-term viability of the kindergarten system in Victoria.

Eureka Community Kindergarten Association (ECKA) commenced in 2003 as a federated cluster management model with six kindergarten services and has grown to comprise 17 kindergarten programs in 2009.

In 2008, the ECKA Board undertook a strategic review in consultation with its members and key stakeholders to strengthen its structures and processes and inform its future direction.

It identified that sustainability was a key priority. It committed to restructure ECKA to meet future opportunities and challenges with an effective strong board and limited reliance on volunteers in governance roles.

ECKA set four goals within its governance project:

1. **To strengthen governance and enhance sustainability through restructuring its Board**

   Action 1: ECKA engaged a consultant to review the constitution and reduce the number of board members from 20 voting members to nine, comprising three kindergarten parents and up to six supportive, skilled community members.

   Action 2: ECKA developed handbooks with key information for board members.

   Action 3: ECKA initiated succession planning for the Board and strategically targeted skilled community members to enhance community linkages and Board expertise.
2. To review and change its constitution to reduce its reliance on volunteers for day-to-day management

Action 1: Key staff in ECKA management undertook training to become qualified in human resource management.

Action 2: ECKA financial systems were reviewed and improved.

Action 3: ECKA undertook to review its policies and procedures to reflect the new organisational structure.

3. To develop operational plans

Action 1: ECKA developed partnerships and networks with community and local government through participation in a range of committees and working parties.

4. To increase the profile of ECKA

Action 1: ECKA developed a marketing plan with capacity to run public education forums.

Action 2: ECKA developed brochures and materials to advertise its services and strategic plan.

Jo Guerts, ECKA Manager comments:

‘As a result of our strengthened governance, the ECKA Board has achieved extra efficiency. In fact, we have needed to convene fewer meetings because the continuity of membership means that members have a clear understanding of the issues. The planning process is more robust. We are delivering better outcomes for the education and care of the kindergarten children. I consider ECKA is a more professional organisation today. We are better placed to be proactive rather than reactive’.
As kindergarten cluster managers grow in number and gain more locations, it is imperative that they remain sustainable over time.

Sustainability

New kindergarten cluster managers must begin with a minimum number of locations. In metropolitan areas, a kindergarten cluster manager is required to manage at least five kindergarten services, while in rural areas kindergarten cluster managers require three kindergarten services.

Kindergarten cluster managers may also wish to diversify their programs to meet the needs of local communities, and expand into other services, such as long day care offering kindergarten programs and kindergartens offering more flexible programs or extended hours.

Kindergarten cluster managers are well placed to participate in the implementation of new programs, including the Early Start Kindergarten funding for three-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children known to Child Protection and facilitated playgroups.

Strategic and operational planning

Kindergarten cluster managers are organisations that aim to provide high-quality early childhood services. They require strategic and operational planning with a strong focus on continuous quality improvement.

Robust governance will ensure that appropriate planning is undertaken by kindergarten cluster managers to provide clarity of strategic priorities and future direction incorporating the identification and management of risks.

In devising strategic and operational plans, kindergarten cluster managers will link with their local Municipal Early Years Plan/s and Best Start Partnerships where they exist. Non-local government cluster managers will need to engage formally with each local government where they operate to connect with their Municipal Early Years Plan/s. Robust governance will support the development of appropriate structures within the organisation to facilitate strong local connections.

The specifications for cluster management service delivery directly related to demonstrating robust governance and support infrastructure are:

- governance model
- staff employment and support
- strategic and operational planning
- regulatory and licensing administrative requirements
- budgetary and financial requirements.
3: Participation in local partnerships

An integrated system of early childhood services in local communities assists in achieving better outcomes for children and families. In building collaborative, connected, locally responsive services, kindergarten cluster managers will establish partnerships with a range of key stakeholders within the local community. Activities will include:

• supporting the planning role of local government
• participating in local place-based activities
• forging partnerships with families
• cooperating with other local cluster managers.

Supporting the planning role of local government

When the kindergarten services belonging to a kindergarten cluster are located within a single municipal area the kindergarten cluster manager is better able to strengthen the local capacity of parents, families, communities and early years services to meet the needs of all children and families.

Non-local government kindergarten cluster managers are required to promote an effective operation that is supported at the local level. While there is no impediment to kindergarten cluster managers operating in more than one municipality, there is a need for them to engage formally with each local council through the Municipal Early Years Plan, as well as to establish strong connections with local early childhood and community services.

