

Engagement Summary

To develop this Strategy, the City of Ballarat undertook a wide-ranging engagement process between February and March 2026, reaching 576 people across three types of engagement activities. Findings were analysed thematically to identify the priorities and challenges that matter most to Ballarat's children and families, and have directly shaped the goals and priorities in this Strategy. **Detailed findings for each goal area are included at the start of each goal section.**

Scale of engagement

576

people contributed across all engagement activities

100+

Children and young people directly engaged

Survey respondents (18% of the total Strategy development participants)

4.5%

Identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

13.6%

Identified as having a disability or chronic health condition

7.6%

Identified as LGBTQIA+

How we engaged

Listening sessions

In-person sessions at community events including the Begonia Festival, Parent Place, Get Ready for Kinder Day, and Ballarat's Biggest Playgroup. Also included children's drawing activities and the Ballarat Kids Think Tank.

Surveys

Online surveys via the MySay platform, with separate surveys designed for adults and for children, capturing written responses from community members and parents across the municipality.

Consultations

Structured workshops with external service providers and professionals, as well as internal consultations with Council staff across business units including Family, Youth and Children's Services.

What we heard

1 Cost of living and access to affordable activities

Families want more free or low-cost things to do, spread across the whole municipality. Financial pressure was also raised as a barrier to accessing services, camps, excursions, and basic essentials.

2 Access to services and information

Families struggle to navigate what is available to them, with long waitlists, limited after-hours availability (particularly between 2:30 and 8pm), and services concentrated in certain areas flagged as some of the challenges. Better promotion and coordination across the service system was a common call.

3 A gap for children aged 7 to 12

Children in this age group consistently fall between early years services and youth programs with limited activities, spaces, and structured support for this cohort. There is a clear need for programs that bridge this gap, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage.

4 Safety, family violence, and trauma

Trauma-informed approaches across Council services, whole-of-family responses that include men and boys, and better support for children who have experienced family violence.

5 Cultural safety and inclusion

CALD families face barriers including difficulty accessing interpreters and services not designed with their needs in mind. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families want stronger connection to country and culture embedded across programs and services.

6 Strengths to build on

Participants across all groups consistently recognised the value of Parent Place, library programs, kindergarten hubs, CALD outreach workers, community events including the Begonia Festival, and Council's genuine willingness to consult and listen.

Goal 1: Valued, Loved and Safe

Across every engagement activity, the safety and wellbeing of children in their homes and communities was a consistent and heartfelt theme. Community members told us that **family violence, trauma, and the ongoing impacts of disadvantage** continue to affect children's sense of safety in Ballarat, and that more needs to be done to ensure every child can feel truly secure.

Parents and carers called for **trauma-informed approaches across Council services** and whole-of-family responses that include men and boys. There was strong recognition that safety doesn't just mean the absence of harm, it means feeling cared for, seen, and part of a community.

Professionals highlighted the value of services like **Parent Place** and other holistic family support programs, and asked for continued investment in services that support families holistically, not just in moments of crisis. Children themselves told us that safety looks like **friendly adults, safe places to play, and people who listen**.

Community members also raised the importance of **child-friendly neighbourhood design**, safe crossings, accessible green spaces, and welcoming public spaces, as foundational to children feeling valued and safe in their everyday lives.

Voices from our community

"Safety is about being important to someone, knowing people care and having somewhere safe to play and just be a kid."

COMMUNITY MEMBER, BEGONIA FESTIVAL LISTENING SESSION

"A whole-of-community approach to trauma means everyone who works with families needs the skills and understanding to respond well."

CONSULTATION WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

"It means to me like feeling important, like when someone in my family says let's go for a walk."

CHILD, BALLARAT KIDS THINK TANK

68/100

average community rating for children feeling valued, loved and safe in Ballarat
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

Friendly adults

ranked as the top thing children said helps them feel safe and cared for
MySay Children Survey, 2026

Safe places to play

ranked second for helping children feel valued and secure
MySay Children Survey, 2026

People who listen to kids

ranked third — children want to feel heard, not just protected
MySay Children Survey, 2026

* Survey responses are multi-select. Figures reflect the proportion choosing each option, not mutually exclusive categories.

Goal 2: Having Material Basics

Accessibility, affordability and equitable access to services and activities were consistently raised across all engagement methods. Families described financial pressure, transport barriers and uneven access to programs and supports across the municipality as challenges affecting participation in community life and access to the services children and families need to thrive.

