

Communities for Children Shellharbour: Community Consultation

Prepared by:

Professor Lisa Kervin AM, Dr. Chye Toole-Anstey,
Dr. Crystal Arnold, Dr. Joanna Waloszek, Dr. Lisa
Kilgariff, Mia Wright

Early Start, University of Wollongong



**Barnardos
Australia**



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

FINAL REPORT
AUGUST 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

This report was produced at the University of Wollongong on Dharawal country.

We acknowledge that Country for Aboriginal peoples is an interconnected set of ancient and sophisticated relationships. The University of Wollongong spreads across many interrelated Aboriginal Countries that are bound by this sacred landscape, and intimate relationship with that landscape since creation.

From Sydney to the Southern Highlands, to the South Coast.

From fresh water to bitter water to salt. From City to Urban to Rural.

The University of Wollongong Acknowledges the Custodianship of the Aboriginal peoples of this place and space that has kept alive the relationships between all living things.

The University Acknowledges the devastating impact of colonisation on our campuses' footprint and commit ourselves to truth-telling, healing and education.

Acknowledgements

This report is an initiative of Communities for Children Shellharbour and was funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

The researchers wish to acknowledge the Barnardos Australia team for their coordination support throughout the project. We also thank the many community members who generously shared their time and experiences. Their voices are central to this report and will continue to guide work with children and families.

How to cite this report

Kervin, L., Toole-Anstey, C., Arnold, C., Waloszek, J., Kilgariff, L., & Wright, M. (2026). Communities for Children Shellharbour: Community consultation (Report). Early Start, University of Wollongong.

Executive summary

Background

Communities for Children (CfC) is a place-based initiative designed to support the development and wellbeing of children and families across Australia. As a CfC Facilitating Partner, Barnardos Australia works with local organisations to deliver community-informed early childhood programs, mentoring and family support to children, young people and families to achieve positive and sustained development and wellbeing outcomes. Early Start was commissioned to undertake this community consultation in the Shellharbour LGA to help Barnardos understand the experiences of children, young people and families living within this LGA to: 1) inform and guide the design of future CfC programs, 2) shape long-term goals and 3) identify ways to better support safety and belonging for those that live within this community.

Research questions

To achieve these aims, the following research questions framed the consultation:

- What are the strengths of the Shellharbour LGA community and what matters most to its children, young people, and families?
- What are the key challenges and gaps impacting children, young people, and families in Shellharbour LGA?
- How can a stronger sense of safety and belonging be fostered, and what additional supports or programs are needed to achieve this?

Evaluation design

Building on past CfC community consultations, the Early Start research team implemented a mixed methods consultation designed to capture the experiences and perspectives of children, young people, families, and community members. Residents within the Shellharbour LGA were invited to participate through an online survey, and subsequent to this eight focus groups were conducted with diverse stakeholder groups to further explicate survey findings. Together, these methods provided complementary and integrated insights into community views and lived experiences to provide recommendations for further CfC programs.

Overview of findings

Participants emphasised strong, trusting relationships with local services as a key strength within the Shellharbour LGA. Community activities were identified as critical to fostering connection, belonging, and positive intergenerational relationships. Inclusive programs, mentoring opportunities, and spaces that support diverse groups, including CALD communities, neurodiverse young people, and families experiencing vulnerability, were highlighted as contributing positively to children's and young people's development and sense of community. The participants also valued accessible and well-kept outdoor and nature-based spaces that support physical and mental wellbeing.

Participants identified a range of challenges affecting engagement with services and overall wellbeing in the Shellharbour LGA. Common barriers included limited transport options, financial pressures, and low awareness of available programs. Additional gaps were noted in age-appropriate activities, safe third spaces outside of the home and work/school for young people, supports for people with complex needs, mental health services, and the availability of staff given ongoing shortages and long waitlists. Housing instability, fears of judgement or stigma, and the difficulty of balancing work and family responsibilities further restricted access.

Recommendations

Strengthening safety, belonging, and participation was identified as a need in the Shellharbour LGA through the development or expansion of inclusive and youth friendly third spaces and programs, as well as maintaining existing local programs and supports including family friendly third spaces.

Participants emphasised the importance of enhancing environments and services that offer safe places for children and young people to connect, build skills, and access appropriate support and resources for community building and participation. Crucial to this vision is the integration of services, such as through schools or existing community centres and programs, as essential for maintaining trusted relationships with providers, ensuring stability and continuity, and enabling programs to deliver deep and sustained impact within the Shellharbour LGA community.

Table of contents

Acknowledgement of Country.....	2
Executive summary.....	3
Background.....	3
Research questions.....	3
Evaluation design	3
Overview of findings.....	4
Recommendations.....	4
Table of contents.....	5
Figures.....	7
Tables	7
Key terms and acronyms	8
1. Overview and rationale for consultation.....	10
1.1 Overview of Communities for Children.....	10
1.2 Rationale for community consultation	10
1.3 Community snapshot.....	12
2. Research design	14
2.1 Guiding framework.....	16
2.2 Research design	18
2.3 Phase 1: Community survey design	19
2.4 Phase 2: Focus groups design.....	19
2.5 Participant overview	20
3. Analysis and findings	27
3.1 Community survey.....	27
3.2 Focus groups.....	27
3.3 Shared community perspectives.....	27
3.4 Quantitative findings.....	29
3.5 Introduction to qualitative findings.....	35
3.6 Nest analysis	37
3.7 Participating	37
3.8 Learning	40
3.9 Valued, loved and safe.....	43

3.10 Identity and culture.....	49
3.11 Healthy.....	52
3.12 Material basics.....	55
4. Implications for practice.....	61
4.1 Responding to cost-of-living pressures	62
4.2 Building trust and improving engagement	62
4.3 Creating inclusive and meaningful youth spaces	62
4.4 Increasing opportunities for Aboriginal community and connection..	62
4.5 Improving access to resources and infrastructure	63
4.6 Strengthening mental health and wellbeing supports	63
4.7 Leveraging the natural and built environment	63
4.8 Strengthening community leadership and cultural connection.....	64
4.9 Limitations	64
4.10 Opportunities for action	64
4.11 Recommendations.....	66
5. Visual summary of findings	69
6. References	77
7. Appendices	81
Appendix A: Online survey questions	81
Appendix B: Focus group questions.....	90

Figures

Figure 1. Map of Suburbs in Shellharbour	11
Figure 2. The Common Approach detailed child wellbeing wheel.....	17
Figure 3. Duration of residency in the Shellharbour LGA for survey participants.....	21
Figure 4. Age range of survey participants.	22
Figure 5. Participants' primary role in relation to children	23
Figure 6. Activities and programs attended by participants	30
Figure 7. The top five challenges facing families in Shellharbour LGA reported by participants.	31
Figure 8. Participant ideas for what they would like to see in the community.	34
Figure 9. The ARACY NEST wellbeing framework.....	37

Tables

Table 1. Population and SEIFA scores of Shellharbour suburbs*	12
Table 2. Distribution of survey participants across suburbs in the Shellharbour LGA.....	21
Table 3. Distribution of Focus Group Participants	23
Table 4. Themes identified across participant groups.....	28
Table 5. Summary of community strengths.....	35
Table 6. Summary of community challenges.....	36
Table 7. Summary of Community Priorities	61
Table 8. Summary of Community Opportunities.....	65

Key terms and acronyms

CfC	Communities for Children
LGA	Local Government Area
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SEIFA	Socioeconomic Indexes
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
SYFS	Southern Youth and Family Services
AECG	Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
Third spaces	Places outside of the home (“first space) and work/school (“second space”) that often serve as a common meeting ground for individuals with shared interests or lived experiences such as parks, community centres and libraries (Littman, 2022)



1. Overview and rationale for consultation

1. Overview and rationale for consultation

1.1 Overview of Communities for Children

Communities for Children (CfC) is facilitated by Barnardos Australia in partnership with local organisations across the Shellharbour Local Government Area (LGA). The program aims to improve the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families by focusing on early childhood development, mentoring and family support to give children and young people the best start in life.

Communities for Children (CfC) is a place-based initiative designed to support the development and wellbeing of children across Australia. The program delivers community-informed interventions for children birth to 12 years old, as well as young people and families.

CfC Facilitating Partners collaborate with local Community Partners to coordinate a holistic service system that draws on existing community strengths, local knowledge and evidence-based practice. Through this collaboration, local organisations design and deliver programs and services that respond to community needs and provide tailored early intervention and support.

Services and programs developed in consultation with the community include parenting, family and peer support, early learning and literary support, case management, home visits, community events and skill courses. Services and programs may also be targeted towards specific groups of vulnerable or disadvantaged children and families. These groups may include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistic diverse (CALD) families, parent and carers for children with disability, chronic illness or additional needs, families that lack social support, families experiencing mental health, alcohol or other substance and domestic violence issues.

Ultimately, CfC aims to create environments where children and young people can thrive, adults feel supported and empowered, and family and community relationships are strengthened, contributing to a connected and cohesive community.

1.2 Rationale for community consultation

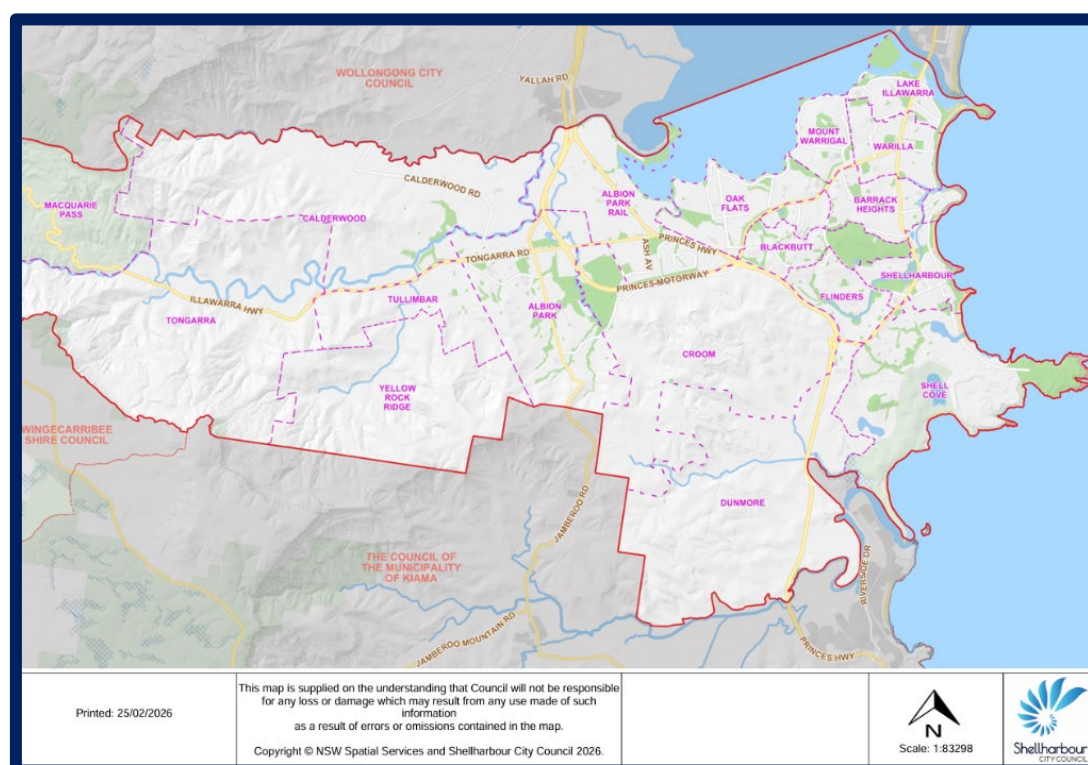
To support design and delivery of future CfC programs (anticipated 2026-2030), a comprehensive, multi-stage needs analysis and strategic planning project commenced in 2025. This initiative includes a comprehensible

process of data collection, service mapping, community consultation, literature review, analysis and dissemination of findings. A central focus of this project is inclusive and meaningful community consultation.

In the second half of 2025, Barnardos approached Early Start to conduct this community consultation. The UOW Early Start team, led by Professor Lisa Kervin AM, conducted the community evaluation between September and December 2025. The UOW team was purposively selected to build on the ongoing collaboration with Barnardos and insights from previous evaluations, ensuring the approach was grounded in evidence and responsive to community priorities. Further, the team designed the consultation by drawing on their expertise in early childhood and community wellbeing, while incorporating the lived experience and guidance of Aboriginal team members and community, to ensure the approach was grounded in evidence and responsive to community priorities.

The consultation sought to explore the strengths of the Shellharbour community (Figure 1), what community members considered important, and the main issues that were impacting children, young people, and families.

Figure 1. Map of Suburbs in Shellharbour



The consultation also aimed to understand how a stronger sense of safety and belonging could be created, as well as identify any additional supports or programs that were needed. The data highlighted areas for improvement, current areas of strength, and revealed emerging issues requiring targeted focus.

The consultation design also drew on the ongoing collaboration with Barnardos and insights from previous evaluations, ensuring the approach was grounded in evidence and responsive to community priorities.

1.3 Community snapshot

Shellharbour LGA is a rapidly growing area within the Illawarra region, approximately 80 kilometres south of Sydney.

Shellharbour is estimated to have a resident population of 81,566 with projections indicating a 24% population increase by 2041 (ABS, 2021; Shellharbour City Council, 2024).

The Shellharbour LGA comprises 20 suburbs and rural localities that feature diverse landscapes including beaches, rivers and nature reserves as well as growing urban and commercial spaces. There are approximately 21,682 families in the Shellharbour LGA with an average of 1.8 children in each family (ABS, 2021). The community has a median age of 39 years. The area offers residents and families coastal lifestyles supported by proximity to Wollongong, Sydney and the South Coast.

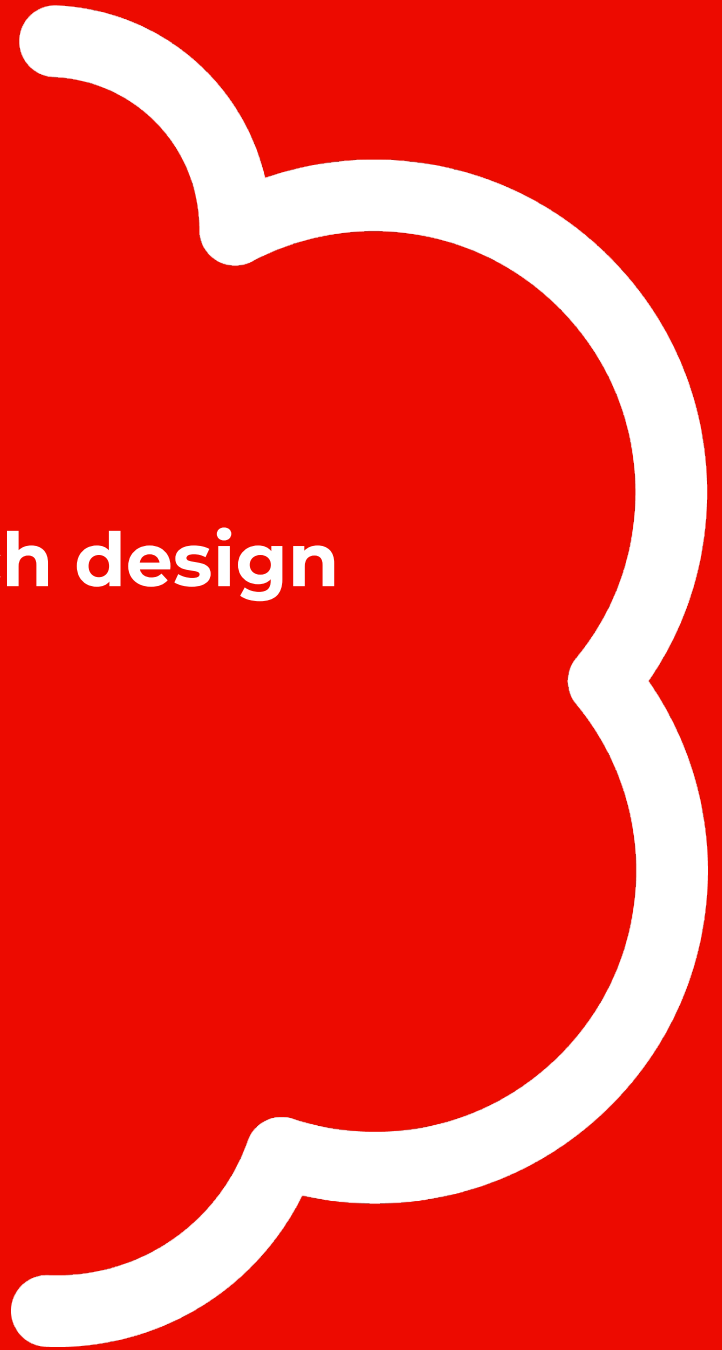
Table 1. Population and SEIFA scores of Shellharbour suburbs*

Suburb	Postcode	Population	SEIFA score*
Albion Park	2527	13826	1018.0
Albion Park Rail	2527	6920	930.7
Barrack Heights	2528	6003	936.7
Barrack Point	2528	725	1063
Blackbutt	2529	3291	949.8*
Calderwood	2527	3013	1079.1
Croom	2527	112	1074*
Dunmore	2529	318	1074*
Flinders	2529	7118	1026.8
Lake Illawarra	2528	3288	888.3
Macquarie Pass	2577	NA**	1053*
Mount Warrigal	2528	4880	934.2
Oak Flats	2529	6840	984.7
Shell Cove	2529	7591	1077.4

Shellharbour	2529	3520	982.9
Shellharbour City	2529	457	949.8*
Tongarra	2527	141	1053*
Tullimbar	2527	1840	1054.0
Warilla	2528	6226	848.6
Yellow Rock	2527	226	1053*

*SEIFA score of disadvantage is an index of relative socio-economic disadvantage. Low scores indicate high proportions of disadvantages based on these characteristics. High scores indicate low proportions of these characteristics (lack of measured disadvantage).