In moving forward, the consideration for approval of new kindergarten cluster managers will be based, in part, on the principle that a limited number of kindergarten cluster managers within a municipality is desirable. This will encourage larger kindergarten clusters within each municipality and facilitate more effective relationships with local government and place-based initiatives. In addition, existing kindergarten cluster managers will be required to seek approval from DEECD prior to adding locations from a new municipality. In effect, DEECD will approve only a small number of kindergarten cluster managers for operation within each municipality. In some instances, there may be one in a municipality.

Taking into account the principle that a limited number of kindergarten cluster managers within a municipality is desirable, kindergarten cluster managers are encouraged to seek additional locations in municipalities within which they operate. DEECD regional officers will actively encourage and promote kindergarten cluster management, and provide valuable local information to potential and existing kindergarten cluster managers regarding opportunities for growth.
Participation in local place-based activities

This facilitates the development of relationships where collective knowledge and access to a range of early childhood programs maximises the opportunity for collaboration, planning and provision of flexible, responsive services.

For instance, kindergarten cluster managers should play a key role in the following:

- Supporting their kindergarten services to link families to other early childhood services, including Maternal and Child Health Service, Early Childhood Intervention Services and Settlement Support Services. This extends also to services such as family support services via Child FIRST and, where necessary, Child Protection.
- Participating in and supporting local Best Start partnerships, recognising that kindergarten participation is one of the objectives of the Best Start partnerships.
- Establishing effective relationships with children’s centres where one is operating in the local area. Increasingly, children’s centres will be a place of local expertise and service access. Kindergarten cluster managers are significant leaders with a capacity to manage the integrated services that are provided within children’s centres.
- Developing effective relationships with other placed-based initiatives, such as Community Renewal and Neighbourhood Renewal, which have a focus on supporting improved outcomes in early childhood.

Brimbank Preschool Association (BPA) and Early Childhood Management Services (ECMS) both provide kindergarten cluster management to a total of 36 kindergarten services within the municipality of Brimbank City Council.

BPA and ECMS provide effective local operations that are enhanced through their partnership with the Brimbank City Council.

Both BPA and ECMS have strengthened their local service networks by their ongoing membership of the Brimbank Early Years Reference Group. In this municipal wide group, they have the opportunity to network with a range of local early years services and deliver services that are locally responsive to the needs of families and the community.

ECMS and BPA both participate in various working groups of the Brimbank Early Years Reference Group implementing Best Start and Communities for Children.

Recently, both clusters have been collaborating with Victoria University to introduce a program, Kinda Kinder, with kindergarten staff mentoring student teachers.
Steve Sutton, Chief Executive Officer of BPA observes:

‘Being involved in the local Early Years Reference Group and Brimbank’s Municipal Early Years Plan has provided our organisation with a fantastic opportunity to work with a variety of local early years services. It has resulted in our cluster having access to greater knowledge about what is going on locally as well as what is happening on the national scene, learning about funding opportunities, and being involved in partnerships that deliver innovative and exciting projects. It has resulted in a higher local presence for BPA with other local organisations seeking us out to partner with them in a number of fantastic initiatives which benefit young children, their families and the wider community’.

Marie Howard, Chief Executive Officer of ECMS comments:

‘This is a partnership that works well with all parties. ECMS and BPA often share resources and offer support with staff and information sharing. Together the two kindergarten cluster managers meet regularly, explore professional development opportunities for staff and work with Council’.

Forging partnerships with families

Collaborative partnerships between families, community organisations and kindergarten cluster managers create more responsive services to meet the needs of children and families. Families must have opportunities to contribute to decisions that influence their child’s education. Effective kindergarten cluster managers will build partnerships with families to enhance the capacity for community building and maximise the opportunity to achieve the best outcomes for children and families.

Kindergarten cluster managers will formally seek feedback from families on an annual basis and incorporate findings from the feedback into quality improvement strategies.

The City of Moonee Valley is the cluster manager of 14 kindergarten services. Building respectful partnerships with families is integral to Moonee Valley’s philosophy of achieving the best outcomes for children in early childhood services. Moonee Valley establishes its intention to include parents in each child’s kindergarten experience by inviting all parents to attend an information forum when the family is offered a kindergarten place for their child.