Families and service providers also highlighted broader pressures affecting family wellbeing, including housing instability, social isolation and difficulties navigating available supports and services. Respondents emphasised the importance of connected neighbourhoods, accessible community infrastructure and coordinated local services that help children and families remain connected to community life.

Transport and geographic access were raised as particular challenges for families in growth areas such as Lucas and Alfredton, where limited public transport and gaps in pedestrian and cycling infrastructure can make it difficult to access activities, services and community spaces. Families also expressed a strong desire for more free and low-cost activities distributed across the municipality, rather than concentrated in central Ballarat.

Children described having material basics as access to essential supports and also having parks, playgrounds, public sports grounds and trusted people within their community who help them feel safe, supported and included.

Voices from our community

"Putting nutritious food on the table is getting harder. A meal program for families or cooking classes on a budget could make a real difference."

COMMUNITY MEMBER

"Travelling by anything other than car is difficult and often unsafe. Better paths and crossings would make such a difference for families getting around."

COMMUNITY MEMBER

"Free activities and programs need to be accessible to families across the whole municipality, wherever they live."

CONSULTATION WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

58/100

average community rating for families being able to access the basic supports they need
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

Cost of living and access to affordable activities

ranked as the top concern for Ballarat families
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

More free or low-cost activities

More free or low-cost activities ranked as the top thing children said would improve life in Ballarat
MySay Children Survey, 2026

2nd lowest

Material basics scored the second lowest of all six goal areas in community ratings
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

* Survey responses are multi-select. Figures reflect the proportion choosing each option, not mutually exclusive categories.

Goal 3: Being Healthy

Access to health and wellbeing services was one of the most frequently raised issues across the engagement process. Families raised concerns **about long waitlists for allied health services**, limited after-hours availability, particularly between 2:30pm and 8pm, and services concentrated in central Ballarat that are difficult to reach for families in outer suburbs.

Mental health emerged as a significant and growing concern. Community members called for greater focus on children's mental health, particularly for those experiencing trauma, family violence, neurodivergence, or social isolation. Several respondents highlighted the lack of support for children aged 7–12, who fall between early years services and youth mental health programs.

Alongside these challenges, respondents recognised the importance of **physical health environments**, safe, accessible play spaces, outdoor areas, sports facilities, and active transport options. Many noted that Ballarat's weather can limit children's ability to be active and called for covered and indoor spaces where children can move freely on cold and wet days.

Children told us that being healthy is as much about **social connection and feeling positive** as it is about physical activity and nutritious food. For Council, this means focusing on Early Years systems navigation and the social environments where children grow and connect.

Voices from our community

"Families are waiting too long for allied health supports. Early intervention makes such a difference and the system needs to be easier to navigate."

COMMUNITY MEMBER

"There needs to be more social services for children experiencing disadvantage, neurodiversity, and trauma so they can learn positive social skills."

COMMUNITY MEMBER

"There are very few play spaces that can be used when raining, which is a lot of the time in Ballarat."

COMMUNITY MEMBER

56/100

average community rating for access to child and family health supports — one of the lower-scoring goal areas
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

Connecting with other kids and healthy food

ranked as children's top contributors to feeling well
MySay Children Survey, 2026

Sports & physical activities

ranked second among things children associate with being healthy
MySay Children Survey, 2026

2 in 10

adult respondents rated access to health and wellbeing supports for children as poor or very poor
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

* Survey responses are multi-select. Figures reflect the proportion choosing each option, not mutually exclusive categories.

Goal 4: Children Are Learning

The community recognises that learning happens in many places, at home, in kindergarten, at school, in libraries, through sport and the arts. Engagement told us that **access to quality early learning** is highly valued, but that families need better support navigating the system and understanding the choices available to them.

Children emphasised the value of **fun, social, collaborative learning environments**, libraries, events, group activities, and opportunities to learn with and from others. They also told us they want to learn about Ballarat's Aboriginal culture and history.

Children with additional needs were consistently raised as an underserved group during consultation. The community described an education and support system under pressure, with increasing rates of neurodivergence and disability highlighted as a key concern for families.

Transitions were flagged as a critical pressure point, particularly the move from kindergarten to school and from primary to secondary school, where children and families can fall through the gaps. Council's role in supporting smooth transitions and maintaining connections to services during these times was seen as important.