2. Research design



2. Research design

This project builds on previous CfC community consultations in the Shellharbour LGA and existing research to explore the current experiences of families, children, young people and community members.

A mixed methods design, incorporating quantitative and qualitative approaches including an online survey (phase 1) and focus groups (phase 2). Together, these methods were used to gather meaningful insights from the community and diverse representative groups. Consistent with previous community-based research, this mixed-methods approach enabled the integration of lived experience and contextual insight with quantitative findings. In doing so, it supports a holistic and comprehensive understanding of community needs and strengths that can be leveraged in responding to emerging and ongoing challenges (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Past research spanning across disciplines, highlight a complex nexus of factors that influence child's wellbeing, a sense of belonging and safety. The influence of the broader community a pivotal role in support children and young people's wellbeing, social and emotional develop and can provide opportunities for growth and learning. Current literature focuses on developing a cohesive understanding the dynamic relationship between children and community for example, how children conceptualise community and belonging (e.g. Maine et al., 2021; Wastell & Degotardi, 2017) and how children act as vessel for strengthening community connection and social capital (e.g. Bessel, 2015; Wood et al., 2013) as well as the impact of community-led initiatives (e.g. Brettig, 2019; Lin et al., 2020) and what conditions are conducive to positive developmental outcomes, reduced risk factors and enhanced protective factors for children, young people and families (Bessel, 2015; Lin et al., 2020).

Common themes present in current research broadly centres on resources (poverty, financial pressures, material needs, access to public services) and relationships (social integration, intergenerational relationships, peer relationships, parental bond) (Bessel, 2019). Positive adult-child relationships and interactions which form the foundation of children's community experience e.g. children having positive encounters with unfamiliar adults generalises to holding positive perceptions of their community (Benson et al., 2012; Bessel, 2015). In responding to challenges in the community, children's perspectives can differ from adult-centric standpoints, revealing priorities and gaps that adults may overlook (Bessel, 2015). Research identifying children's priorities on what makes a supportive community have been expanded to include relationships (family, time with parents, friends, good neighbours, caring people, being listened to, community get-togethers); safety (positive interactions, no violence, no bullying and no

drunkenness); physical spaces (home, a good environment, inclusive spaces); resources (financial security, public service) (Bessel, 2015). When assets of the community align with the needs of young people, the community becomes more supportive and improves the likelihood of positive outcomes (Brettig, 2019). Hence, a large body of evidence suggest that co-designing community programs and services with children, young people and families create opportunities for shared decision making, collaboration across service systems, and the development of safe spaces for honest or difficult conversations (Brettig, 2019)

The additional perspective taken from practitioners within the community who shape wellbeing of children, young people, families and community members through their vocational roles provide further depth to the discussion around resources available to the community from an expert standpoint (Elrick-Barr et al., 2025). Consultation that is holistic uncovers the direct and indirect effects of the community on children, young people and families and collective role in supporting wellbeing, safety and a sense of belonging (Beson et al., 2012; Thomas & Spencer, 2021).

2.1 Guiding framework

The study design was informed by The Nest (2014), a national wellbeing framework developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People (ARACY), which outlines the fundamental conditions children and young people need to thrive and is grounded in multidisciplinary research and broad community consultation. Guiding the study's approach, The Nest provided a holistic, rights-based lens that shaped both the design and analysis of consultation processes.

In addition to these foundations, the research team drew on their expertise in early childhood development, community wellbeing, and participatory methodologies to ensure the consultation was rigorous, culturally responsive, and grounded in best practice. The Barnardos Australia Practice Framework and Principles, centred on the child and family, further ensured alignment with evidence informed approaches to engaging children, young people, families and the wider community.

Together, these frameworks and the team's interdisciplinary expertise supported a research design that prioritised wellbeing, contextual understanding and meaningful, ethical participation. Using this framework for community consultation helps build a more inclusive and holistic understanding of the factors shaping children's and families' health and wellbeing, as well as their perceptions of the community. Considering these broader systems at play supports the identification of barriers and strengths that can inform responsive, community specific support.

The Nest

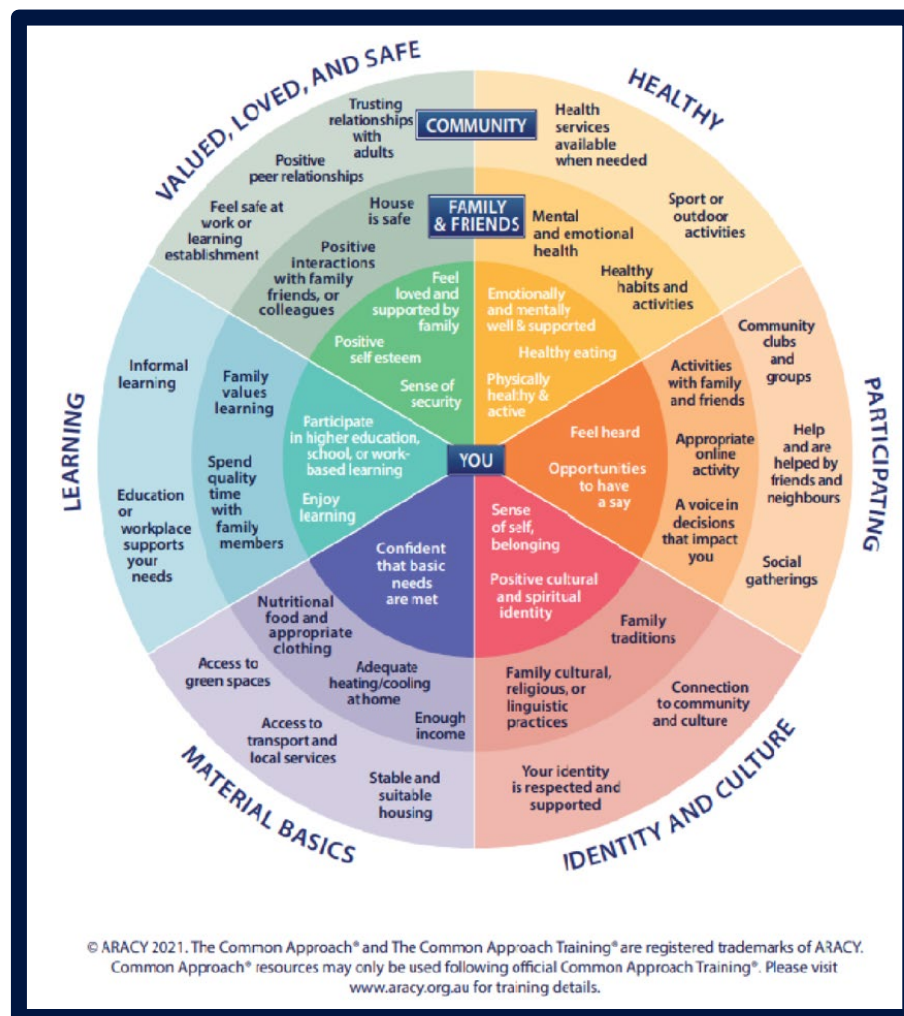
The Nest (2014) is a wellbeing framework developed by Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People's (ARACY) in consultation with children, young people, parents, practitioners and services.

The Nest is grounded in multidisciplinary research and reflects a holistic, rights-based perspective on child wellbeing and describes the elements of daily life that children and young people in Australia need to thrive. The Nest outlines six interconnected dimensions of wellbeing that provide a lens for understanding community perspectives and children's wellbeing needs.

The Common Approach

Building on the wellbeing dimensions established in The Nest, the Common Approach (Figure 2) recognises that children's development and wellbeing is influenced by multiple spheres, including individual-, family- and community-level.

Figure 2. The Common Approach detailed child wellbeing wheel



The Common Approach is a complementary, strengths-based framework that offers practical guidance for how practitioners, policymakers, services and people working with children can engage with children, young people and families around their wellbeing needs. It emphasises the importance of protective factors and supportive environments at each level and provides a structured, collaborative framework to help explore strengths, respond to needs and identify appropriate supports for children and young people. In this research, the Common Approach dimensions provide a practical framework that helps shape consultation questions, guide analysis, and ensure that community insights are interpreted through a comprehensive wellbeing lens.

Using this framework for community consultation helps build a more inclusive and holistic understanding of factors shaping children and family's health and wellbeing as well as their perceptions of the community. Considering these broader systems in action supports the identification of barriers and strengths that informs responsive, community-specific support. This ultimately supports communities to shape solutions that align with their lived experiences and aspirations for children and families.

2.2 Research design

Approval for this community consultation for both research phases was provided by the Human Ethics Committee at the University of Wollongong (2025/287).

The design and facilitation of all phases of consultation considered the benefits and interests of the community and individual participants including consultation with Aboriginal researchers to ensure cultural respect, equity and inclusivity as well as minimisation of risk and burden to support participant safety, dignity and wellbeing.

All participants were informed of the purpose and scope of the community consultation and were provided written information sheets outlining their rights. Participation in both phases of the consultation were voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional consent sought from parents or guardians for focus group participants under 18 years of age. At the outset of each focus group, participants were reminded of their consent, advised that they could choose not to answer any question, and were free to leave the session at any time. Survey participants were also able to skip any question they did not wish to answer and withdraw their consent to participate. Data collected was de-identified for analysis. These practices ensured that participation was voluntary, safe and respectful.

2.3 Phase 1: Community survey design

A community survey was used to gather initial insights and feedback from a broad range of Shellharbour LGA residents on their perceptions, attitudes and experiences within the community.

The UOW research team developed an online survey using Qualtrics and adapted items from previous CfC community consultation surveys. The online survey was distributed to residents in the Shellharbour LGA through social media platforms, email recruitment through community networks, advertisements in Shellharbour LGA and via community partners and could be accessed via link or QR code. Participation was voluntary and participants who completed the survey were offered the chance to enter a draw to win a \$150 Woolworths gift card.

The survey focused on community access to services and programs, lived experiences within the Shellharbour LGA, and perceptions of strengths and challenges facing children and families. It also collected demographic information, including participant age, gender, suburb of residence, duration of residency, household composition, role in relation to children (e.g. parent, grandparent, other family member), and the number of children and ages of children (see Appendix A for full survey).

Participants were required to be over the age of 18 years, which resulted in the survey primarily captures the perspectives and attitudes of parents, carers, people working with children (e.g. childcare workers and educators) and community members.

The survey included a combination of multiple-choice questions (including items with multiple-selection options) and open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete and was open for a period of six weeks between September and November 2025.

2.4 Phase 2: Focus groups design

Focus groups were facilitated to gain collective and local insights into community needs and experiences and to capture the voices of community members. Building on the community survey findings, focus groups questions were designed to explicate trends in the survey data while also providing an opportunity for participants (including those under 18 years) to share their lived experiences and perspectives, offering rich insights into everyday engagement in the Shellharbour LGA from the perspectives of children, young people and families. Through these focus groups, participants described what it feels like to live, work, grow up and raise families in the area.

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and invited to participate based on their role within the community or membership to key community groups. Recruitment occurred through email invitations or direct contact via established community partners and network meetings. The focus groups brought together a broad range of perspectives including parents and carers, children (from pre-school to high school), community service providers and practitioners, Aboriginal community leaders and school administrators.

Focus groups were semi-structured guided by prompt questions and were facilitated by researchers using insights from the survey to shape discussion. While specific questions were tailored to each group, discussions generally explored community and service strengths, barriers and challenges and opportunities to enhance belonging (Nyumba et al., 2018). Focus groups were facilitated by the UOW team drawing their data collection expertise.

To support inclusive participation, additional strategies were used to prompt discussion including photos of local landmarks, drawing activities and opportunities for written responses. For focus groups involving children and young people, child-safe and developmentally appropriate methods were included to ensure children could meaningfully and safely contribute to discussions. Focus groups were conducted face-to-face across different locations in the Shellharbour LGA, and two individual consultations were held online via Microsoft Teams. Focus groups were scheduled during existing community meeting times, Council interagency meetings to reduce time burden and enhance accessibility.

Large groups were divided into smaller breakout groups to ensure all voices were shared and to foster more in depth and meaningful discussion. Group sizes ranged from three to twelve participants from the same community group. Individual consultations were conducted with two participants who were unable to attend group sessions. Some participants engagement in more than one focus group due to their involvement across multiple community roles.

Each focus group ran for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Sessions were audio recorded, researchers took written notes, and any artefacts or written materials generated by participants were collected for analysis.

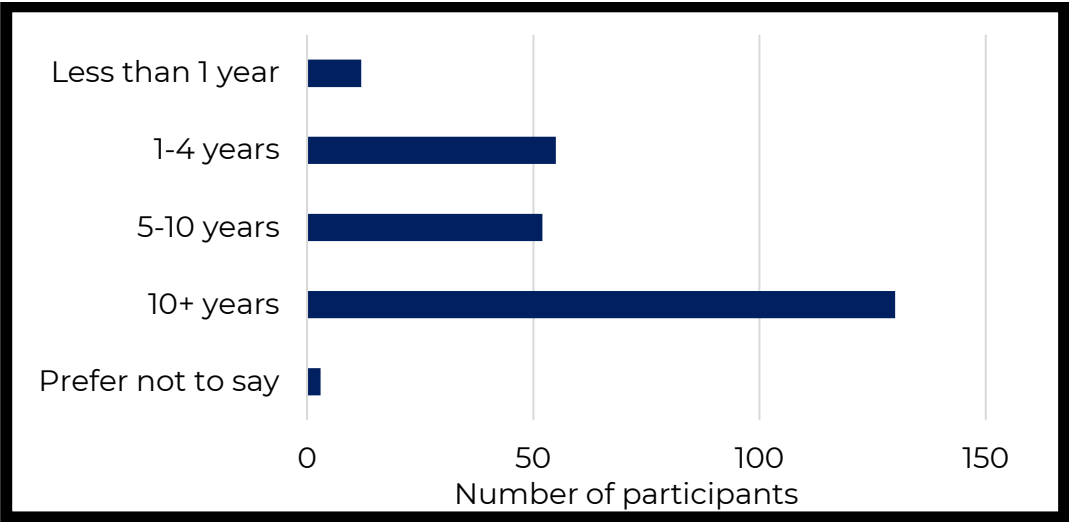
2.5 Participant overview

Phase 1: Community survey

A total of 252 responses were collected. Survey responses reflect a broad cross-section of the Shellharbour community offering insights into participant's backgrounds, roles and connections to the community.

Most participants had also lived in the Shellharbour LGA for more than 10 years, indicating strong local knowledge and long-term community connection (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Duration of residency in the Shellharbour LGA for survey participants.



Perspectives from residents in 17 of 20 suburbs in the Shellharbour LGA were captured with particularly strong participation from residents in Calderwood, Albion Park and Oak Flats (see Table 2).