Moonee Valley invites a guest speaker to the forum to present the evidence-based research for best practice in early childhood services, outlining the basis for Moonee Valley’s play-based kindergarten
A parent annual meeting in November follows the initial forum where kindergarten staff describe many aspects of the kindergarten year, including the use of portfolios to document their child’s learning and the rationale for introducing an indoor/outdoor program and informal snack.

Parents are encouraged to maintain ongoing communication with the kindergarten staff and raise any issues as they arise. Parents are also introduced to the Moonee Valley Early Years Coordinator and provided with contact information if their concerns with the kindergarten staff are not addressed to their satisfaction.

Parents are then invited to accompany their child on their orientation visit to kindergarten. Consequently, parents are well placed to support their child’s transition to kindergarten and are empowered with knowledge of the program and the outcomes that kindergartens in Moonee Valley aim to achieve.

Karen, kindergarten parent commented to one of the teachers:

‘We found the orientation very useful and a smooth transition. Great idea how orientation is in small groups first, before the whole group get together’.

Collaborating with other kindergarten local cluster managers

Kindergarten cluster managers working in cooperation and collaboration with each other and regional offices are better able to promote the most appropriate option for independent kindergartens seeking to join a kindergarten cluster. Similarly, cooperative relationships between kindergarten cluster managers within a municipality present the opportunity for sharing of practice in a non-competitive environment.

In the interests of stability and cooperation, there is an expectation that kindergarten cluster managers will not encourage or support kindergartens to change kindergarten cluster managers. Cooperative relationships result in a more stable environment for kindergarten cluster managers, staff and individual kindergartens.

The specifications for kindergarten cluster management service delivery directly related to participation in local partnerships are:

- family participation
- links to local government including municipal early years plans
- links to local early childhood services
- access and participation for local children and families.
4: Providing professional development opportunities and career pathways for kindergarten staff

Professional development

Kindergarten cluster managers coordinate and plan approaches to lead professional development opportunities, surveying and discussing with staff their professional development needs to support them to meet their individual performance plans, and deliver the cluster’s strategic and operational business plans.

Kindergarten cluster managers are able to actively champion and promote the adoption of current evidence-based teaching approaches. This will lead to a stronger focus on social and cultural contexts of learning, strengthening staff capability to meet the needs of a broad range of children and families.

Kindergarten cluster managers are able to work with other local services to coordinate the provision of professional development opportunities and minimise disruption to their services, effecting working families.

Professional networks

Professional networks may include early education and care workers (from kindergartens, childcare services and schools), Best Start Partnerships Maternal and Child Health Service staff, allied health professionals, early childhood intervention service workers, preschool field officers, settlement support services, Child Protection workers and playgroup leaders. They support kindergarten services in being outward looking and part of their community, as one of a range of intersecting early childhood services that support families.

They also give professionals the opportunity to promote the value of kindergarten in enhancing children’s learning and development and improve participation in early learning. They enable professionals to position their career development within the broader field of early childhood services. Kindergarten cluster managers will provide opportunities for their staff to participate in these networks.

Kindergarten cluster managers work together to strengthen the quality of programs by proactively supporting the capacity of staff to share their professional skills and knowledge across kindergarten clusters. Joint professional development opportunities, such as formal training sessions and mentoring programs, are provided to encourage staff to collaborate across kindergarten clusters.
Current work to establish links between the new School Network Plans and Municipal Early Years Plans will strengthen the community links and networking opportunities between early childhood and school staff, supporting the professional development of staff and the children’s transitions to school.

**Knox City Council** has stepped up its efforts to engage staff and create networking opportunities that improve its early years service for all stakeholders.

Knox City Council is the kindergarten cluster manager of 30 preschool services. More than 250 dedicated staff from Council’s Family and Children Services work across all early years services. These include preschool, centre-based childcare and Family Day Care, Maternal and Child Health, community and supported playgroups, Preschool Field Officers, inclusion support facilitators and early intervention workers.

With such a broad range of available services, there is an essential need for a more integrated working and learning environment, with regular networking opportunities between staff. Council’s Municipal Early Years Plan articulates just that and, to achieve it, Knox Council has undertaken an extensive program of staff development, relationship building — between both Council and private operators — and networking opportunities that benefit children across Knox.