Voices from our community

"Children learn in so many different ways. Having more flexible, sensory-friendly spaces across all schools would make a real difference for so many kids."
COMMUNITY MEMBER

"In my ideal learning community everyone would be outside in small groups with lots of teamwork and communication."
CHILD, BALLARAT KIDS THINK TANK

65/100

average community rating for children's learning opportunities
— the highest score across all six goals
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

Kindergarten and early learning

ranked as the top setting children associate with
learning and growing
MySay Children Survey, 2026

Community events and special activities

ranked second among learning environments valued by
children
MySay Children Survey, 2026

2 in 3

respondents feel children in Ballarat have good
opportunities to learn and develop
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

* Survey responses are multi-select. Figures reflect the proportion choosing each option, not mutually exclusive categories.

Goal 5: Children Are Participating

According to our community engagement, of all six goal areas, community members felt that children, particularly those aged 7 to 12, have limited dedicated spaces, activities, and programs in which to engage with community life. This age group consistently fell between early years services and youth programs, with very little structured support or opportunity in between.

Cost was raised as the primary barrier to participation. Families described not being able to afford team sports, excursions, or after-school activities, which excluded their children from social and community life. The lack of activities spread across the whole municipality, rather than concentrated in growth suburbs or the CBD, meant that geographic location added to the barrier.

There was also a strong call for children to be **genuinely heard in decisions that affect them**. Children told us directly that they want to be asked what they think that their voice matters, and that they want to be part of shaping the city around them.

Many children told us that **meeting new friends** and joining fun activities are the most important things for feeling included in community life.

Voices from our community

"Most activities are in the morning, which doesn't work for many families. More afternoon and after-school options would open things up for so many more kids."
COMMUNITY MEMBER

"There's an appetite for a wider range of recreational activities for young people, including creative, cultural and non-competitive options."
COMMUNITY MEMBER

"A city where every kid is participating would, at best, have a kid member of parliament."
CHILD, BALLARAT KIDS THINK TANK

49/100

average community rating for children's participation — the lowest score of all six goal areas
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

1 in 4

adult respondents felt positively about children's ability to participate in community life
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

Fun activities

ranked as children's top factor for feeling included and part of community life
MySay Children Survey, 2026

Being asked what kids think

ranked second — children want a genuine voice, not just access to activities
MySay Children Survey, 2026

* Survey responses are multi-select. Figures reflect the proportion choosing each option, not mutually exclusive categories.

Goal 6: Positive Sense of Culture & Identity

Culture and identity was a theme that cut across every goal area. Community members, professionals, and children all told us that **feeling seen and represented** is fundamental to children's wellbeing, and that Ballarat still has significant work to do to ensure all children see themselves reflected in their community.

CALD families described barriers including difficulty accessing interpreters, services not designed with their needs in mind, and a lack of culturally competent educators and workers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and community members called for a stronger and more genuine connection to Country and culture embedded throughout Council programs and services, not just as an add-on.

Professionals noted that **kindergartens and childcare services** often provide stronger multicultural exposure than schools, and suggested that primary and secondary schools could do more to acknowledge cultural and religious diversity. More diverse after-school programs, such as models similar to the BADAC homework hub, were also raised as a priority.

Children spoke powerfully about the importance of **celebrating difference**, learning about other cultures, and having spaces where they feel safe to be exactly who they are. They want to see their cultures reflected in the places, programs, and activities that make up their everyday lives.

Voices from our community

"Be aware of all backgrounds, honour that this is Wadawurrung land and pay respect to cultural safety and the importance of belonging."

CONSULTATION WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

"It would feel really good if everybody got together one day, just to celebrate different cultures."

CHILD, BALLARAT KIDS THINK TANK

"More inclusion of possum skin pedagogy and First Nations culture as a foundation for wellbeing."

COMMUNITY MEMBER

54/100

average community rating for children feeling connected to their culture and identity in Ballarat
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

Seeing their own culture represented in the community

ranked as children's top factor for feeling a sense of identity
MySay Adult Survey, 2026

Learning about other cultures

ranked second — children connect their identity through understanding difference
MySay Children Survey, 2026

1 in 4

adult respondents felt children's connection to culture and identity in Ballarat is poor or very poor
MySay Children Survey, 2026