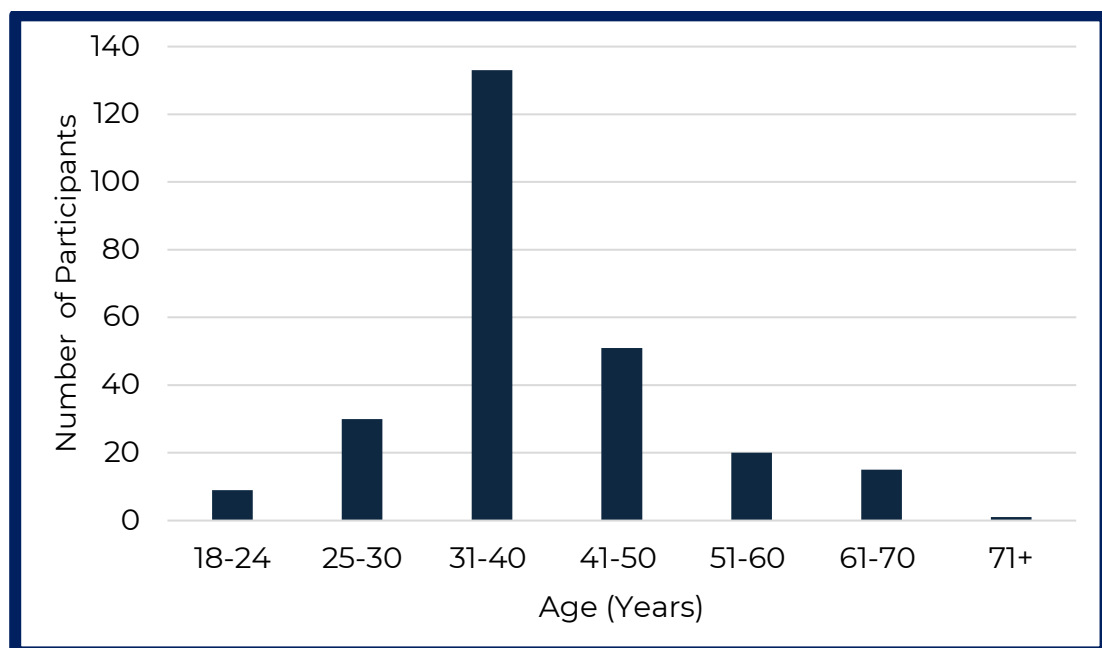
Table 2. Distribution of survey participants across suburbs in the Shellharbour LGA

Suburb of Shellharbour	Percentage of Participants
Calderwood	21%
Albion Park	15%
Flinders	9%
Oak Flats	8%
Shellharbour	7%
Shell Cove	6%
Warilla	6%
Barrack Heights	5%
Lake Illawarra	5%
Albion Park Rail	4%

Blackbutt	3%
Mount Warrigal	3%
Tullimbar	3%
Dunmore	1%
Tongarra	1%
Barrack Point	0%
Croom	0%
Macquarie Pass	0%
Yellow Rock Ridge	0%

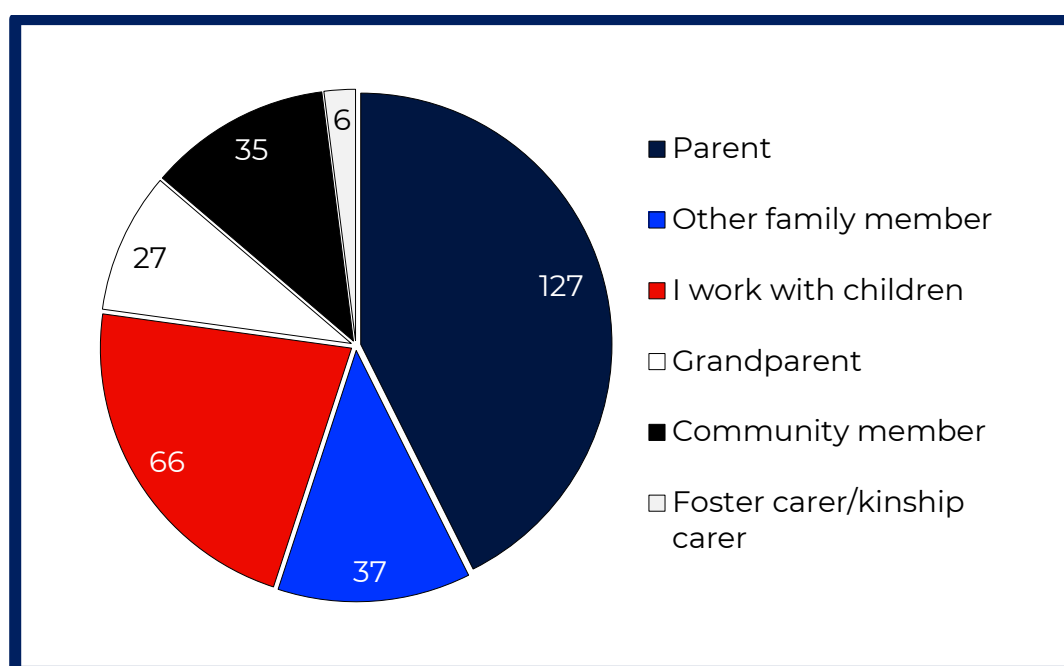
Participant perspectives were collective from a broad range of ages with the largest group aged 31-40 years (see Figure 4). 222 respondents (88%) were female, 27 (11%) were male and a small proportion of participants preferred not to say.

Figure 4. Age range of survey participants.



Participants held a wide range of roles with children, including parents and carers, educators, extended family members, people who work with children, and other community members (see Figure 5). Many identified more than one role, showing the broad mix of perspectives represented in the survey.

Figure 5. Participants' primary role in relation to children



*Note: Participants could select more than one response.

Phase 2: Focus groups

Eight focus groups were conducted, targeting a wide range of stakeholders including children, young people, practitioners, family members and community leaders (see Table 3 for participant numbers).

Table 3. Distribution of Focus Group Participants

Key Community Group	Number of Participants
Child and Family services and practitioners	17
Youth services and practitioners	24
School Administrators	2
Aboriginal leaders	5
Preschool children	5
Active In-Betweens (Ages 8-12)	10
Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS) Indigenous Network Program Attendees (Ages 12-17)	7
Parents and carers	6

Focus Group 1. Child and family services and practitioners

This focus group was conducted face-to-face and had participants from community service providers and practitioners working in services supporting primarily children and youth in the Shellharbour LGA. Participants included Supported Playgroup facilitators, Allied health professionals, Program managers, Department of Education and Department of Communities and Justice representatives. The focus group was conducted during Shellharbour Council Interagency meeting.

Focus group 2. Youth services and practitioners

This focus group was run face-to-face and included community service providers and practitioners working with youth and families in the community. Participants included representatives from Shellharbour City Council, Headspace, the Department of Education, Community service providers, Allied Health professionals and Program managers.

Focus group 3. School administrators

This group involved individual discussion with representatives from the Department of Education including principals and administrators from various schools in the Shellharbour LGA. To support participation, individual discussions were conducted via Microsoft Teams.

Focus group 4. Aboriginal leaders

This focus group was made up of Elders and community members with connections to the Aboriginal community in the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) based in Shellharbour. To ensure the process was grounded in cultural safety and respect, we moved away from a rigid interview structure to reciprocal sharing. We shared afternoon tea together, and we purposefully stepped back to let the Elders lead the dialogue. This allowed the conversation to follow their protocols and priorities rather than a fixed agenda. Throughout our time together, we focused on a genuine two-way exchange, discussing meaningful ways of giving back to the community to ensure the research was a contribution rather than just a collection. By prioritising these relational values, the insights gathered remained grounded in the authority and lived experiences of the Aboriginal community.

Focus Group 5. Pre-school children (Ages 4-5)

This focus group was run face-to-face and was made up of children aged 4 to 5 years old attending pre-school. Participants engaged in discussion prompted by researchers and photos to explore what children enjoyed doing in their community.

Focus group 6. Active In-Betweens (Ages 8-12)

This focus group was formed by children aged 8-12 participating in neighbourhood program, Active In-Betweens. Active In-Betweens is a free, after-school program that supports children to meet their nutritional needs, engage physical activity and develop important life and social skills. The program encourages participation in physical activity, especially outdoor play, promotes healthy eating awareness and strengthens social bonds between peers and educators, and builds leadership skills and emotional resilience.

The program aims to promote sustained health and wellbeing outcomes for children, their families and the broader community. Participants engaged in face-to-face discussion prompted by researchers and photos to explore what children enjoyed doing in their community.

Focus group 7. SYFS (Ages 12-17)

This focus group involved high school students attending the Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS) Indigenous Network Program. This program supports Aboriginal students in Year 7 to 11 (approximately aged 12-17) in the Shellharbour region by providing cultural programs and workshops, individualised specialist support and age-specific activities.

The program has a strong emphasis on cultural awareness and identity, encourages active participation and aid with social engagement as well as educational, training and pre-employment support to young people and their families. Aboriginal group leaders who deliver the program were consulted with and given a copy of the discussion questions prior to the session. Researchers observed a yarning circle session with the young people led by the Aboriginal group leaders. Note that community consent was obtained for observation and note-taking, however it was requested that there be no audio recording.

Focus group 8. Parents and carers

This focus group was conducted face-to-face and involved parents of children who currently or previously attended various Ed U Play programs. Ed U Play Illawarra delivers targeted programs for young people that aim to build holistic wellbeing, social and emotional skills, improve capacity, positive peer relationships and a sense of belonging and connection for children and young people.

3. Analysis and Findings



3. Analysis and findings

3.1 Community survey

The quantitative survey data was analysed using descriptive analysis which involved summarising participant demographics such as age, gender and suburbs as well as patterns of engagement with local programs, services and organisations to identify common responses and areas of high or low participation.

Open ended survey responses were examined through a thematic analysis informed by Braun & Clarke (2013) using ARACY's The Nest and Common Approach Wellbeing Framework. This was done alongside analysis of the data generated by the focus groups to identify what matters most to community members, including what they value about living in the Shellharbour LGA and the challenges or gaps they experience.

3.2 Focus groups

A systematic approach was used to analyse the focus group data. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) seven stages of thematic analysis, beginning with the transcription of focus group discussions and interview notes, followed by an extended period of familiarisation to ensure researchers developed a deep understanding of the data.

3.3 Shared community perspectives

Both survey and focus group responses were independently coded by the research team who identified meaningful patterns and recurring ideas across the dataset. These initial codes were informed by ARACY's The Nest and Common Approach Wellbeing Framework, which provided a structured lens for understanding children's wellbeing needs across domains including identity and culture, learning, participating, healthy and valued, loved and safe.

These were then grouped into themes that reflected shared priorities, such as access to services, community connection, outdoor spaces and accessibility. This approach provided an accessible and robust overview of community experiences, helping to highlight strengths, needs and opportunities across the Shellharbour LGA.

Underlying themes and subthemes were identified and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the breadth of community perspectives gathered during each discussion and what matters most to children, young people, families and practitioners in the Shellharbour LGA. These themes have been

summarised in Table 4. Note, practitioners encompass all participants in focus groups 1, 2 and 3. Children refers to participants in focus groups 5 and 6. Families and adult community members refers to participants in focus group 8 as well as survey respondents. Aboriginal community refers to participants in focus group 4 and participants in SYFS.

Table 4. Themes identified across participant groups

Identified Theme	Group
Physical environment	Families and adult community members, children, Aboriginal community
Infrastructure	Practitioners, families
Lifestyle	Families and adult community members, young adults
Sense of connection	Families and adult community members, practitioners, young adults
Strong community leadership	Practitioners, families and adult community members, Aboriginal community
Health and wellbeing	Families and adult community members, practitioners
Cost of living	Families and adult community members
Engagement	Practitioners
Places for connection	Families and adult community members, children, Aboriginal community, young adults, children
Access to resources	Practitioners, young adults, families and adult community members
Belonging and safety	Practitioners, families and adult community members, children, Aboriginal community, young adults
Equity and responsiveness	Aboriginal community, practitioners, families and adult community members
Education	Practitioners, young adults, families and adult community members
Decision making	Aboriginal community, practitioners, families and adult community members, young adults

The final stage of the analysis involved synthesising these themes into a clear narrative to inform the report's findings, recommendations and broader understanding of community strengths, challenges and priorities.

3.4 Quantitative findings

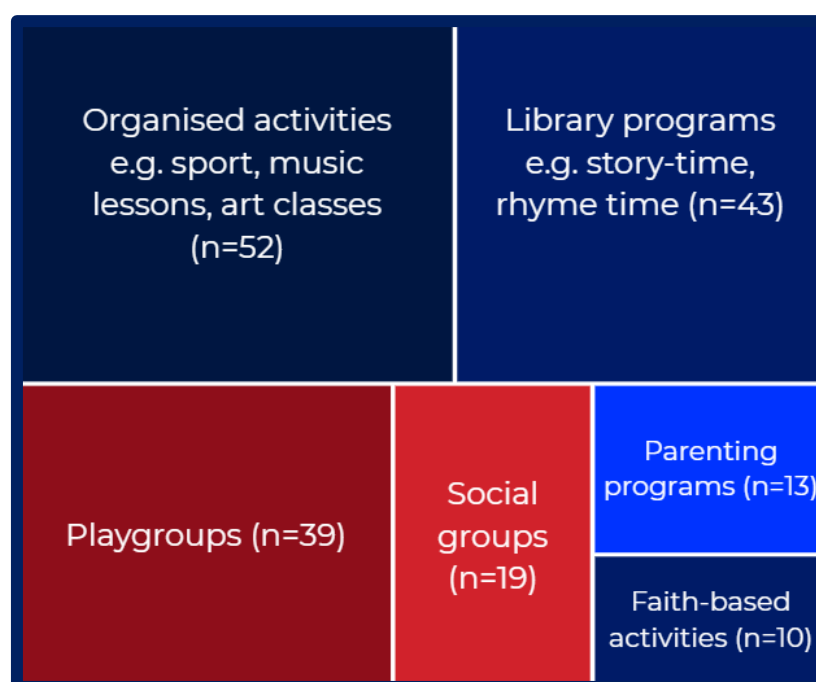
Participants reported on their experiences and engagement with groups and programs in the Shellharbour LGA. 66% of respondents were confident that they knew about, could access and get help from services and organisations to assist them and their families if needed.

Access and engagement with local services, groups and programs

When asked which services they currently access or have used in the past, participants reported engaging with a range of supports across the Shellharbour LGA. These included essential healthcare providers such as GPs, hospitals, dentists, child health nurses, and allied health professionals, as well as early childhood and childcare services including daycare, Mind Champs and afterschool care programs. Families also accessed a broad suite of community-based programs such as Go4Fun, Healthy Cities, SYFS, 2528 and Park and Play. In addition, many relied on specialist and early childhood services including Life Start, Kids Wish, Karitane, Kids Cottage and MCHN groups as well as community events like the Teddy Bear Picnic, Kids Fest, the Lions Book Fair and the Lifeline Book Fair. These responses highlight a service landscape that families draw on to meet a wide spectrum of developmental, social and wellbeing needs. The breadth of services accessed suggests that families are actively navigating multiple systems health, education, early intervention, community programs and recreational activities to support their children's growth.

Participants additionally reported their engagement with groups and programs. 178 participants (71%) indicated they attended a group or programs within the Shellharbour LGA. The types of activities and programs varied including organised activities, library programs, playgroups, social groups, parenting programs and faith-based activities reflecting diverse interest, needs and opportunities (see Figure 6). Participants additionally shared a range of reasons for attending local programs and services, including the sense of enjoyment and social connection they experience through engaging with their local community. Many felt their needs were being met by programs within the Shellharbour LGA, reducing the need to travel elsewhere. Practical factors such as shorter travel distances and lower transport costs further supported their preference for accessing services locally.

Figure 6. Activities and programs attended by participants



*Note “n” refers to the number of participants. Participants could select multiple options.

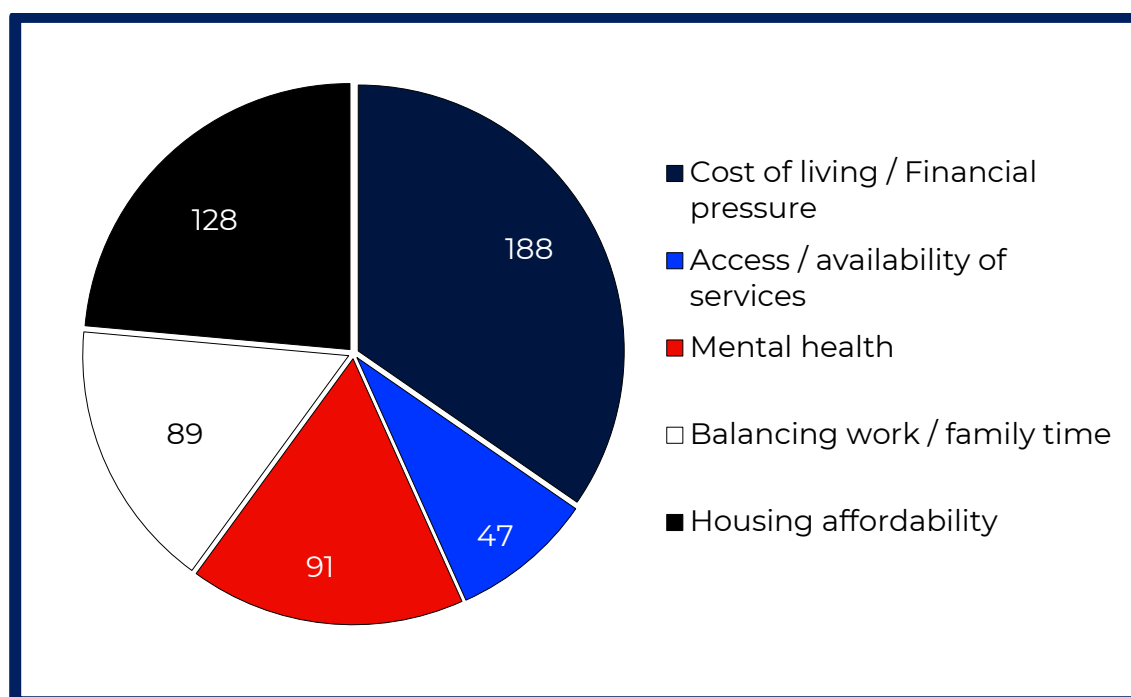
Additionally, some participants reported accessing organised sports or lessons, such as music, swimming, dancing and Park Run, along with general amenities like shops. Government and community support services including Centrelink, Medicare, employment services, Family Services Australia, The Smith Family, Salvation Army and Anglicare were also utilised. Mental health services such as Headspace, the Gidget Foundation and Kids Hub were accessed by some families as well.