They include staging and facilitating forums to share ideas on best practice in early childhood education and care, discussing emerging service integration issues, and considering service planning and related community engagement. Some of the initiatives include:

- Establishing **Preschool Cluster Groups** across four geographical areas in the municipality for regular meetings to strengthen networks between preschool staff across the community and build relationships between Council’s early years services.
- Convening **Family and Children’s Services Cluster Group** meetings led by an Early Years Coordinator, including representatives from Council’s childcare services, Family Day Care, Maternal and Child Health, preschools and early years specialist support and consultancy teams.
- Hosting an annual conference for Knox’s Family and Children’s Services staff, local early years service providers including Regional DEECD and other agencies such as Connections, Knox Community Health and Anglicare to develop a common understanding about the latest research in the early years sector.
Setting up *Strengthening Links – Supporting Transition to School Network* meetings twice a year to invite DEECD regional representatives and all local community and private early years services that have children transitioning to school (schools, preschool, childcare, and early intervention).

The kindergarten cluster management innovations grant recently provided by DEECD was utilised by Council’s early years staff to convene an Integrated Services Summit. More than 200 staff turned out in force for the summit, which helped them better understand the value of working in an integrated way.

Council is also providing opportunities for its preschool staff to ‘walk in the shoes’ of someone else. The *Walk in My Shoes Program* allows a preschool staff member to work alongside a counterpart in a different early years service, giving them an insight and perspective of the different early years role.

‘It is only through an understanding of how everyone works together, often for the same families, that we will truly begin to achieve the outcomes for our children, families and community’, says Kerry Stubbings, Director of Community Services at Knox City Council.

Career pathways

Kindergarten cluster managers have an ongoing relationship with their early childhood workforce and greater capacity to offer full-time employment and flexible career pathways to staff, as well as mentoring and buddy systems for new graduates and succession planning. Therefore, kindergarten cluster managers are an attractive employment option for the early childhood workforce.

**Hume City Council** is a kindergarten cluster manager of 24 kindergarten services. As a kindergarten cluster manager, it provides professional development support to kindergarten staff to strengthen their professional learning and practice as well as alleviate their professional isolation.

Hume City Council has initiated a range of best practice strategies so that its early childhood workforce is connected to evidence-based practice and emerging early childhood government policy initiatives. They have commenced a journey of change, supported by ongoing mentoring.
The mentoring program operates in local network areas and builds team cohesion. It has evolved from feedback within the teams to utilise their own expertise.

The mentoring support consists of:

- facilitated quarterly team meetings
- team leader support visits
- tutorial support, targeted at staff that identified their need for one-on-one attention and support through the process.

As a result of this process, five preschool and four long day care staff are being trained as mentors for their peers, focusing on areas such as the fundamentals of team structures and the rationale for professional enquiry.

Within this supportive environment, the early years staff have developed a local early years framework to guide improved quality and consistency of practice across all early childhood services.

This process has paved the way for changes that will result from the introduction of the *National Early Years Framework, the Victorian Early Learning and Development Framework* and *Transition to School Plans*.

Trish, a kindergarten teacher employed by the Hume Cluster, says:

> ‘It’s a privilege to be a member of the mentor program. It will enable me to further my skills through professional practice and reflective learning. I, in turn, will be equipped to offer workplace support, to assist with team building, leadership skills and conflict resolution. It will be a really good learning opportunity for all Early Childhood Services staff’.

### 5: Fostering a culture of continuous system improvement

Kindergarten cluster managers are well positioned to provide leadership as champions of strategies that foster continuous system improvement across the sector and deliver high-quality inclusive early childhood programs for children and their families.

Commencing 2009–10, all kindergarten cluster managers will be required to complete an annual Kindergarten Cluster Management Service Improvement Plan as part of their Service Agreement with DEECD. The plans will document strategies to guide service improvement based on the five key components of the kindergarten cluster management policy framework.
In planning for responsive, high-quality kindergarten provision, kindergarten cluster managers are well placed to set best practice in response to a number of new and emerging reforms in early childhood education and care.

**Best practice**

Innovations such as the introduction of the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*, complemented by the National Early Years Learning Framework, will offer further opportunities for kindergarten cluster managers to provide leadership promoting kindergartens of best practice.