Forty-three participants (17%) indicated that they did not attend programs and services in the Shellharbour LGA. Reasons for non-engagement in programs and services in the Shellharbour LGA include difficulty juggling work and other commitments during the week, limited availability services and programs on the weekends, difficulty joining and finding groups, lack of options catering to children with different needs, limited interest in current options and attending programs outside the Shellharbour LGA.

Challenges experienced by participants

Families across the Shellharbour LGA reported navigating a mix of pressures that shape daily life, and these pressures often overlap in ways that make them feel heavier than any single issue on its own. The top five challenges identified by participants are cost of living/financial stress, access/availability of services, mental health, balancing work/family time, housing affordability (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. The top five challenges facing families in Shellharbour LGA reported by participants.



*The numbers represent the number of participants who selected each challenge. Participants could select more than one response

Rising cost of living pressures sit at the centre of many households' concerns. Groceries, utilities, fuel, and everyday essentials have become noticeably more expensive, and families are finding that their budgets no longer stretch as far as they once did. Outside the household, cost of living and financial pressures underscored all barriers expressed by participants.

Housing affordability remains was reported as a major pressure point for many participants. Whether renting or trying to buy, participants described facing high prices, limited availability and increasing competition, often leaving them with few viable options. Some families reported having to move away from established support networks, while others remained in housing that did not meet their needs simply because it was all they could afford. This challenge can have indirect implications for children; frequent moves, parental stress and the lack of a stable home environment can undermine children's sense of safety and disrupt routines that support healthy development. These insights highlight housing stress as both an economic and wellbeing issue, where affordability pressures cascade into wider impacts on family stability, parental mental health and children's long-term foundations for learning, belonging and development.

Mental health emerged consistently as a challenge facing community members in the Shellharbour LGA. Participants described a variety of concerns relating to mental health including accessing treatment, obtaining referrals for practitioners and diagnosis as well as support and resources for more complex challenges such as trauma and substance use. For many, these issues were compounded by financial strain and the pressures of managing family and work responsibilities. Survey responses reflected this pattern, with many participants identifying mental health supports for both children and young people, as well as for parents, as a significant gap in the community. Together, these reflections highlight a community in which mental health concerns are widespread and underscoring the need for accessible, ongoing and preventive mental health initiatives that recognise the realities families are navigating.

Balancing work and family time was a pressure for many participants. With most households relying on two incomes, parents often felt torn between meeting workplace expectations and being present for their children. Long commutes, shift work and irregular hours disrupted predictable routines, leaving families with limited opportunities for connection and rest. Participants described feeling overwhelmed or stretched too thin to attend community events or services and programs for their children. These reflections highlight that work-life pressures are not simply logistical challenges, also they shape children's daily experiences, influence family wellbeing and contribute to broader stress patterns already intensified by financial strain, housing pressures and limited-service access. This underscores the need for flexible, family responsive service models and community support that acknowledge the realities of modern family life.

While 71% participants indicated they attend services and programs in the Shellharbour LGA, it was equally recognised that families often encounter significant barriers when trying to engage with support. Many described a sense of confusion or uncertainty at the outset, reflecting limited awareness of what services exist, how to navigate multiple service streams or where to begin, particularly for families with lower health literacy or those juggling complex needs. Others spoke about structural constraints such as long wait times, closed books, eligibility restrictions and the difficulty of securing timely appointments, which together create a system that feels overstretched.

Practical challenges also shaped families' capacity to access support. Transportation issues, traffic and parking, the cost of services, and the need for childcare were commonly cited as barriers that make attending appointments or programs logistically difficult. These pressures were often compounded for families already experiencing financial stress or limited flexibility in work schedules. For some, concerns about stigma or judgement added an additional emotional barrier to seeking help.

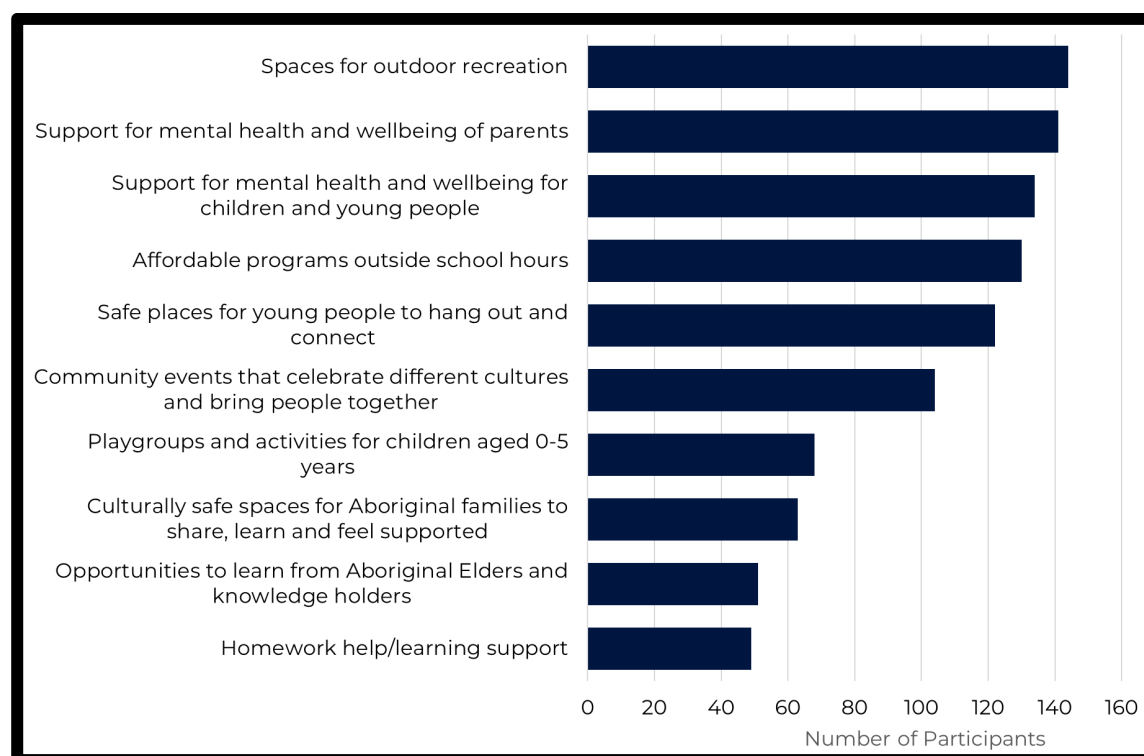
Taken together, these reflections highlight a service landscape that can feel fragmented, hard to navigate and inconsistent in its availability.

Families' experiences point to the importance of clear communication, coordinated pathways and system-level investment to enhance accessibility. Addressing these barriers would not only improve service uptake, but also strengthen trust, reduce stress and ensure that support reaches the families who need it most. These challenges illustrate families doing their best in circumstances where foundations such as security, time, support and stability are increasingly difficult to sustain. Each issue is significant on its own, but it is their combined weight that shapes daily life for many households in Shellharbour. The cumulative effects of financial strain, service gaps, housing pressures and work-life demands create environments where families must constantly adjust and absorb stress, often with limited buffers. This interconnected burden underscores the importance of coordinated, place-based supports that recognise the realities families face and work to restore the stability and sense of safety that underpin children's wellbeing.

Participant suggestions for action

Participants across the Shellharbour LGA described a shared vision for what would make their community stronger, more connected, and more supportive of everyday family life. At the heart of their feedback was a desire for more places to gather, play, and relax (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Participant ideas for what they would like to see in the community.



*Note: Participants could select more than one response

Survey respondents indicated the importance of accessible outdoor recreation spaces such as parks, walking paths, beaches, and play areas - where children can explore and adults can relax and socialise. These spaces are seen not just as amenities, but as anchors for wellbeing and community connection.

Alongside this, families emphasised the need for stronger mental health and wellbeing supports for both parents and children, further highlighting the need for more accessible supports and resources.

Families consistently emphasised the importance of affordable programs outside school hours. Whether after-school activities, school holiday programs, or weekend options, parents are looking for opportunities that are engaging, inclusive, and financially realistic. These programs would support children to learn, socialise and stay active, while also helping parents balance work commitments and family time.

As another recurring need was for safe, welcoming and appropriately supervised spaces where young people can spend time, build friendships, express themselves and feel a strong sense of belonging, offering programs that also provide these spaces was identified as a key need.

Opportunities for community connection and cultural inclusion were other strong themes. Families expressed a desire for events that celebrate different cultures, bring people together and reflect the diversity of Shellharbour. For families with young children, there is a clear call for more playgroups and early-years activities that support early learning, social play, and connection with other families who are navigating similar stages of life.

Participants additionally highlighted the importance of culturally safe spaces for Aboriginal people to gather, share stories and feel supported. Survey participants expressed a strong desire for opportunities to learn from Elders and knowledge holders, ensuring that culture, language, and traditions are passed on to children and young people in meaningful ways.

Finally, families spoke about the need for homework help and learning support. Whether it's tutoring, quiet study spaces, or programs that build confidence, families want children and young people to have the tools they need to succeed at school.

Together, these suggestions paint a picture of a community that values connection, culture, safety, and wellbeing and families who are eager to see the Shellharbour LGA continue to grow into a place where every child, parent, and young person feels supported and able to thrive.

3.5 Introduction to qualitative findings

The qualitative findings drawn from the community survey and focus groups also reveal strong and consistent themes. These collective perspectives offer insight into the community's current strengths and challenges. All quotes are drawn from the focus groups to represent the voices and experiences shared directly by participants. Although not an exhaustive, these perspectives capture the most shared ideas.

Community strengths focused on the physical environment and lifestyle that Shellharbour has to offer, available and supportive infrastructure, a sense of connection and strong leadership within the community (see Table 5).

Table 5. Summary of community strengths

Identified theme	Key ideas
Physical environment	• Natural environment (beaches, lakes, waterways, reserves) • Spaces for recreation and connection (bike and footpaths, pools, parks, sport fields, skateparks)
Infrastructure	• Access to library, shops, services

	Well-connected location and proximity to city, coast and rural settings
Lifestyle	- Family-friendly lifestyle - Accessible spaces for young children (parks and playgrounds)
Sense of connection	- Established networks - Longstanding ties between families and community service providers and practitioners - Strong connection to area, community and Country
Strong community leadership	- Community mentors and role models - Educators - Health and community practitioners - Aboriginal and cultural leaders

Community challenges were shared by participants centred on access and availability health and wellbeing services, cost of living, engagement and access to resources as well as opportunities and places for community connection (see Table 6).

Table 6. Summary of community challenges

Identified theme	Key ideas
Health and wellbeing	- Mental health and trauma support for children, young people, parents and families - Systemic limitations (waitlists, staffing, capacity)
Cost of living	- Meeting basic needs (housing, food security, transport) - Financial pressures - Local employment opportunities - Affordability of services programs and activities for children, young people and families
Engagement	- School engagement and attendance - Parent engagement due to work commitments - Trust in services and community - Fear of judgement
Places for connection	- Places for young people to meet and connect - Inclusive spaces and events for CALD communities, people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and disability
Access to resources	- Limited programs and support (interest, novelty, age-appropriate) - Service funding - Information and awareness/knowledge of services

- Transport and infrastructure to support movement/linking suburbs (walkable suburbs, roads, pathways, bike paths/lanes)

3.6 Nest analysis

The data below has been analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2022) seven stages of thematic analysis with consideration of the interconnected dimensions of wellbeing from The Nest framework (see Figure 9). These dimensions outline what is essential for children and young people to thrive.

Figure 9. The ARACY NEST wellbeing framework



Across Phase 1 and Phase 2, this framework was used to guide analysis by identifying patterns, drawing comparisons and integrating insights from the survey, focus groups and individual consultations. Applying this consistent lens allowed the team to meaningfully connect quantitative and qualitative trends from the survey with the lived experiences and community voices shared in discussions, strengthening the depth and coherence of the overall findings.

3.7 Participating

“Engaging children and young people in decision-making processes that affect them” - The Nest Framework

A range of factors that shape how families interact with the community and local services and programs were described by the participants.

Participation in services and programs was mostly positive, as 66% of survey participants indicated they were confident that they could access services.

Participants across the consultation noted that engagement was shaped by their awareness of opportunities and how to access them. Community members described uncertainty about available programs, reflecting a wider need for clearer communication and more visible pathways into local activities and programs. This was particularly important for children and young people with complex needs, requiring multiple services and levels of support. Practitioners recognised that it is often difficult to connect families and children and navigate different service streams.

“

“When we have discussions with the families about what they would really need, sometimes they don’t know where to go. The services are available, but they don’t know about them.” (Child and family services group)

“I know a lot of the [programs and supports are available, but our schools don’t necessarily know that and that trickles down to the families as well. So, it’s that communication of what’s actually available and how to navigate all of the different things that are there.” (School administrators group)

”

Engagement with services and programs also was strongly influenced by the timing and flexibility of what is offered. Increasing work commitments and financial pressures mean that families often struggle to attend programs scheduled during working hours. Opportunities that provide evening, weekend or drop-in formats were seen as essential for enabling involvement. Parents noted that services and programs that were in accessible locations for children assisted in engagement. For example, after-school programs that were run out of school halls or hubs meant that their children independently and conveniently get to and engage in the program.

“

“We've had more parents are working. And so, it just means essentially that those kids miss out. Like a lot of people, they can't get there. They just go, “I can't do it.”
(Child and family services group)

“Financial obligations. So that is a barrier as well, because to access programs, you have to take a day off work or work it around a schedule or what it might be. And that impacts children.” (Child and family services group)

”

Participants also shared that children and young people are increasingly drawn to programs that offer activities and experiences that are interesting and different from what they usually encounter. For example, practitioners shared that rock climbing, songwriting, parkour and Dungeons and Dragons events saw high engagement from young people. Activities need to be age appropriate and responsive to the preferences of specific age groups, noting that what appeals to younger children may not resonate with pre-teens or teenagers. Sixty-eight survey participants (27%) indicated that they would like to see playgroups for 0–5-year-olds, highlighting a gap in age-specific programs and activities. Comparatively, practitioners noted that programs for young people need to be flexible and responsive to their habits and interests such as outdoor recreation, sports or activities which allow children to “tap in and out” rather than long-term commitment.

“

“I think young people are just looking for something different, something new.” (Youth services group)

“The main thing we need to do is keep our kids safe and busy and entertaining things to do.” (Indigenous group)

“Activities like bike riding and surfing are good because they can tap in and out...It's not that they don't want to do these activities. It's the fact that they don't think that far in advance.” (Youth services group)

“I don't feel as though the message is really put there for kids and it's not always catering to what teenagers actually want these days as well.” (Child and family services group)

”

3.8 Learning

“Encouraging effective learning and developmental opportunities through to adult life”- The Nest Framework

Participants emphasises that opportunities for children to learn exist in schools, relationships, culture and everyday experiences. Schools were recognised by service providers and practitioners as central hubs where strong school engagement can create vital pathways to support. When schools are well resourced and closely connected with families and local service networks, children and young people are more readily linked to the help they need, and early signs of disengagement or wellbeing concerns can be identified.

However, survey participants noted that positive school experiences in the area were not universal with some describing that schools are overcapacity, which reduces their ability to provide meaningful support to students. These perspectives indicate a clear need to strengthen resourcing, collaboration and integration between schools and local programs and services. Enhancing these partnerships would not only support school engagement but also position schools as effective gateways for social connection, wellbeing support, learning opportunities and community participation.