Other tools such as the Transition Plans for children entering primary schools have been trialled in some kindergarten cluster managed sites prior to statewide implementation for children entering Prep in 2010. This demonstrates the leadership role that can be played by kindergarten cluster managers.

**Yarra City Council** is a kindergarten cluster manager of six funded kindergarten services. It has introduced a number of initiatives to provide more inclusive kindergarten services to meet the needs of all children and families in the local community.

Yarra City Council has demonstrated a commitment to provide collaborative and inclusive kindergarten services by:

- Establishing a Parent Advisory Group to provide an opportunity for parents to take an active part in collaborating with the kindergarten staff in the educational and social program.
- Introducing a personal and professional development program, facilitated by external consultants, for their early childhood workforce. Within this program, kindergarten staff participate in discussions on hypothetical topics to explore the diversity of the social and cultural contexts and perspectives of families within their community.
- Endeavouring to employ a kindergarten workforce that reflects the cultural diversity within the community. Consequently, it has modified its interview process, so that it is more inclusive.

**Julie Salomon, Manager Family and Children’s Services at Yarra** says:

‘Kindergarten at Yarra is more than just a session for children and families. Kindergarten is seen as a part of Yarra’s vibrant social fabric. Kindergarten provides an opportunity for children and families to be connected to the community that values and respects the individual.

To achieve this, we require ongoing feedback and honest appraisal of the services we deliver. We see this as an ongoing journey of open, transparent communication, providing and promoting formal and informal opportunities for each child and family to engage with the service and community more broadly. We believe that respectful and responsive children’s services assist children to become strong in mind, body and spirit, as well as support the role of parents in the raising of their children and creating healthy and inclusive communities’.
Promoting kindergarten participation

Kindergarten cluster managers are able to support the access and participation of families in kindergarten through the provision of locally based, responsive programs. Children and families experiencing disadvantage will benefit from the integrated support and referral systems that kindergarten cluster management provides.

Kindergarten cluster managers can also play an important role within the framework provided by Municipal Early Years Plans in the introduction of the Council of Australian Government (COAG) early childhood development strategy. This strategy plans to introduce universal access to 15 hours of high-quality kindergarten education to all children in the year before formal schooling by 2013.

**Banyule City Council** is the kindergarten cluster manager of five kindergarten services. Banyule Cluster has been proactive in adopting a three-prong strategy to increase kindergarten participation for groups experiencing disadvantage:

- The Banyule Cluster has employed a family support worker to provide outreach support to families experiencing disadvantage and strengthen links between services and families.
- The kindergarten cluster is strengthening current quality practices to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families by working with Elders to deliver cultural awareness training for all early childhood services staff and to provide ongoing mentoring support to kindergarten staff.
- Kindergartens within the cluster actively support the participation of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds by sharing resources to ensure that families with limited English language skills have access to interpreting services and written information in their first language.
Current research indicates that high quality kindergarten programs improve children’s learning and educational outcomes and that these benefits extend into adult life.

Kindergarten is particularly beneficial for children experiencing disadvantage and can support their health, development and wellbeing.

The Victorian Government has initiatives in place so that disadvantage is not a barrier to participating in kindergarten and every child has the opportunity to benefit from an early learning and development program before starting school.

The *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* recognises that high quality early childhood services assist children experiencing disadvantage and have long-term positive effects on children’s development. There are a range of linked initiatives in Victoria building on a strong universal platform of early childhood services to address barriers to kindergarten participation and promote increased participation of children experiencing disadvantage in high quality kindergarten programs.

Local government kindergarten clusters, in particular, are able to facilitate cooperative planning involving other local kindergarten cluster managers and local kindergarten providers to plan a suitable range of kindergarten program options for the local community.

Kindergarten cluster managers increase kindergarten participation of the most disadvantaged children through the promotion of the kindergarten fee subsidy, free kindergarten for all three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and three year old kindergarten for children known to Child Protection. Other strategies and procedures to support access and participation may include the development and implementation of hardship policies, in consultation with parents, to assist in payment of fees, particularly in programs offering a program in excess of 10 hours a week.

The specifications for kindergarten cluster management service delivery directly related to fostering a culture of continuous system improvement are:

- service improvement plans
- quality assurance
- access and participation for local children and families.
Part 3: Conclusion

There are new understandings of the vital contribution made by early childhood education and care and there is an increasing need for responsive local approaches to the planning and delivery of kindergarten services across Victoria. In this context, the kindergarten cluster management policy framework sets out to redefine kindergarten cluster management as a highly valued strategy.