“

“When people aren’t engaged in school, school isn’t tracking, supporting and connecting to services as well. So, I think you have to be engaged with supports to connect more supports a lot of the time.” (Youth services group)

“We work with community health agencies dependent on need. So, we’re bringing in those groups into the school. We have various connections with agencies that come to discuss topics in mental health, road safety, rail safety, basically we cover the whole gambit through our wellbeing initiatives.” (School administrators group)

”

Fifty-one survey participants (20%) shared that they would like more opportunities to learn from Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders particularly learning about Indigenous history in the area and sharing knowledge about Country and landmarks. Aboriginal community members shared that the ties between schools and their involvement with Aboriginal programs was strong e.g. Southern Stars, Yanga Garaba and that this could be expanded into the broader community through community-led events

or programs. SYFS members also shared that opportunities for young people to engage and learn about their culture in low-pressure and safe environments was particularly valuable especially young people who are off Country or who self-identify. Sharing language was noted as being particularly powerful to engaging Aboriginal children and young people and fostering a sense of belonging. These perspectives highlight the value of cultural learning and connection to Country, describing this as a meaningful source of identity, pride and belonging for children and young people.

“

“Teaching the children [culture] and then they’re teaching their peers...If we work with our students and have close communication and regular communication, that they can then feel the confidence and the support to teach [others].”
(Indigenous Group)

“I do know is the power that child feels when they know their language. It's like just having a secret kind of, it's just my stuff. And it's that sense of belonging that kids are yearning for.” (Indigenous group)

”

Across the consultation, educators, youth workers, peers and Aboriginal leaders were consistently described as central mentors for who nurture confidence, provide guidance and model positive behaviours. The parents readily recognised benefits of mentors with consistent presence in helping their children build trust, learn, develop emotionally and support their wellbeing. These relationships were not only valued for the support they offered in the moment, but also for their longer-term developmental impact: children and young people were more likely to engage with others, take risks in learning and seek help when they felt known, understood and supported by trusted adults. Parents highlighted the importance of positive role models, noting that some children may not have strong, supportive figures within their immediate networks. For these families, the presence of reliable community mentors provided reassurance, enhanced their sense of safety and offered children opportunities to experience consistent, constructive relationships.

Mentors were also recognised as playing a critical role in shaping future leaders within the community. Participants described how young people developed confidence, practical skills and a sense of responsibility through these relationships, often going on to support or mentor others in turn. This

relational cycle was seen as strengthening community capacity and contributing to a broader culture of care and reciprocity.

Parents highlighted the importance of positive role models, noting that some children may not have strong, supportive figures within their immediate networks. For these families, the presence of reliable community mentors provided reassurance, enhanced their sense of safety and offered children opportunities to experience consistent, constructive relationships. Together, these insights underscore the vital role of community-based mentoring in fostering resilience, belonging and leadership while illustrating the need for sustained investment in the people and programs that enable these relationships to flourish.

“

“I think the whole social aspect. The environment's safe, there's great mentors.” (Parents group)

“Being a constant kind of point of contact can be really useful in helping them open up and trust someone.”
(Youth services group)

“Young people listen to young people.” (Indigenous group)

“I think it's really important that we continue to support educators in that way because that's where a lot of children are but we can access a lot of children through our early childhood services.” (Child and family services group)

”

Skill development also emerged as a key priority, with families and practitioners emphasising the value of opportunities for children and young people to build practical knowledge, social skills and leadership in ways that feel embedded in everyday life. These reflections highlight a shared understanding that learning is holistic and relational, shaped not only by formal schooling but also by cultural connection, supportive community relationships and everyday experiences that build confidence and capability across generations.

Parents, practitioners and service providers alike described the joy and importance of watching children flourish when given space to explore new skills and take on increasing responsibility, underscoring a broader community commitment to nurturing growth and empowering young people to realise their potential.

“

“The Girls Only program built that resilience and that self-esteem and confidence. Whereas without the program, I don’t think she would have built that confidence.” (Parents group)

“They’re learning without realising they’re learning, doing activities and stuff once a week, and they have dinner together even things like sitting at the table and having dinner together like a family dinner and cooking, things that a lot of kids wouldn’t get the opportunity to.” (Parents group)

“Basic concepts, just teach them, teach them, just keep teaching them. It’s like swimming.” (Parents group)

”

3.9 Valued, loved and safe

“Ensuring children feel valued in loving and secure environments”- The Nest Framework

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of feeling valued, supported and safe within their community, describing how relationships and shared spaces contribute to these experiences. Longstanding community programs were viewed as especially influential, as their sustained presence allows families to build trust over time and form stable, meaningful connections.

Participants noted that when services are embedded in the community across many years, they not only support individual children, but they also create a ripple effect that benefits siblings, parents and extended family members. These enduring relationships were seen to strengthen family confidence, enhance community capacity and contribute to a generational cycle of positive engagement.

These reflections highlight the foundational role that longstanding, reliable programs play in shaping a strong, connected community and supporting children’s wellbeing over the long term.

“

“Programs that have something continuous, that have the capacity to grow our kids, then you’re building community.” (Indigenous group)

“Start small, but we’re reaching more and more people in the community and more and more families.” (Child and family services)

“[The program has] been so long standing, it’s been a number of years, so its year on year and I think that also help with a lot of that relationship building an expectation [of support].” (Child and family services group)

”

Activities were often described as times and places where children can be themselves, connect with others and feel accepted, reinforcing the role of continuity and familiarity in fostering belonging. Children who participated in programs such as “Active In-Betweens” shared that they enjoyed their time there and felt supported by the trusted adults who ran the program, highlighting the importance of consistent, warm relationships in creating safe and engaging environments. Parents echoed these reflections, noting observable improvements in their children’s emotional and social development as a result of their involvement in longstanding community programs and services.

Parents also spoke about the importance of safety, both physical and emotional, as a primary consideration in choosing where their children spend time. While participants across the consultation highlighted the importance of waterways, parents were distinct in placing greater emphasis on safety than other groups. They called for programs that would strengthen children’s skills and confidence in safely navigating water and road environments.

These participants responses point to the influence of sustained, relationship-based programs in supporting children’s growth, wellbeing and safety. They also highlight the value of community spaces that combine trusted adults, meaningful activities and practical skill building to support both immediate and long-term outcomes for children and families.

“

“Certainly, that sense of connection can be really valuable. Being that stable person in someone’s life, being able to build that sense of connection as well as connection with other supports.” (Youth services group)

“A lot of families comment that they really see their children come out of their shell and feel comfortable and the first time they really see the interacting well with other kids and being accepted for who they are.” (Child and family services group)

“[The kids] all want to be outdoors, they want to socialise with their friends and then it's also keeping them safe too, because in our area there's a lot of people who drive around and speed and all that sort of stuff.” (Parents group)

”

Participants also expressed a strong desire for opportunities to contribute their ideas and be involved in decision--making about community developments, emphasising that being listened to is an important aspect of feeling valued, respected and represented. Survey responses heavily reinforced this sentiment, with many community members sharing thoughtful ideas about what would help them feel safer, more connected and foster a sense of belonging within the Shellharbour LGA. Several participants noted that having clearer and more accessible avenues to communicate these ideas to council or other decision-making- bodies would be highly valued, as it would ensure their lived experiences meaningfully inform local planning and service design.

Indigenous community members also highlighted the importance of extending these opportunities to children and young people. They emphasised that listening to young people provides valuable insight into their worldviews, priorities and experiences, offering perspectives that adults may overlook. Valuing children’s and young people’s voices was seen not only as good practice but as essential to understanding their needs and shaping environments where they feel seen, included and supported.

These comments reflect a broader community expectation that participation should be genuine, inclusive and responsive. Enabling meaningful input across generations and communities strengthens trust, supports more equitable decision-making and ensures community development is grounded in the voices of those who live, work- and grow in the Shellharbour LGA.

“

“I keep telling them, you must listen to our young people because the truth is there.” (Indigenous group)

“I think counselling is kind of a thing that's known in the Headspace but also having that connection with peer workers who have lived experience of mental health issues and recovery can be really valuable. I think a lot of the social groups can help connect young people to others experiencing similar things and provide those really positive communities.” (Child and family services group)

”

Across the consultation, it was evident that some community members experienced fear and distrust when engaging with local supports and services. Several participants described feeling uncertain or discouraged after struggling to find services capable of meeting their children's needs, which in turn eroded confidence in the broader service system. Practitioners also reflected on these challenges, noting that seeking help can be a vulnerable experience for families, and that building trust is often a necessary first step before support can be effective.

“

“I think maybe just having us there to guide them and be a voice and not bark at them like everybody else has and just providing them with options, I think it's great. And just having a rapport with a young person by being there to do that.” (Youth services group)

”

Creating inclusive and welcoming environments emerged as a key factor in reducing these barriers. Service providers and practitioners shared that particularly newly arrived communities, CALD families, and people with disability or neurodiversity it is important that spaces feel safe, respectful and attuned to diverse needs. Participants emphasised the importance of purposeful supports such as sensory friendly- settings, culturally responsive support, trauma-informed practices and environments free from judgement.

“

“I suppose a fear factor of what their child might do in a public setting and how the community are going to judge or accept that behaviour is a big sense of what I hear from families.” (Youth services group)

“At our events, everyone’s in the same boat. So, if there is a challenging moment that they’re faced with, everyone gets it. So, I think that sense of everyone gets what I’m going through.” (Children and family services group)

”

Together, these insights point to a critical need for services and community spaces that prioritise psychological safety and cultural inclusivity, recognising that trust is foundational to engagement and essential for ensuring children and families feel valued, supported and able to access the help they need.

“

“We’ve seen a lot more venues being more inclusive with regards to sensory needs. So having low sensory session or dimming lights, turning their volume down...I’m finding the community are a lot more receptive to those sorts of sensory needs, which is really good to see.” (Child and family services group)

“I think creating community and community safety and a sense of belonging for newly arrived families and also allowing kind of equity of access to services for young people who might not have, who might face significant challenges like language difficulties or mental health struggles and just navigating the new country that they’ve just entered is pretty special.” (Youth service group)

”

Young people were described as needing safe, accessible places where they can spend time, connect with peers and seek support when needed. Participants highlighted a gap in youth friendly spaces that are well maintained and designed to encourage genuine engagement rather than surveillance. These reflections underscore the importance of supportive relationships, inclusive environments and opportunities for young people to feel understood.

Survey findings reinforced this priority, with 122 participants (48%) expressing a desire for more safe places for young people to hang out and connect. Service providers, practitioners, parents and young people themselves echoed this sentiment, offering detailed ideas about what effective youth spaces should include.

Their suggestions emphasised the need for environments that offer flexible, less structured activities; are well maintained and physically safe; and provide connection to support services, relevant resources and reliable information. Participants also stressed that spaces must reflect diverse interests ranging from sports-oriented areas to social or gaming focused options that genuinely engage different groups of young people.

“

“It’s a safe place they can go to and it’s the same faces every single week.” (Parents group)

“Opportunities where teenagers feel safe and welcome...If they want to just chill out that should be okay...They can release some energy if they need to in a safe space but also, so they feel welcomed as well...There’s a lot missing for youth in this area.” (Child and family services group)

“I think more like third spaces... It gives young people a space where they can be that's safe. Having maybe youth workers come through and just be available for young people as well. Well-lit spaces as well so that it's safe for young people to be there at night...So making sure that the spaces are safe and well maintained as well.” (Youth services group)

”

Community members also recognised an absence of safe, appealing spaces can leave young people vulnerable, potentially leading to negative community perceptions and poorer social, emotional or behavioural outcomes for young people.

These perspectives reveal a strong community interest in inclusive, youth driven spaces that promote connection, safety and meaningful engagement. Creating such environments would not only respond to current gaps but also support young people to build relationships, develop a sense of belonging and access help early.

3.10 Identity and culture

“Supporting a strong sense of self and belonging, including cultural identity and values”- The Nest Framework

Participants described identity, culture and community connection as central to what helps children, young people and families feel a sense of belonging in the Shellharbour LGA. Service providers and practitioners shared positive experiences and outcomes relating to community events that they have designed and executed. The positive impact of these events in providing parents opportunities to connect with their children and other community members were evident in parents' reflections and survey participants.

Survey data revealed that 104 participants (41%) would like to see more community events that celebrate different cultures and bring people together. Survey participants provided examples of community events and projects they would like to see including community gardens, music and cultural festivals, markets noting that these activities would create opportunities for families to come together, strengthen relationships and celebrate the community and its achievements.

Service providers and practitioners described consistently positive outcomes from the community events they have designed and delivered, emphasising the role these events play in strengthening family relationships and building social connection.

“

“We have introduced a family connect day where we take our families and offer them to bring their extended family to a local park. It's really good to see the dads, the aunties, the brothers and sisters all coming together” (Child Services Group)

“I really enjoy the family outings that we get to get from this. I think it's such a great opportunity because there's things that we don't normally do...It just gets to spending time as a family again, so I really like that.” (Parents group)

”

These reflections were supported by survey findings, where 104 participants (41%) indicated a desire for more community events that celebrate different cultures and bring people together.

These responses highlight that such events are not only valued for entertainment but also recognised as important vehicles for fostering

belonging, reducing social isolation, and may offer low-cost opportunities for families to spend time together. Survey participants also provided examples of the kinds of activities they believe would strengthen community connection including community gardens, music and cultural festivals, and local markets.

The suggestions reflect a broader community aspiration for initiatives that bring diverse groups together, show local identity, and create shared spaces where children, young people and families can interact. Together, the insights from practitioners and community members highlight the impact of community led events in its potential enhance social cohesion, a sense of belonging and reinforce community achievements.

Cultural learning featured strongly in participants' reflections, emphasising the importance of Aboriginal knowledge, language and cultural practices in fostering belonging, pride and confidence among children and young people.

Survey findings reinforce this priority, with 63 participants indicating a desire for more culturally safe spaces where Aboriginal families can share, learn and feel supported.

Young people attending SYFS provided further insight into the complexities of cultural connection, noting that Aboriginal children and youth often navigate diverse experiences of identity such as being off Country, newly self-identifying, having limited cultural knowledge, or feeling hesitant to identify.

“

“Teaching the children [culture] and then they’re teaching their peers...If we work with our students and have close communication and regular communication, then they can feel the confidence and the support to teach [others].”

“[A] program could look like anything, whether it's dancing or song or fishing or yadaki making, as long as it's the kids want to do it...there's some fantastic stuff happening with language in schools, and to me that gives them the sense, a real sense of who they are, because it's their language.”

(Indigenous group)

”

These nuanced reflections signal the need for cultural spaces that recognise varied experiences and offer gentle, supportive pathways into connection.

Furthermore, participants emphasised that such spaces must be codesigned with Aboriginal communities to ensure they genuinely reflect cultural priorities, are responsive to local needs and respect Indigenous leadership. Young people particularly stressed the importance of opportunities to spend time on Country, along with creating cultural spaces located within the communities where children and families live rather than centralised hubs. Participants consistently highlighted that cultural activities must be meaningful, varied and accessible to all, recognising their essential role in deepening connection to Country, strengthening identity and supporting cultural continuity.

“

“I’d like to see cultural programs, no matter what it is, that supports a sense of belonging and wellbeing.” (Indigenous Group)

“When we are talking about cultural activities, every single person should have the opportunity to participate.” (Indigenous Group)

“There’s certainly that community effort and people will work hard to make that connection happen.” (Youth services group)

”

A strong sense of local identity was evident in the way participants described their deep connection to the Shellharbour LGA, often highlighting the community’s collective effort and longstanding intergenerational ties to the area. These reflections point to more than just attachment to place, they reveal a community that is actively invested in strengthening its resources and shaping positive futures for children, young people and families.

Across all participants, a sense pride in local identity and passion for building community capacity and improving wellbeing. Together, these insights point to a community that not only values belonging but is deeply motivated to contribute to the ongoing growth for children, young people and families.

3.11 Healthy

“Promoting good physical and mental health”- The Nest Framework

Participants frequently described Shellharbour’s natural environment as central to children’s and families’ health and wellbeing, noting the strong reliance on beaches, parks, waterways and green spaces for free, everyday recreation. This was shared across all groups involved in the community consultations, particularly for children and families. Outdoor settings were viewed as widely used and valued, offering opportunities for physical activity, exploration and social connection that feel accessible to families.