It articulates the relationship between DEECD and kindergarten cluster managers in the areas of location, governance, management, planning and delivery of kindergarten management services.

The five key components of kindergarten cluster management and specifications that all kindergarten cluster managers must meet will be instrumental in creating systemic and sustainable change to increase the effectiveness and quality of kindergarten cluster management. They are:

Geographically based clusters
Specifications:
- Links to local government including Municipal Early Years Plans
- Links to local early childhood services

Demonstrating robust governance and support infrastructure
Specifications:
- Governance model
- Staff employment and support
- Strategic and operational planning
- Regulatory and licensing administrative requirements
- Budgetary and financial requirements

Participating in local partnerships
Specifications:
- Family participation
- Links to local government including Municipal Early Years Plans
- Links to local early childhood services
- Access and participation for local children and families

Providing professional development opportunities and career pathways for kindergarten staff
Specifications:
- Staff employment and support

Fostering a culture of continuous system improvement
Specifications:
- Service improvement plans
- Quality assurance
- Access and participation for local children and families

The requirements for each specification are provided in the document titled Kindergarten Cluster Management Specifications – New Provider.
Appendix 1: Policy and legislative context

Early childhood has been the focus of considerable policy and legislative attention in Victoria in recent years. A range of documents provide the overarching policy and legislative context for the new policy framework for Kindergarten Cluster Management.

A Fairer Victoria

A Fairer Victoria outlines the Victorian Government’s plan to address disadvantage within Victoria by creating opportunities and reducing barriers to full participation in daily life experienced by those who are experiencing disadvantage.

A Fairer Victoria is a whole-of-government social policy action plan that remains unique in Australia as a long-term commitment to reducing disadvantage.

The Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development

The Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development was released in September 2008 and extends reforms outlined in the Blueprint for Government Schools (2003) and Victoria’s Plan to Improve Outcomes in Early Childhood (2007). It articulates a vision for every young Victorian to thrive, learn and grow to enjoy a productive, rewarding and fulfilling life, while contributing to their local and global communities.

Priorities

It also describes four priorities for further improvements to the learning and development system:

- increase access to high-quality early childhood health, education and care services
- integrate services for children and families
- strengthen public confidence in a world-class school education system, with a strong and vibrant government school sector at its core
- improve outcomes for disadvantaged young Victorians.

Goals

The Blueprint commits to six goals for Victoria’s children and young people:

- All Victorian children will have the best start in life to achieve optimal health, development and wellbeing.
- By the time Victorian children start school, they will be ready to learn at school and schools will be ready for them.
- In Year 3, Victorian students will have the basic literacy skills to provide a foundation for their future learning and support will be in place for those who do not.
• In Year 5, Victorian students will have the basic numeracy skills to succeed in mathematics, and support will be in place for those who do not.
• At age 15, Victorian students will excel by national and international standards.
• Victoria will further increase the number of young people completing Year 12 or equivalent.

Strategies

The Blueprint outlines an integrated reform agenda designed to improve performance and promote excellence across Victoria’s schools and early childhood services. It is based on three strategies: system improvement, partnerships with parents and communities, and workforce reform.

System Improvement

This strategy focuses on integration and transitions, high-quality accessible early childhood services and excellent school education. Nine actions are identified to improve the learning and development system:

• Co-locating and integrating early childhood services on or near school sites, with the continued implementation of multi-service children’s centres.
• Improving transitions, including transition plans for children entering primary schools.
• Introducing new developmental frameworks, including the introduction of the Early Years Learning and Development Framework; roll-out of the Maternal and Child Health Activity Framework; and strengthening of early childhood intervention services within the context of a whole-of-government approach to children and young people 0–18 with a disability.
• Improving the quality of early learning through the introduction of new regulations for Children’s Services, and by strengthening kindergarten cluster management.
• Improving participation in the Maternal and Child Health Service and kindergarten programs.
• Better planning and coordination will draw lessons from Best Start partnerships, support councils to further develop Municipal Early Years Plans, and have a focus on the most disadvantaged children.
• Improving quality in teaching and learning in school settings.
• Improving government school curriculum and standards.
• Developing cross-sector strategies to enhance educational outcomes for all school students.
Partnerships with Parents and Communities

This strategy focuses on working with families, communities and businesses to provide opportunities for all Victorians. Five actions are identified to increase and strengthen parental involvement in children’s development and learning:

• improving parenting support through better information and strengthening of home learning environments
• promoting schools and children’s centres as community hubs, with particular effort to identify and assist families experiencing difficulties
• developing partnerships with businesses
• improving place-based approaches
• meeting diverse needs, including those of koorie children, those from refugee backgrounds and those who are homeless.