“

“There’s a lot of water activities, swimming and fishing and stuff like that. Particularly for young kids, you often see the on their bikes and scooters and stuff like that.” (Parents group)

“I go swimming, I play at the park.” (Active In-Betweens group)

“I think because of where we live, the outdoor space, that natural environment is very much utilised. So, you can go down to the park or beach and there’s always children and families.” (Child and family services group)

”

Clean, safe and well-maintained parks and public spaces were consistently highlighted as important environments that enable children to play, be active and spend time with friends and family. During the consultation, children showed a strong awareness of their surroundings and were able to recognise and relate to images of local landmarks. Outdoor spaces were particularly connected to memories and experiences with participant’s siblings, friends and family. Young people participating in the SYFS program further emphasised the importance of connection through community sport and local sporting events, describing these as key avenues for connecting with peers, strengthening family ties and engaging with culture. They also noted that these activities provide meaningful pathways for young people to develop leadership skills and take on coaching roles, reinforcing the broader community benefits of accessible recreation. The perspectives of adults in the community were also captured in the community survey with 144 participants (57%) indicating that they would like to see more spaces for outdoor recreation in the Shellharbour LGA. Together, these insights demonstrate a strong value placed on outdoor spaces and sport-

based opportunities that not only support physical health, but also build social connection, cultural identity- and youth leadership. The alignment between children and young people's experiences and broader community priorities highlights opportunities to strengthen wellbeing, promote inclusion and enhance community cohesion.

“

“I know a lot of kids are using those things too, like the parks that are well used, and I know that football field down at Shellharbour is just always full at night, afternoons, which is good, that's their first, and well maintained, it's more green and all good, it's amazing.” (Youth service group)

“We go to the library. We have to be quiet there.” (Pre-school group)

“[At the park] I played with my sister and my brother, and we went climbing.” (Pre-school group)

”

Alongside these strengths, participants also emphasised the importance of accessible mental health supports and trauma-informed support, noting that families often face challenges in finding affordable and timely care, ongoing follow up and services located close to home. This was reflected in survey data as 141 participants (56%) reported the need for more mental health supports for parents, while 134 participants (53%) identified the same need for children and young people..

“

“Mental health supports in this area is so poor right now for teenagers... But unless there's somebody that's actually following up with them, they're not interested. They don't feel as though they're being seen or heard or cared about. (Youth services group)

“I think to have increased any service provisions that might be needed for families in the community, access. So, they don't have to travel to get access, whether it's paediatricians and therapists...making sure that there's adequate access for families in this region.” (Child and family services group)

”

Service providers and practitioners also emphasised broader systemic limitations including long waitlists, workforce shortages and funding constraints that affect service capacity and create inequities in access. Taken together, these insights indicate a clear gap between what families need and what the current service system is resourced to provide, underscoring the urgency of strengthening sustainable, local and trauma-informed mental health supports

A commitment to equity and responsiveness remained a strong theme throughout the consultation, with participants emphasising the need for supports that are genuinely accessible to all families, regardless of location or circumstance.

“

“Having services that offer a wider range of supports rather than having to go to many different places to have needs met...sort of mediating the interconnection between services.” (Child and family services group)

“We would really benefit with some sort of outreach in terms of wellbeing, safety, care, food...Something in those areas in particular [Warilla, Mount Warrigal], I think might be lacking so that families in that area know they can go get support locally.” (School administrators group)

”

SYFS participants described how outreach models and localised service hubs can play a vital role in reducing travel burdens and ensuring that every suburb, particularly those further from central facilities, has reliable opportunities for connection and assistance. This desire for more evenly distributed resources also reflected broader aspirations for funding and infrastructure that are not concentrated in only a few areas, but instead responsive to the unique needs and identities of the diverse communities across the LGA. This was reflected by multiple community stakeholders including parents, service providers and practitioners and Aboriginal leaders.

Taken together, these insights reflect a community that highly values its natural environment as a foundation for wellbeing, while also calling for more equitable, localised and coordinated support systems that ensure all families can access the care, activities and spaces they need to thrive.

“

“There’s a huge divide between the east side of town and the west side of town... That’s where our biggest population of Aboriginal children and young people are. It’s on the west side of town and traditionally, our population lie in those low SES areas where transport is terrible, and footpaths aren’t accessible.” (Indigenous group)

“I’ve noticed in Shellharbour, and I don’t know if it happens in other areas, but certain places that feel like the council sort of target their funding towards, like the Marina and Foreshore as opposed to other places. Foreshore and the Marina, they’re all beautiful. But these other little parks in the suburbs and the streets where families are living.” (Parent group)

”

3.12 Material basics

“Providing access to essential material needs like food, housing, transport and other essentials”- The Nest Framework

Participants described a range of challenges relating to infrastructure that shape how children, young people and families move through their neighbourhoods and access local spaces. While well used parks, reserves and public areas were valued, many felt that infrastructure across the LGA does not always support accessibility and participation noting the need for safe, clean and well-connected roads and public areas including walkable neighbourhoods, accessible parking, shaded and uncover areas and toilet facilities.

E-bikes emerged as a contented matter in the community for they provide young people with an alternative mode of transport but also raising concerns for safety and supportive infrastructure e.g. bike lines, bike racks.

“

I think with the e-bikes, having the infrastructure there, because it's not going to go away, young people just want their independence, right? And you see the community complain about young people, but they've got nowhere to park it. They've got no places to ride it...It's just about finding ways to get around.” (Youth services group)

“In one sense it's really good that [young people] are outdoors. But on the other sense, there is nowhere for them to ride [e-bikes] and do the things they want to do. They're just roaming the streets, they're cutting cars off, they're knocking people over.” (Child and family services group)

”

Participants indicated that families seek free or low-cost programs and activities and that some young people and families attend programs to access food or essential support. Parents shared a variety of challenges relating to cost of living that prevent them from spending time together, engaging in community programs, events and extracurricular activities and accessing necessary services and support.

“

“I've worked in community in Shellharbour for the last 10 or so years with Aboriginal community and in the youth sector and children and families. And the biggest issue we have is accessibility. So being able to access programs that are in locations or facilities that our people can get to... If you want to catch a bus, buses only come one to two hours. You miss the bus; you miss your whole day.” (Indigenous group)

”

Participants also mentioned embedded costs associated with participating in programs and services such as petrol and travel costs, parking, equipment and uniforms, registration and food costs that often accompany attendance to events and organised activities and can be a barrier to participation.

“

“Allowing families to spend time together but not costing them a lot of money.” (Child and family services group)

“[Families] are accessing those outdoor spaces because they are accessible and free.” (Child and family services group)

“Extracurricular activities for kids are so expensive and the way that we’re living now, most of us can’t afford it, and especially if you have multiple children.” (Parents group)

”

Transport was also identified as a significant barrier affecting daily life and access to services. The LGA itself is geographically large and not all areas within appear connected. Participants described public transport as infrequent and poorly connected, making it difficult for many young people and families to travel to appointments, programs or community spaces. Some noted that long travel times, limited bus schedules and reliance on private cars can deter attendance entirely, especially for those experiencing financial pressures or without access to a vehicle. These constraints were seen as particularly challenging for young people, who may lack alternative transport options and therefore miss out on opportunities for social engagement, support or recreation. Together, these perspectives suggest that transport limitations reduce independence, restrict access to essential services and disproportionately affect families in suburbs with fewer local facilities.

“

“[Transport is] quite a big deterrent. Like, we work with young people with a lot of challenges, and they might wake up on the day and just go, I don't want to go to my appointment, like it's too hard, it's raining, it's going to take an hour and a half to get there. Or if they had a car and a driver's licence, 15 minutes in the car near there.” (Youth services group)

“The kids can’t go anywhere because of the lack of transport. What are they supposed to do?” (Child and family services group)

”

In addition, service availability was often perceived as constrained by systemic issues such as funding limitations, long waitlists and workforce shortages, which participants felt reduced the capacity of services to meet growing and complex needs. These perspectives also pointed to a desire for more localised, flexible and interconnected support systems such as outreach models or multi-service hubs that could reduce travel burdens and make assistance easier to access.

“

“There’s not enough funding to provide enough staff to provide the families with the support they actually need.”
(Child and family service group)

“I think systemic funding, is a big barrier, like waitlists and things and how those systemic and funding things trickle down and impact of internal capacity as well.” (Youth services group)

”

Challenges associated with health and wellbeing was consistently raised across the consultation with participants highlighting the ways that unmet basic needs including housing, employment, food insecurity and reliable transport impact everyday experiences for children, young people and families.

“

“Particularly systemic funding issues, and the essential need or long-term funding and the flow on effect with staff not being secure. And also, my clients are saying that they’re seeing an increased number of children with multiple vulnerabilities or complex needs. (Youth services group)

”

From service providers and practitioners and parents’ groups, financial pressures for families and services remained a consistent theme with rising cost of living limiting capacity to support family’s needs, engage in community life and families’ ability to thrive.

“

“[Parents] feel really relieved, with the cost of living the way it is. Who can afford for driving lessons? We'll pay for driving lessons, we'll get them laptops, we can put [their children] into accredited training, we can put them into short courses if that's what they want to do. We'll do their resumes, we'll do their cover letters, we'll cover them with job applications. We'll reverse market them to employers that we deal with consistently.” (Youth services group)

“Young people coming to drop-in [sessions], we could have really good programs and they're just there for the food. So, I think that the food security is a bit, issue in Shellharbour.”
(Youth Services Group)

“Financial pressure does impact the families here. And the median house price is quite high in Shellharbour...It's quite an expensive area to live.” (Child and Family Services Group)

”

4. Implications, opportunities and recommendations



4. Implications for practice

The findings highlight a series of practical considerations for strengthening support for children, young people, and families in the Shellharbour LGA. Participants shared insights into what helps them feel safe, connected and supported (Table 7), as well as the barriers that they encounter accessing resources within their community (Table 8, p.65).

Table 7. Summary of Community Priorities

Identified theme	Key ideas
Belonging and safety	• Empowering children, young people and families • Building lasting connections over time • Physical, emotional, social and cultural safety • Accepting and welcoming environments • Safe spaces for children and young people to play and gather
Equity and responsive services	• Accessible outreach and service hubs across the LGA • Decentralisation of funding and facilities • Services that adapt to diverse needs, including CALD communities, people with ASD and disabilities
Connection to community	• Access to outdoor spaces and participation in activities (bike riding, bushwalking, swimming, parks) • Role modelling, peer learning and intergenerational connection • Opportunities to strengthen community belonging and relationships
Education	• Promotion and spreading awareness of local programs and services • Building life skills • Space for children to play • Cultural awareness
Transport and Infrastructure	• Reliable transport options for children, young people and families • Suitable infrastructure that supports participation and connection

The following implications summarise the findings into key implications for practice for community organisations working in the Shellharbour LGA with

a focus on diverse and culturally grounded approaches, integrated service pathways, and responses that reduce practical and structural barriers.

4.1 Responding to cost-of-living pressures

Financial stress shapes families' ability to meet basic needs such as housing, food, and transport. These pressures limit participation in programs and community life. Practice needs to incorporate practical supports: low-cost or free activities, food and transport assistance, and flexible program models that reduce financial barriers. Services also play a role in advocating for systemic change by highlighting how economic pressures affect family wellbeing and access to opportunities.

4.2 Building trust and improving engagement

Engagement challenges (including school attendance, parent involvement, mistrust of services, and fear of judgement) signal the need for relational, flexible, and culturally safe approaches. Many parents juggle demanding work commitments, making traditional service hours difficult. Meeting families where they are, offering after-hours or outreach options, and building trust through consistent, respectful relationships can strengthen engagement. The community's longstanding networks and trusted local practitioners are key assets in bridging gaps and rebuilding confidence in services.

4.3 Creating inclusive and meaningful youth spaces

Young people need safe, welcoming places to connect, socialise, and participate in activities that reflect their interests and identities. Families want spaces that are inclusive of CALD communities, young people with disability, and those on the autism spectrum. Co-designing programs with young people ensures relevance and ownership, while keeping activities affordable removes barriers to participation. Local employment pathways, mentoring, and skill-building opportunities can further support young people's sense of belonging and future direction.

4.4 Increasing opportunities for Aboriginal community and connection

Providing opportunities for the development of young people's and children's cultural identity and community connection is essential to wellbeing and engagement. Aboriginal participants emphasised the importance of language, culture, and belonging as foundations for supporting children, young people, and families. Practice should prioritise

culturally grounded initiatives extending of existing programs such as language classes, on Country activities, and cultural learning led by Elders and community members. These initiatives should be designed with Aboriginal communities ensuring that content delivery is transparent and community owned. This includes continuing to create culturally safe spaces in partnership with local Aboriginal organisations and investing in programs that foster pride, connection, and intergenerational learning.

4.5 Improving access to resources and infrastructure

Families highlighted gaps in age-appropriate programs, limited funding, and challenges navigating what services exist. Strengthening communication (for example, through shared calendars, coordinated messaging, and outreach in schools and community hubs) can improve awareness. Transport and walkability also matter; families want better pathways, bike lanes, and connections between suburbs to make services easier to reach. Expanding programs that reflect community interests and developmental needs helps ensure families can access support that feels relevant and engaging.

4.6 Strengthening mental health and wellbeing supports

Families who require mental health and trauma related support or intervention may face long waitlists, limited staffing, and inconsistent access to services. This creates a need for approaches that bring support closer to everyday environments - schools, playgroups, youth spaces, and community hubs - so families can seek help without navigating complex systems.

Trauma-informed practice becomes essential, ensuring every interaction feels safe, predictable, and non-judgemental. The strong relationships already present between families, educators, and local practitioners can be used to identify emerging concerns early and connect people to support before issues escalate.

4.7 Leveraging the natural and built environment

Shellharbour LGA's beaches, lakes, parks, and recreational spaces are central to community identity and wellbeing. These environments offer opportunities for outdoor programs, cultural gatherings, youth activities, and family connection. Maintaining and enhancing these spaces supports physical activity, mental health, and social cohesion. The area's well-connected location - close to the coast, city, and rural settings - can be used to design programs that feel uniquely place-based and reflective of local lifestyle and further positioning the LGA as a tourist destination.

4.8 Strengthening community leadership and cultural connection

The community benefits from strong local leaders (including educators, mentors, healthcare workers, and Aboriginal cultural leaders) who hold deep relationships and trust. Supporting these leaders through training, collaboration, and shared decision-making strengthens the whole service system. Aboriginal families' desire for culturally safe spaces and opportunities to learn from Elders highlights the importance of embedding cultural knowledge, connection to Country, and Aboriginal leadership across programs. These strengths can guide practice that is culturally grounded, community-led, and responsive to local identity.

4.9 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the survey findings. First, some suburbs including Barrack Point, Croom, Macquarie Pass, Yellow Rock Ridge within the Shellharbour LGA were not represented in the survey dataset, which restricts the geographic completeness of the sample. However, this area is not heavily populated. Furthermore, the distribution of responses across suburbs was not proportionate to actual population patterns, limiting the representativeness of the results.

The sample is also subject to participation bias, as respondents were likely to be individuals already engaged with local groups or programs. Finally, the data reflects predominantly adult perspectives on children's experiences, resulting in an overrepresentation of adult voices and potentially limiting the extent to which the findings capture children's own views.

Similar considerations apply to the focus group participants. While significant effort was made to collect a representative sample, the scope of the project and time constraints meant that only a limited number of groups could be conducted. Participation was largely drawn from existing community groups and programs, meaning the perspectives of less-connected or harder-to-reach cohorts may be under-represented.

4.10 Opportunities for action

Consultation findings highlighted a series of interconnected community priorities and opportunities that reflect the needs of children, young people and families across the Shellharbour LGA (Table 8).

Table 8. Summary of Community Opportunities

Identified theme	Key ideas
Involvement, participation and access	• Affordable activities • Safe and clean parks and outdoor spaces • Spreading awareness and advertising • Community projects and events • Infrastructure and transport to support young people
Equity and responsiveness	• Outreach and service hubs across LGA • Decentralisation of funding and facilities • Novel programs and activities that cater to interests of children and young people • Support opportunities for learning and leadership • Investment in service that supports longevity and builds connection, trust and community capacity • Creating third spaces for young people that are safe, interesting, accessible and connect them to services/ support and information • Skill development and knowledge that builds individual and community capacity
Decision making	• Opportunities for feedback • Openness and communication with local government • Collaboration and linking services • Celebrating achievements, pride in community and strengths-based narratives • Listening to children and young people • Collaboration between services, facilities and community hubs

These themes emphasise the importance of creating environments where individuals feel a strong sense of belonging and safety, supported by inclusive spaces, cultural acceptance and opportunities for meaningful connection. Community members also emphasised the need for equitable and responsive service delivery, including accessible outreach models, decentralised resources and sustained investment that builds long term trust and capacity.

Local organisations hold an important role in responding to the challenges identified in this report as they sit at the intersection of family support, child wellbeing, community connection, and advocacy. As a trusted, long-standing presence in the region, local organisations such as Barnardos, are well placed to bridge the gap between what families need and what systems currently provide. The Barnardos organisation can act as

a steady anchor for families navigating mental health pressures, financial stress, and service limitations; offering safe, non-judgemental spaces where parents, children, and young people feel seen and supported.