Workforce Reform

This strategy focuses on careers and workplaces, and a culture of strong leadership and professional learning. Six actions are identified to improve the learning and development system:

• developing an early childhood workforce strategy
• attracting the best people to teaching
• developing high-performing school workforces
• strengthening leadership development
• build the capacity of early childhood services through professional development
• strengthening professional learning for teachers.

The Blueprint acknowledges Victoria’s participation in the current work of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in a collaborative national approach to a productivity agenda in which learning and development are central.

Council of Australian Governments’ early childhood reform agenda

The Commonwealth Government has set out a comprehensive plan to make the early years a national priority. This plan involves reforms to early childhood education and care and a greater focus on early childhood development.

The Commonwealth Government’s plans for early childhood focus on:

Improving access to quality early childhood education and care through:

• universal access to preschool for all children in the year before formal schooling by 2013, for 15 hours per week, 40 weeks per year, delivered by university-qualified early childhood teachers
• In Victoria, the establishment of eleven learning and care centres, including a specialist autism centre.

**Improving quality of early childhood education and care through:**

• strong National Quality Standards

• quality rating system

• support for education and training of the early childhood workforce

• the development of an Early Years Learning Framework

• improving the affordability of child care by increasing the childcare rebate

• a new Healthy Kids Check for four-year-olds

• national roll-out of the Australian Early Development Index

• a Home Interaction program to help parents prepare their children for school

• the introduction of *Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Guidelines* for use in early childhood settings

• enhanced early years services for Indigenous children.

The development of the Early Years Learning Framework is an integral component of the Commonwealth Government’s early childhood reforms. It was endorsed by COAG on 2 July 2009 and it will be used by all early childhood education and care services, including services offering universal access to quality early learning in the year before formal schooling.

*Australia’s National Early Years Learning Framework* (the National Framework) describes the learning outcomes for all Australian children; as well as the pedagogy required to support and enhance young children’s learning from birth to five years of age, as well as their transition to school. This will form the basis for ensuring that children in all early childhood education and care settings experience quality teaching and learning.

The National Framework has been developed collaboratively with all Australian Governments and early childhood experts, educators and families.

*The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework 0–8* (the Victorian Framework) will link directly to the National Framework. The Victorian Framework will also link with the *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* to create a description of the early learning and development of children from birth to eight years. The Victorian Framework will provide a common language with which to describe children’s learning and development from 0–8 years. In this way, the Victorian Framework will support a partnership between families and early childhood professionals to support children’s learning and development from birth to eight years.
Victorian State–Local Government Agreement

In May 2008, the State Government and the Municipal Association of Victoria signed the Victorian State–Local Government Agreement. The agreement strengthens state–local government relations. The agreement formally commits the partnership to principles and guidelines that give greater clarity to roles, responsibilities and financial arrangements, and will foster respectful collaboration and mutual support.

One aspect of the strong partnership between state and local government is the Victorian Government’s recognition of local councils as the key planner for early childhood. This is primarily achieved through the development of Municipal Early Years Plans that provide strategic direction for the development and coordination of early education and care and health programs, activities and other local developments that impact on children from birth to school entry in a municipality.

Municipal Early Years Plans articulate local government’s role in early years service or facility provision, planning, advocacy and community capacity building. They cover the period that aligns with a council’s planning cycle and encompass all state-funded programs, including kindergartens.

A partnership agreement between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) has been developed enshrining values and obligations related to improved communication, transparency, mutual support and respect, awareness of synergies between the organisations and the fostering of opportunities to work collaboratively.

The Victorian Government’s Action Plan: Strengthening Community Organisations

The Victorian Government is strongly committed to developing and supporting community and not-for-profit organisations and acknowledging the contribution they make to the economic and social wellbeing of all Victorians. To this end, the Government established the Office for the Community Sector in 2008 as a single, overarching structure for representation and dialogue between the Government and the full range of community organisations. The Office for the Community Sector is located within the Department of Planning and Community Development to maximise policy integration and operational efficiency. It leads the coordination and implementation of policy priorities affecting the sector across the whole of the Victorian Government.
The Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005

The Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 includes the principles for the wellbeing of children, requires notification of births to local councils, and establishes the Victoria Children’s Council, Children’s Services Coordination Board and the Child Safety Commissioner.

The Act states that providers of services to children and families should:

- Protect the rights of children and families and, to the greatest extent possible, encourage their participation in any decision-making that affects their lives.
- Acknowledge and be respectful of the child’s individual identity, circumstances and cultural identity and be responsive to the particular needs of the child.
- Make decisions about intervention by the providers of services into a child’s or family’s life and about access by a child or family to those services in a timely manner (being mindful of any harmful effects that may be caused to the child by a delay in making decisions or providing services).
- Ensure that families are made aware of the services available to them and of the benefits these services can provide, especially to those families in most need of assistance.
- Cooperate with other services or professionals to work in the interests of the child and family.

The Children’s Services Act 1996 (the principal Act) and the Children’s Legislation Amendment Act 2008

The Children’s Services Act 1996 supports the licensing and regulation of children’s services in Victoria. The principal Act has been amended by the Children’s Legislation Amendment Act 2008, the provisions of which came into full effect on 25 May 2009.

The objectives of the amendments are to:

a) minimise the risk of harm to children while being cared for and educated in the absence of their parents
b) regulate two additional children’s services sectors, namely Family Day Care and Outside School Hours Care
c) amend and streamline the licensing process to reduce the regulatory burden on licensees and provide for new licence types
d) clarify and enhance regulatory powers in the Children’s Services Act 1996 and make a number of miscellaneous amendments to improve the efficiency of the Act
e) improve the operation of children’s services and enhance children’s development

f) recognise in legislation the principle that every Victorian child should be able to enroll in a kindergarten program.

The *Children’s Services Regulations 2009* sets out the requirements relating to the licensing and operation of children’s services in Victoria. The recent changes focus on improving the qualification level of early childhood staff, improving staff ratios, and prescribing standards for the operation of Family Day Care and Out of School Hours.

**The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006**

This Act articulates human freedoms, rights and responsibilities. The Charter contains 20 rights that reflect four basic principles: Freedom, Respect, Equality and Dignity.

All Victorian government departments and public authorities must act compatibly with the Charter and consider human rights when making decisions, providing advice or services, or taking action in their day-to-day work.

The Charter has an important role in protecting and promoting human rights, and helping to create a fairer society that reduces disadvantage and respects diversity.
Immediate support for kindergarten cluster management

All operating cluster managers received an immediate grant of $20,000. The grant focused on strengthening governance models and arrangements and, for others, including local government, it supported further innovation, provided opportunities to share best practice and promote further quality improvement. A total of $980,000 was provided.

In addition, $290,000 was provided across cluster managers for professional development grants to improve network development between kindergarten and other local services, such as Maternal and Child Health nurses, childcare, playgroups and schools. Kindergarten cluster management organisations are well placed to provide opportunities to support the professional development of staff across a number of kindergarten locations.

Longer-term support for kindergarten cluster managers in 2009–11

- $100,000 will be provided for the development of an Online Policy Bank to provide information on the cluster management model and practices.
- $30,000 will be provided for mentoring grants to encourage small federated and new cluster managers to link with other cluster managers to support effective implementation of the model and improve governance.
- $250,000 will be provided for Best Practice Awards of $10,000 to showcase place-based examples of best practice and innovation.
- $180,000 will be provided for new governance establishment grants of $5000 for each new cluster manager. The grants will assist cluster managers to source tailored governance support based on their individual needs and to implement good governance practices from the outset.

In addition to the initiatives above, funding of $1 million was allocated towards a new approach to supporting kindergarten services, including cluster managers, to be trialled through the delivery of the Kindergarten Parents Victoria pilot projects in three local government areas. The pilot projects will enhance the capacity of all kindergarten cluster managers and community-based kindergartens in the target municipalities to develop collaborative service planning with local government and provide support for professional development and governance practices.