Local organisations can help reduce the load on overstretched systems by providing accessible, relationship-based support embedded in everyday community settings. At the same time, Barnardos' strong partnerships with schools, community leaders, and Aboriginal organisations position it to champion culturally safe, community-led approaches that honour local identity and knowledge. By leveraging its credibility, networks, and commitment to child safety and wellbeing, Barnardos can play a central role in shaping a more connected, inclusive, and responsive service landscape; one where families feel empowered, young people have meaningful places to belong, and the strengths of the Shellharbour community are amplified rather than overlooked.

4.11 Recommendations

The following recommends centre on actions that are within the current and future scope of Barnardos Australia and Communities for Children within Shellharbour.

Recommendation 1: Expand accessible, trauma-informed wellbeing supports

Mental health and wellbeing programs should be embedded in everyday settings such as schools, playgroups, youth spaces, and community hubs. This includes training and provision of trauma-informed practice across all services to ensure families experience safety, predictability, and respect. To achieve this, Barnardos and other community organisations may choose to partner with local practitioners and Aboriginal leaders to create culturally safe, community-led support pathways and leverage existing networks and services.

Recommendation 2: Reduce barriers created by cost-of-living pressures

Free or low-cost programs, school-holiday activities, and youth engagement opportunities should continue to be offered throughout the community. Existing programs can be extended using a 'hub and spoke' model to deliver activities and engagement opportunities to more disconnected parts of the LGA or communities without easily accessible transport to enable increased reach, access and impact. The integration of practical supports including food security initiatives, transport assistance, and flexible program models into existing services would address concerns identified by participants.

While it is acknowledged that resolving housing and transport issues falls outside of the current scope, continued advocating to council on behalf of

the community for improved housing affordability, transport access, and financial supports for families would further build trust and relationships to those in need.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen engagement through flexible, relational approaches

Strengthening engagement requires approaches that recognise the realities of families' daily lives and honour the trust they place in services. Providing after-hours and outreach service options can remove practical barriers for parents managing work schedules or unpredictable routines, ensuring support is accessible when families most need it. Central to this is the development of consistent relationships and safe spaces particularly for families who have previously experienced stigma, labels or service fatigue. Working closely with schools and community hubs further enhances this relational approach, enabling coordinated pathways that support access, learning and belonging. To achieve this, Barnardos and other community organisations could consider relational practice approach, expand flexible delivery models, and embed workers within school and community settings to ensure support is visible, predictable and easy to access.

Recommendation 4: Co-design inclusive spaces and opportunities

Creating meaningful opportunities for young people begins with listening to them and designing spaces that reflect their diverse needs, interests and identities. Co-designing environments with young people from CALD communities, young people with disability and those on the autism spectrum ensures that spaces are not only safe and welcoming but genuinely relevant and affirming. Ensuring programs are affordable and interest-driven supports equitable participation and helps young people stay engaged in activities that build confidence and connection. Barnardos and other community organisations should continue to facilitate place-based programs that are culturally informed and designed in the interests of young people as well as expanding mentoring programs that help young people build identity, capacity and connection.

Recommendation 5: Improve access to programs, information, and infrastructure

Improving access means ensuring families can easily identify, navigate and participate in the programs and services. Clear, coordinated communication strategies shared across services, schools and community hubs can help families understand what supports exist, when they are available and how to get involved. Expanding age-appropriate programs for early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence ensures that children and young people have opportunities that evolve with their developmental needs. Families also highlighted the importance of physical access: improving transport links, walkability and infrastructure between suburbs can reduce barriers and ensure all communities feel equally connected to local services. It is

recognised that improving infrastructure falls outside of the current scope, Barnardos and local organisations can play a central role in amplifying its impact and coordinating communication efforts to ensuring families are accessing information that can fulfil their needs and enable equitable support for families.

Recommendation 6: Leverage the natural environment and community identity

Shellharbour's rich natural environment and strong sense of local identity offer unique opportunities to support wellbeing and connection. Beaches, parks, lakes and outdoor recreational spaces can serve as settings for cultural gatherings, family-friendly programs, youth activities and wellbeing initiatives. Community-led cultural events that celebrate diversity further strengthen belonging, pride and shared identity across the LGA. Embedding Aboriginal knowledge, connection to Country and cultural leadership across programs enriches learning and fosters cultural safety and ensures Aboriginal families feel seen, respected and supported. Leveraging these place-based strengths helps create programs that feel deeply connected to community identity and grounded in the environments families value most. For Barnardos and local organisations this could mean leveraging place-based strengths and further utilisation of the environment to reach new families and strength community connections.

Recommendation 7: Invest in community leadership and collaboration

Building a strong, cohesive service system requires investment in the people and partnerships that hold communities together. Strengthening local leadership through training, peer networks, and shared decision-making supports sustainability and fosters collective ownership of community initiatives. Empowering Aboriginal Elders, cultural leaders, educators and community mentors that play a crucial role in shaping culturally grounded practice and young people in the community to grow and thrive. Cross-sector collaboration between schools, services, community organisations and local government allows for the sharing of resources and create coordinated pathways that make service navigation easier for families and young people. These collaborative, community-led approaches create a foundation for long-term impact and a more connected, resilient Shellharbour. For Barnardos and other community organisations, this could mean advocating for long-term services so that networks and collaboration between services, schools, local programs, governing bodies and families deepen over time and have lasting impacts on the community.

5. Visual summary of findings



5. Visual summary of findings

The following infographic provides a visual summary of key insights from the community survey and focus groups conducted in this consultation. It was designed by researchers to share insights from the community and elevate participant voices in a clear and accessible manner in-line with the project's strengths-based focus.

The survey findings provide an overview of participants involved in the survey and highlight what matters most to children, young people and families. This included strong community connections, safe outdoor environments, and accessible local programs. Participants also identified common challenges such as cost-of-living pressures, limited transport. Services gaps were also identified such as long waitlists and priority areas where additional support and opportunities are needed.

The infographic also draws on focus group reflections mapped onto The Nest Wellbeing Framework. Quotes from across the consultation bring forward community voices that speak to strengths and opportunities in the community. Together, this offers a snapshot of the experiences and ideas shared by residents and the opportunities to strengthen belonging, access, and wellbeing across the Shellharbour LGA.

In September 2025, Early Start and Barnardos Australia surveyed 244 Shellharbour Local Government Area (LGA) residents about their experiences with local services, the community's strengths, and the challenges facing families, children and young people.

SURVEY SNAPSHOT



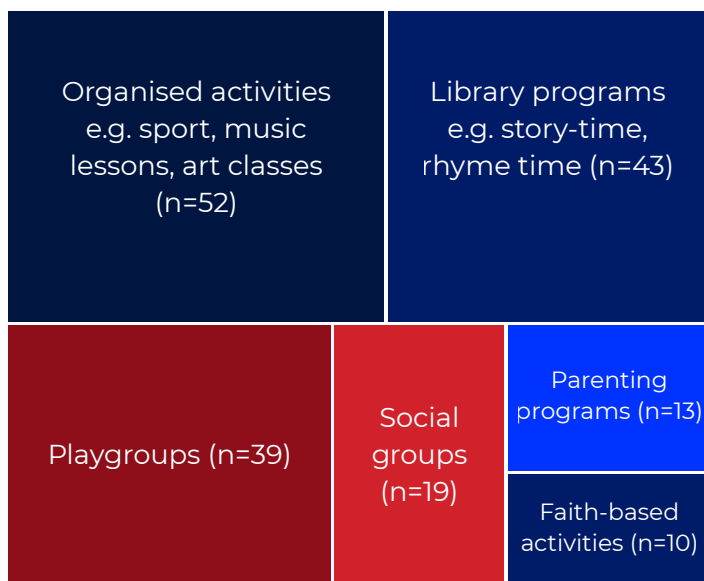
14% of participants were aged 18-30
72% of participants were aged 31-50
14% of participants were aged 51+



52% of participants have lived in the Shellharbour LGA for 10+ years

ACCESS TO SERVICES

Participants indicated that they attended a variety of groups/ programs in Shellharbour including:



66% of participants were confident they could access and get help from services/organisations.

MOST VALUED IN SHELLHARBOUR



A community and lifestyle that is family-friendly, safe and peaceful.

The outdoors and nature including beaches, parks, lakes, mountains

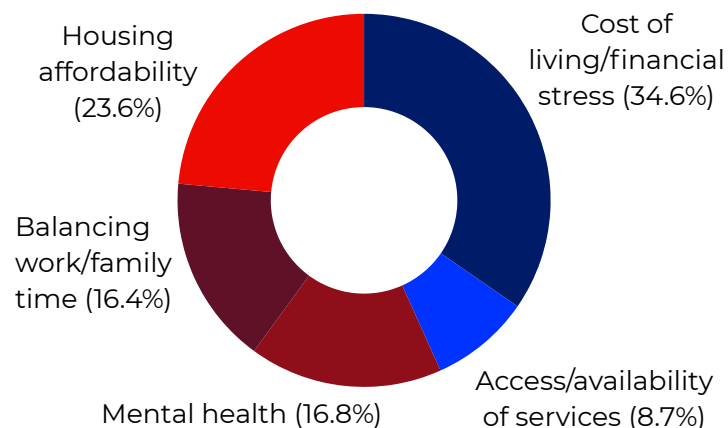


Convenient access to schools, health services and shops.

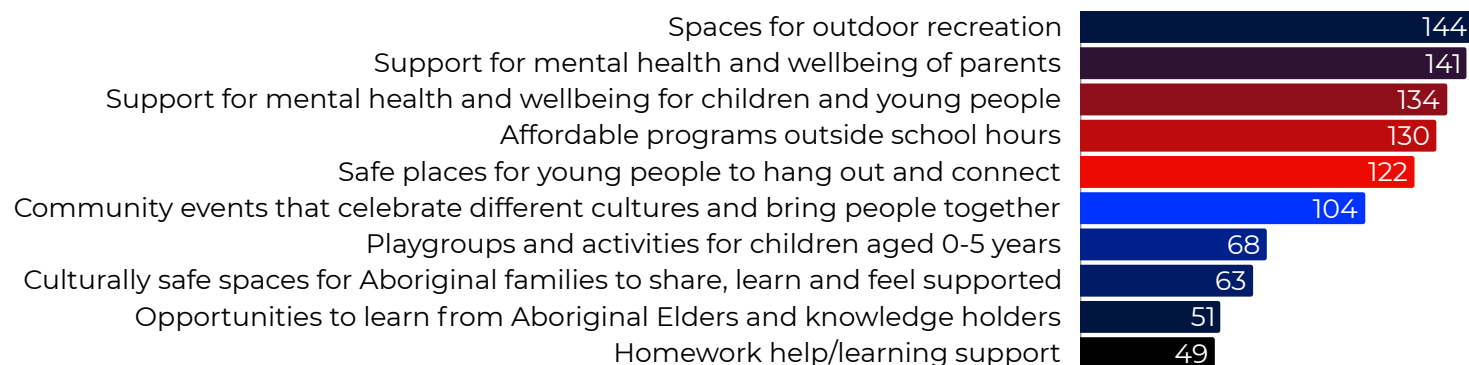
Proximity to the city, coast and more rural settings.

CHALLENGES IN THE COMMUNITY

Participants identified five main challenges facing children, families and young people in the Shellharbour LGA.



THE COMMUNITY WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE...



PHASE TWO

FOCUS GROUPS

Early Start researchers held focus groups with local community groups including children, young people, parents, community service providers, and practitioners to capture community voices and experiences. Discussions were analysed to identify key themes.

We asked the community

- What matters to children, young people, and families in Shellharbour?
- What are existing strengths and gaps in services in Shellharbour?
- What additional supports or programs are needed for a more connected community?

WHAT MATTERS?

- Empowering children, young people and families
- Safety and wellbeing for children and families (e.g. water safety, road safety)
- Access to outdoor spaces and participating in activities (e.g. bike riding, bush walking, swimming, parks)
- Building connections over-time and strong sense of community

STRENGTHS

- Spaces for recreation and connection (e.g. parks, sporting fields, beaches, lakes)
- Strong connection to area, community and Country
- Wide range of local services and programs
- Inclusive and welcoming environment
- Long-standing ties with community service providers and practitioners
- Building community capacity through service/program participation

SERVICE GAPS

- Improving links between services and families (e.g. identifying services for specific needs)
- Ensuring sustainable funding for services and affordability for families (e.g. staffing, capacity, waitlists)
- Reducing wait times and supporting service capacity
- Enhancing transport and infrastructure to support growing population

PRIORITY NEEDS

- Creating safe and inclusive spaces for young people
- Supporting road and swimming safety for children and young people
- Promotion and awareness of local programs and services
- Outreach and accessible services (e.g. spreading funding, facilities and services across LGA)



PARTICIPANTS' IDEAS FOR A MORE CONNECTED COMMUNITY



Promoting community projects and culturally inclusive events to support participation and connection.

Integrated service delivery and use of media platforms to spread awareness of events and community programs.



Affordable activities and family-friendly spaces that are easy to access, bring people together and foster sense of belonging.

Programs and activities that cater to interests of children and young people that run outside school hours and during holidays.



Safe and clean parks, outdoor spaces and infrastructure such as footpaths and bike paths.

Reliable transport connecting areas across the LGA and affordable housing to support growing population.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Nest is an evidence-based framework that describes the key dimensions of wellbeing for children and young people. Using this framework, Early Start researchers examined the voices and experiences of community members, service providers and practitioners in Shellharbour to identify current strengths and opportunities across six interconnected areas of wellbeing.

	Strengths	Opportunities
IDENTITY AND CULTURE 	"The Girls Only Program built that resilience and that self-esteem and confidence. Whereas without the program, I don't think she would have built that confidence." (Parent Group) "Creating community and community safety as well as a sense of belonging for newly arrived families" (Family Services Group)	"I'd like to see cultural programs, no matter what it is, that supports a sense of belonging and wellbeing." (Indigenous Group) "When we are talking about cultural activities, every single person should have the opportunity to participate." (Indigenous Group)
MATERIAL BASICS 	"We work with community health agencies dependent on need. So we're bringing those groups into the school. We have various connections with agencies that come in to discuss topics in mental health, road safety, rail safety, basically we cover the whole gambit through our well-being initiatives." (School Principals Group) "[Families] are accessing those outdoor spaces because they are accessible and free." (Child and Family Services Group)	"Young people coming to drop-in, we could have really good programs and they're just there for the food. So, I think that the food security is a bit, issue in Shellharbour." (Youth Services Group) "The kids can't go anywhere because of the lack of transport. What are they supposed to do?" (Child and Family Services Group) "Financial pressure does impact the families here. And the median house price is quite high in Shellharbour...It's quite an expensive area to live." (Child and Family Services Group)
HEALTHY 	"I think because of where we live, the outdoor space, that natural environment is very much utilised. So, you can go down to the park or beach and there's always children and families." (Child and Family Services Group) "They're in a supervised space, they're still having fun and getting to socialise with their friends, they're getting a meal, they're getting that outdoors time." (Parents Group)	"Having services that offer a wider range of support rather than having to go to so many different places to have needs met." (Child and Family Services Group) "Parts of Albion Park, Warilla and Mount Warrigal would really benefit with some sort of outreach in terms of wellbeing, safety, food and care." (School Principals Group)

LEARNING



"It's still bringing very positive outcomes for families. I think it's really important that we continue to support educators in that way because that's where a lot of our children are, but we can access a lot of children through our early childhood services." (Child and Family Services Group)

"Start small, but we're reaching more and more people in the community and more and more families." (Child and Family Group)

"Teaching the children [language] and then they're teaching their peers...If we work with our students and they can have close communication and regular communication, that they can then feel the confidence and the support to teach." (Indigenous Group)

"Doing things as one off, on the ground, is one thing, and it helps in the moment. But if you can think of programs that have something continuous that have the capacity to grow our kids, then you're building a community." (Indigenous Group)

VALUED, LOVED AND SAFE



"Everyone's nice around here." (Pre-teen Group)

"It's a safe place they can go to and it's the same faces every single week." (Parents Group)

"The whole social aspect of [the program]. The environment is safe, there's great mentors." (Parents Group)

"I really enjoy the family outings that we get from Ed U Play. It's a great opportunity because there's things that we don't normally do. It just gets us spending time as a family again." (Parent Group)

"Mental health supports in this area is so poor right now for teenagers...But unless there's somebody that's actually following up with them, they're not interested. They don't feel as though they're being seen or heard or cared about." (Youth Services Group)

"I don't feel as though the message is really out there for kids and it's not always catering to what teenagers actually want these days as well...having somewhere that they feel like they would be comfortable and welcomed in for support would be great." (Child and Family Services Group)

PARTICIPATING



"We have introduced a family connect day where we take our families and offer them to bring their extended family to a local park. It's really good to see the dads, the aunties, the brothers and sisters all coming together" (Child Services Group)

"It's about social connection, opportunities for children to meet and socialise, for parents or grandparents to connect people who are new to the community. It's also a bit of a soft entry for referral to services." (Youth Services Group)

"I think more third spaces... it gives young people a space where they can be safe." (Child Services Group)

"Families want to be part of community events and are looking for free events to take their children." (Family Services Group)

"Transport is an issue because it is such a widespread LGA...Transport is limiting and services aren't always reliable." (Family Services Group)

We also talked to young children

We asked our youngest participants, "What do you enjoy doing in Shellharbour?" Children showed a strong awareness of their surroundings and were able to recognise and relate to images of local landmarks. Many connected spaces to time spent with friends and family.

"[I like to] be with my mum and dad."

"I went [to the library] with my cousins and we read books and coloured in."

"We see nature and the plants and the flowers and go for a walk through the forest."

"[At the park] I played with my sister and my brother and we went climbing."

"We stay on the sand and go on the boat and maybe go in the shallow part."

"[I see] all the traffic. There's cars everywhere."

"[At the beach] I jump in waves and we can build sandcastles and we can go swimming."

"We go to the library. We have to be quiet there."

"[At the mall] there is a place you can play. There are a thousand of people."

"I've been there before. I've gone there before. The park!"

"[At the park] there is the biggest slide in the whole world...We take turns. There is a lot of people at the park."



6. References



6. References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Census All persons QuickStats*.
<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA16900>
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. (2024). *What's in the Nest?*. <https://www.aracy.org.au/whats-in-the-nest-2024-update/>
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). (2014). *The Nest action agenda: Technical document*.
<https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-technical-document-4/>
- Barnardos Australia. (2021). *Barnardos Communities for Children Shellharbour Report 2021*.
- Barnardos Australia. (n.d.). *Communities for Children programs*.
<https://www.barnardos.org.au/services/communities-for-children/>
- Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., Scales, P. C., & Blyth, D. A. (2012). Beyond the "Village" Rhetoric: Creating Healthy Communities for Children and Adolescents. *Applied developmental science*, 16(1), 3-23.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2012.642771>
- Bessell, S. (2015). *Putting the Pieces in Place: Children Communities and Social Capital in Australia*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.2449.7362>
- Bessell, S. (2019). Money matters...but so do people: Children's views and experiences of living in a 'disadvantaged' community. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 97, 59-66.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.06.010>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Brettig, K. (2019). *Building Stronger Communities with Children and Families (2nd Edition)*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=SRHCDwAAQBAJ>
- Communities for Children (CfC). (2026). *Communities for Children facilitating Partner Operational Guidelines*.
<https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-activity>
- Communities for Children Shellharbour (CfC). (2019). *The State of Shellharbour's Children Report 2019*.
- Communities for Children Shellharbour (CfC). (2021). *Shellharbour Communities for Children Community Strategic Plan: 2022-2026 Priority Areas in Focus*.

- Elrick-Barr, C. E., Smith, T. F., & Thomsen, D. C. (2025). Practitioner perspectives of wellbeing in rapidly changing Australian coastal communities. *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 266, 107668. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2025.107668>
- Lin, E. S., Flanagan, S. K., Varga, S. M., Zaff, J. F., & Margolius, M. (2020). The Impact of Comprehensive Community Initiatives on Population-Level Child, Youth, and Family Outcomes: A Systematic Review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 65(3-4), 479-503. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12398>
- Littman, D. M. (2022). Third Places, Social Capital, and Sense of Community as Mechanisms of Adaptive Responding for Young People Who Experience Social Marginalization. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 69(3-4), 436-450. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12531>
- Maine, F., Brummernhenrich, B., Chatzianastasi, M., Juškienė, V., Lähdesmäki, T., Luna, J., & Peck, J. (2021). Children's exploration of the concepts of home and belonging: Capturing views from five European countries. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 110, 101876. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101876>
- Mertens, D. M., & Hesse-Biber, S. (2013). *Mixed Methods and Credibility of Evidence in Evaluation: New Directions for Evaluation*, Number 138 (1 ed., Vol. 138). John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Nyumba, T. O., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation. *Methods in Ecology and Evolution*, 9(1), 20-32. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12860>
- Shellharbour City Council. (2021). *Shellharbour City Council Community Profile*. <https://profile.id.com.au/shellharbour/>
- Shellharbour City Council. (2021). *Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage*. <https://profile.id.com.au/shellharbour/seifa-disadvantage-small-area?SeifaKey=40004>
- Shellharbour City Council. (2024). *Online Mapping*. <https://shbr.spatial.tlcloud.com/spatial/intramaps/?configId=3399ba48-3b8f-4cd7-a655-3b84b701202c&project=Shellharbour%20Public>
- Thomas, G., Lynch, M., & Spencer, L. H. (2021). A Systematic Review to Examine the Evidence in Developing Social Prescribing Interventions That Apply a Co-Productive, Co-Designed Approach to Improve Well-Being Outcomes in a Community Setting. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(8), 3896. <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/8/3896>

Wastell, S. J., & Degotardi, S. (2017). 'I Belong Here; I been Coming a Big Time': An Exploration of Belonging that Includes the Voice of Children. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 42(4), 38-46.
<https://doi.org/10.23965/ajec.42.4.05>

Wood, L., Giles-Corti, B., Zubrick, S. R., & Bulsara, M. K. (2013). Through the Kids . . . We Connected With Our Community: Children as Catalysts of Social Capital. *Environment and behavior*, 45(3), 344-368.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916511429329>

7. Appendices



7. Appendices

Appendix A: Online survey questions

Communities for Children (CfC) Community Consultation
for Barnardos Australia Researchers:

Professor Lisa Kervin, Dr Crystal Arnold, Dr Chye Toole-Anstey, Dr
Joanna Waloszek, Lisa Kilgariff; Early Start, University of Wollongong

Are you over 18 years of age and living in the Shellharbour Local Government Area (LGA)? Tell us what issues are important to you so that we can make positive change!

We are inviting community members aged over 18 who live in the Shellharbour Local Government Area (LGA) to participate in a study that explores the strengths and needs of the Shellharbour community for children, young people and families.

This study is being conducted by researchers from Early Start at the University of Wollongong at the request of Barnardos Communities for Children program (CfC). CfC is a Federal Government Funded program that aims to improve the lives of children, young people and families. The objectives of the program are to support a whole of community approach to early development and wellbeing of children 0 - 18 years old.

The study will help us understand what is important to our children and families. Results will be used to inform the decisions Barnardos makes about the best ways to support children and families in Shellharbour.

Complete the short survey about your experiences in Shellharbour and enter the draw to win one of four \$150 Woolworths Simply Groceries gift cards. Please read through the Participant Information Sheet (insert link), download it for your records and scroll down to the survey!

I have read the [link to PIS] and understand that my participation in this research will involve completing an online survey with questions about me, my household and experiences of living in Shellharbour Local Government Area (LGA). I understand that participation in this research is voluntary, and I may decline to participate without affecting my relationship with Barnardos, the Communities for Children groups, the University of Wollongong or Early Start.

I understand that data will be confidential, stored securely and will not be identified in any outputs. I understand that findings from this study will

be reported in Barnardos reports and may be reported in academic journals and/ or at conferences.

By ticking the boxes below, I am indicating my consent in this study as described above and in the Participant Information Sheet:

I consent to:

☐ Participating in the survey

☐ My de-identified data being used by the University of Wollongong for the purposes of this research

Please select your age group:

☐ <18 years

☐ 18-24 years

☐ 25-30 years

☐ 31-40 years

☐ 41-50 years

☐ 51-60 years

☐ 61-70 years

☐ >70 years

What is your gender?

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Non-binary

☐ Other

☐ Prefer not to say

Please select the suburb you live in within the Shellharbour LGA:

How many years have you lived in the Shellharbour Area?

☐ <1 year

☐ 1- 4 years

☐ 5- 10 years

☐ 10 + years

☐ Prefer not to say

What best describes your role in relation to children?
(Please tick all that apply)

☐ Parent

☐ Grandparent

☐ Foster carer/ Kinship carer

☐ Other family member (e.g. aunt/ uncle, sibling)

☐ Other caregiver (please specify)

☐ I work with children (e.g. childhood educator, teacher)

☐ Community member

☐ Prefer not to say

Who else lives in your household? (either full-time or part-time)

(Tick ALL that apply)

☐ Partner (married/ defacto)

☐ Child/children under 18 years old

☐ Child/children over 18 years old

☐ Extended family

☐ Not applicable (I live alone)

☐ Other (Please list)

☐ Prefer not to say

How many children live in your household? (either full-time or part-time)

☐ 1-2 children

☐ 3-5 children

☐ 6-9 children

☐ 10+ children

What are the ages of the children who live in your household? (either full or part-time)

(Tick all that apply)

Less than 1 year old

1 year old

2 years old

3 years old

4 years old

5 years old

6 years old

7 years old

8 years old

9 years old

Do you have any children that do not live with you?

☐ Yes

☐ No

How many children do you have who do not live in your household? (either full-time or part-time)

☐ 1-2 children

☐ 3-5 children

☐ 6-9 children

☐ 10+ children

What are the ages of the children who do not live in your household? (either full or part-time)

(Tick all that apply)

Less than 1 year old	☐
1 year	☐
2 years	☐
3 years	☐
4 years	☐
5 years	☐
6 years	☐
7 years	☐
8 years	☐
9 years	☐

What do you (and your family) like about living in Shellharbour LGA?

You can write anything! Single words or sentences are fine.

--

Are there places in the Shellharbour LGA that feel important to you or your family? Why?

You can write anything! Single words or sentences are fine.

--

What do you see as the 3 main challenges faced by individuals and families in the Shellharbour LGA?

☐ Mental health
☐ Substance use
☐ Crime
☐ Cost of living/ financial stress
☐ Homelessness
☐ Employment
☐ Access and availability of services
☐ Balancing work/ family time
☐ Housing affordability
☐ Dealing with holiday makers
☐ Family and domestic violence
☐ Other (Please list)
☐ I don't see any challenges
☐ Prefer not to say

I am confident I could access and get help from services/organisations in the Shellharbour LGA to assist me or my family if needed:

☐ Yes
☐ No

What services/organisations have you or your family accessed in Shellharbour LGA?

Do you (or your family) attend any groups or programs in the Shellharbour LGA?

(Tick all that apply)

- ☐ Playgroups (e.g. community or church-run playgroups)
- ☐ Parenting programs (e.g. Child & Family Health drop-in groups, parenting support groups)
- ☐ Social groups (e.g. community walking groups, run club, parent meetups)
- ☐ Organised activities (e.g. sports, music lessons, art classes)
- ☐ Faith-based activities (e.g. Sunday school, youth group)
- ☐ Library programs (e.g. story time, rhyme time, school holiday activities)
- ☐ Other (Please list)

- ☐ No, we don't attend any
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Do you (or your family) attend any groups or programs outside the Shellharbour LGA?

(Tick all that apply)

- ☐ Playgroups (e.g. community or church-run playgroups)
- ☐ Parenting groups (e.g. Child & Family Health drop-in groups, parenting support groups)
- ☐ Social groups (e.g. community walking groups, run club, parent meetups)
- ☐ Organised activities (e.g. sports, music lessons, art classes)
- ☐ Faith-based activities (e.g. Sunday school, youth group)
- ☐ Library programs (e.g. story time, rhyme time, school holiday activities)
- ☐ Other (Please list)

- ☐ No, we don't attend any
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What would you like to see more in the local community?

(Tick all that apply)

- ☐ Affordable programs and activities outside of school hours
- ☐ Playgroups and activities for children aged 0-5 years
- ☐ Community events that celebrate different cultures and bring people together
- ☐ A safe place for young people to hang out and connect
- ☐ Culturally safe spaces for Aboriginal families to share, learn and feel supported
- ☐ Information or programs to help me better understand or support my child
- ☐ Culturally safe spaces for linguistically diverse families to share, learn and feel supported
- ☐ Support mental health and wellbeing of parents
- ☐ Spaces for outdoor recreation
- ☐ Homework help/ learning supports
- ☐ Opportunities to learn from Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders
- ☐ Mental health and wellbeing for children and young people
- ☐ Other (Please list)

What do you (and your family) like to do in your free time, such as on weekends?

You can write anything! Single words or sentences are fine.

What would help you and your family feel more connected to the Shellharbour area?

You can write anything! Single words or sentences are fine.

What would need to change to make it easier for you to access programs in the Shellharbour area? (e.g. increased public transport, scheduling/ timing).

You can write anything! Single words or sentences are fine.

What else would you like to have or be able to do where you live?

You can write anything! Single words or sentences are fine.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences living in Shellharbour LGA?

You can write anything! Single words or sentences are fine.

Appendix B: Focus group questions

Focus Group 1. ECEC

1. What do you like to do in your neighborhood or after school?
2. Are there any places you like to go to in Shellharbour? What do you do there?
3. Do you go to any groups or activities? What are they like?
4. Is there anything that makes it hard to go to your favorite places?
5. What new things would you like to have in your community? (e.g. more parks, activities, etc...)
6. If you could dream up your perfect Shellharbour, what would it look like?

Focus Group 2. Youth services and practitioners

1. What areas in Shellharbour and what ages does your service cover?
2. What programs or services do you offer that people use?
3. What are the benefits of the program/services?
4. Are there barriers to accessing these?
5. What do children and young people usually do around Shellharbour?
6. What do you love about the community and service? If you could change anything about the Shellharbour area or the service you offer, what would it be?

Focus group 3. Child and Family services and practitioners

7. What areas in Shellharbour and what ages does your service cover?
8. What programs or services do you offer that people use?
9. What are the benefits of the program/services?
10. Are there barriers to accessing these?
11. What do children and young people usually do around Shellharbour?
12. What do you love about the community and service? If you could change anything about the Shellharbour area or the service you offer, what would it be?

Focus group 4. Aboriginal leaders

1. In Shellharbour, what kinds of activities do you see children doing? In what ways do they connect to culture, community, or each other through these activities?
2. Tell me about what groups/programs/activities/places within the Shellharbour LGA you are involved with or attend, and your experiences with these.
3. What encouraged you to get involved, and what keeps you connected to those groups or places?
4. What challenges or barriers do you (or others in your community) face when trying to access local programs or services?
5. Are there any groups or cultural activities you go to outside of Shellharbour? What draws you there?
6. What would you like to see more of for young people and children in Shellharbour?
7. What are your hopes/visions/dreams for the future of the Aboriginal community in Shellharbour?
8. Are there places on Country in Shellharbour that are important to you or your family?
9. What would you like to see more young people doing to stay strong in culture and community?

Focus group 5. Principals

1. What do you notice that children and young people do in Shellharbour?
2. Tell me what groups/programs/activities/place within Shellharbour LGA you are involved with or attend, and your experiences with these.
3. Why did you choose to participate in the/se group/s? How long have you been participating? What keeps you coming back?
4. What are barriers to attending local activities or groups? Perhaps for you or for others you know.
5. Do you (or your family) attend any groups, programs or activities outside the Shellharbour LGA?
6. Why do you choose to go outside of the LGA for these groups/programs/activities?
7. What would you like to see more of in your local community?
8. What are your hopes/visions/dreams for Shellharbour?
9. What are the places that matter to you in the Shellharbour community?
10. We started with this question, let's circle back- What would you like to see children and young people do in Shellharbour?

Focus group 6. Active In-Betweens

1. What do you like to do in your neighbourhood or after school?
2. Are there any places you like to go to in Shellharbour? What do you do there?
3. Do you go to any groups or activities? What are they like?
4. Is there anything that makes it hard to go to your favourite places or activities?
5. What new things would you like to have in your community? (e.g. more parks, activities, etc...)
6. If you could dream up your perfect Shellharbour, what would it look like?
7. Is there anything you wish you could do here that you can't at the moment?

Focus group 7. Parents and carers

1. What do you notice that children and young people do in Shellharbour?
2. Tell me about what groups/programs/activities/places within the Shellharbour LGA you are involved with or attend, and your experiences with these.
3. Why did you choose to participate in the/se group? How long have you been participating? What keeps you coming back?
4. What are barriers to attending local activities or groups? Perhaps for you or for others you know.
5. Do you (or your family) attend any groups, programs or activities outside the Shellharbour LGA?
6. Why do you choose to go outside of the LGA for these groups/programs/activities?
7. What would you like to see more of in the local community (Shellharbour LGA)?
8. What are your hopes/visions/dreams for the Shellharbour community?
9. What are the places that matter to you in the Shellharbour community?
10. We started with this question, let's circle back - What would you LIKE TO SEE children and young people do in Shellharbour



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Early Start
Faculty of Arts, Society and Business
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia