



The Seymour Journey

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Acknowledgement of Country

Our Place welcomes all families and children. We acknowledge the First Nations people of Australia and Traditional Custodians of the lands that we live and work on. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Seymour is on the traditional lands of the Taungurung Nation.

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This report describes the origin of the Our Place initiative in Seymour and documents the story so far.

The Seymour Our Place site is located in central Victoria, 104km north of Melbourne on the Seymour College campus. The College is part of a consolidated education precinct with primary and secondary education, the Seymour Developmental Special School, a Trade Training Centre, and the Seymour Family and Children's Centre.

The Seymour Our Place site became operational in January 2020 with the opening of Mitchell Shire Council's Seymour Family and Children's Centre. The Seymour Family and Children's Centre includes a kindergarten operated by Kids First Australia, two Maternal and Child Health (MCH) consulting rooms, a multipurpose room for playgroups, social activities and parenting programs, a community foyer with kitchenette, and two specialist consulting rooms designed to cater for allied health and family support services. A subsequent addition has been an outdoor community plaza area which provides space

for informal community gatherings and connection with the school community. Seymour Our Place is one of ten Our Place sites to be established since the demonstration site at Doveton College opened in 2012.

Seymour's journey towards being an Our Place site commenced back in 2016 when Mitchell Shire Council first approached Seymour College about placing an Early Learning Centre (ELC) on the campus grounds. Following this, a meeting was arranged between the Colman Education Foundation, Seymour College and Mitchell Shire Council and a visit to Doveton College was arranged.

Seymour is a town that has experienced significant intergenerational disadvantage. Seymour is in the top 9% of disadvantaged towns in Australia¹. Single parent families make up 25.5% of all families and 7% of households in Seymour

¹ [Australian Bureau of Statistics \(ABS\) Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas \(SEIFA\), Australia, 2016](#)

² MCH Services Annual Report, 2017-18. North Eastern Victoria Region. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Victoria.



PURPOSE OF THE Journey Report

“

Building capability in adults is an important part of helping children to achieve better education outcome.”

Sean Cory, CEO, Our Place

were rented from social or community housing providers, substantially more than the Victorian average of 2.8%². Many children in Seymour start school developmentally vulnerable in terms of language and cognitive skills, as well as emotional maturity, compared to their counterparts across the state. Australian Early Development Census results show that 32% of children were vulnerable on one or more domains, compared to 20% for Victoria³.

This Journey Report describes the involvement and contribution of key partners in Seymour to improve outcomes for children, families and the community. The series of events leading up to the establishment of the Seymour Our Place site are outlined, as is the early implementation of the Our Place approach. Throughout the report, the key steps, learnings and partner aspirations for the Seymour site are outlined.

A total of 18 key stakeholders involved in the establishment of Seymour Our Place were consulted in the development of this report. Those consulted include representatives from the Seymour Our Place Partnership Group, including Department of Education and Training (DET), Seymour College, Mitchell Shire Council, Kids First Australia, William Buckland Foundation, The Gaudry Foundation, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and Our Place / Colman Education Foundation.

In addition to the stakeholder interviews, information for this report was drawn from other sources including school documentation, meeting minutes, photos, community consultation reports, demographic information, educational attainment and early childhood data.

³ [Australian Early Development Census \(AEDC\) Community Profile 2021, Mitchell VIC](#)



UNDERSTANDING THE **concept of Our Place**

Our Place is a holistic place-based approach to supporting the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities by utilising the universal platform of a school.

The Our Place approach is built on the strong body of evidence from international research and experts, and the translation of learnings from its lighthouse site at Doveton College, which commenced operation in 2012.

The evidence indicates that education is the key to lifting aspirations and improving the lives of children and their families. The approach seeks to overcome the barriers to educational achievement by focusing on:

- Supporting high-quality learning environments for children – at home, in early learning settings and in schools.
- Supporting the service system to better address known biological and environmental risks, allowing for prevention and early intervention.

WHY IS IT NEEDED?

In Australia, the benefits of economic growth are not shared as evenly as they once were, and the equity gap is widening between the wealthy and the poor.

Our Place's approach is based on the premise that improved access to high-quality education for all is key to addressing the equity gap.

- Complex and entrenched disadvantage is concentrated in certain postcodes – where you are born shouldn't determine your opportunities in life.
- Children need supportive environments to thrive, which is especially important for children facing challenges that arise from social and economic disadvantage.
- While there is a wealth of resources and services available, often these are not of adequate quality to make a difference and/or are not accessed by the people that need it the most.

When schools in disadvantaged communities act as community hubs they have the potential to create powerful change. Our Place facilitates partnerships that enable the school to be the central place for learning and support services that overcome barriers to educational achievement.



Children

- Happy, healthy and develop well
- Engage in learning and social opportunities
- Achieve as learners

Families

- Happy, healthy and well with strong self-worth
- Confident as parents/ carers and engage in their children's learning
- Engaged in learning, are skilled and are employed

Community

- Connected and feel socially included
- Having a sense of pride and belonging
- Actively contribute skills and knowledge to community productivity

WHAT ARE THE DESIRED OUTCOMES?

The vision is that all children and their families succeed in life. To reliably measure the impact of Our Place, our objective is to achieve positive change in the nine key areas that form the Outcomes Framework.

The nine Outcomes have been carefully chosen to enable the effective evaluation of clear conditions of wellbeing under the three major domains. The most critical domain focuses on outcomes for children, while the other two domains are outcomes for their families and the communities they live in. There are a number of indicators across these nine outcome areas. The indicators provide a meaningful understanding to the extent that Outcomes are being achieved. They can be measured in a timely manner and reflect reliable, robust indicators of community level change.

HOW ARE THESE OUTCOMES ACHIEVED?

The Our Place holistic approach includes five core Elements that describe the evidence-based strategies that contribute to achieving Outcomes for children, families and communities. The Elements are:

High-quality early learning, health and development

Support early learning from birth as well as playgroups, child health and parenting support on site.

High-quality schooling

Support high-quality teaching and learning environments that ensure each child receives the support they need to achieve and thrive.

Wrap-around health and wellbeing services

Support access to effective health and wellbeing services.

Engagement and enrichment activities for children

Create affordable, on-site opportunities for children to develop an interest in sports, arts and hobbies with others.

Adult engagement, volunteering, learning and employment

Support opportunities for families to engage in volunteering, formal and informal learning, and link them into employment pathways.

“

Evidence indicates that education is the key to lifting the aspirations and improving the lives of children and their families. Our Place facilitates partnerships that enable the school to be the central place for learning and support services that overcome barriers to educational achievement.”

June McLoughlin, Executive Director – Services, Our Place



HOW DOES IT COME TOGETHER?

Our Place facilitates partnerships that enable the school to be the central place for education and support services that are known to improve the lives and aspirations of children and their families. Our Place refers to this role as being ‘The Glue’.

The Glue is made up of the people, partnerships, knowledge and infrastructure that are essential to successfully improving outcomes for children through a place-based approach. The key ingredients are:

1. Space and infrastructure

A single, shared entrance to early learning, school, health services and community facilities, with welcoming and appropriate space for families.

2. Facilitation, leadership and partnerships

People in place to build commitment, drive action and outcomes, connect people with other resources and encourage a culture of mutual respect and questioning.

3. Collaborative governance

Shared commitment to collaborative governance and innovation to develop solutions that achieve impact.

4. Data-informed decision-making

Skills and capacity to identify, collect, analyse, interpret and understand data from available sources.

Our Place does not deliver or fund any services or programs, rather it assists in reshaping the service system by providing essential resources to drive action, impact and innovation. Its expertise building meaningful relationships and facilitating lasting partnerships with local leaders and the community to create opportunities for participation. The people resources Our Place provides are:

Community Facilitators

Front-line staff who implement evidence-based strategies, working on-site with the local community and service providers. This role leads and undertakes the bulk of the work in the implementation process, with an emphasis on engaging with the school and key partners and connecting with the local community and understanding and responding to local community needs.



Partnership Managers

Lead and drive the partnership between the school, the early learning provider, state government and local government at each Our Place site. This role is involved in overseeing and supporting the implementation process, with an emphasis on building relationships, creating a shared commitment and vision.

Research and Evaluation Team

Provide advice, resources and support to Our Place sites in initial planning, data collection and ongoing reporting. The team leads baseline data collection and works closely with those involved in implementation to support the collection and analysis of process and outcome data.

Subject matter experts

Our Place engages consultants with expertise in a number of areas to assist in designing and implementing strategies in each site, such as specialists in early learning, adult education, principal support, employment pathways, paediatric health and data and evaluation.







TRANSLATING THE **concept to Seymour**

The original concept envisaged for the Seymour Our Place site was driven by key individuals and events that unfolded over several years.

Mitchell Shire Council's decision to partner with Seymour College and move existing stand-alone kindergarten and Maternal and Child Health facilities into a new integrated Family and Children's Centre on the school campus was a key step. Alongside this, Seymour College's school Principal and a senior representative from Mitchell Shire Council approached the chair of the Colman Education Foundation to explore the potential for Seymour to become an Our Place site.

THE SEYMOUR COMMUNITY

Seymour is a regional town located in central Victoria, on the lands of the Taungurung people. The town has a population of just over 6500⁴ and is in the local government area of Mitchell Shire Council, situated 104 kilometers north of Melbourne. Seymour was established in the 1840s as a significant railway town located by the Goulburn River.

The Puckapunyal military base contributed to the role of Seymour as a regional services centre in the early 1900s when it was used as a mobilisation and training area with many of its employees and soldiers living in Seymour. From the 1980s the army personnel moved to live in Puckapunyal, and the majority of the military accommodation in Seymour was acquired by the state government for public housing use.

Since then, the decline in worker and residential populations, and the Seymour Bypass that diverts road traffic on the Hume Highway from passing through Seymour, have impacted the local economy. This has led to shrinking employment opportunities and limited opportunity for the region to grow.

⁴[Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, Community Profile](#)

SECTION 2



In 2016 unemployment was higher at 7.2% compared to the rest of Victoria at 6.6% and a lower average weekly household income of \$977 (compared to \$1,419 for Victoria). Seymour is in the top 9% of disadvantaged towns in Australia⁵ with family violence rates twice that of the Victorian average. Single parent families make up 26% of all families and 7% of households in Seymour were rented from social or community housing providers, substantially more than the Victorian average of 3% (DHHS). Most of the Seymour community was born in Australia (80%), with only 8% of households reporting they spoke a language other than English, and a small proportion (3%) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ABS 2021).

Many children in Seymour start school developmentally vulnerable in terms of language and cognitive skills, as well as emotional maturity, compared to their counterparts across the state. Australian Early Development Census results show that 32% of children were vulnerable on one or more domains (compared to 20% for Victoria), and 23% were vulnerable on two or more domains (compared to 10% for Victoria). When compared to all Australian students, Seymour students were below or well below in all domains⁶.

Seymour College is the only government school in Seymour. It caters for approximately 740 children from Foundation to Year 12, with an additional 60 ungraded students in the Seymour Developmental Special School. Seymour College has around 100 full time equivalent staff. It was created in 2010 through a merger of Seymour Technical High School, Seymour Primary School, Seymour East Primary School

and Seymour Developmental Special School. The campus includes a Trade Training Centre that enables students in Years 9 -12 to participate in hands-on programs in a technical skill or trade. The Seymour Developmental Special School is embedded within all the learning communities across the College, allowing students to access mainstream curriculum while also having a home base for literacy and numeracy learning. Seymour College is an important and central hub for Seymour, with its broader offering of an Arts Centre and sports stadium. Seymour College's demography reflects that of the town.

It is made up of a small proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and English as an additional language students, and high levels of socio-economic disadvantage according to the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) and Student Family Occupation and Education (SFOE) scores. In 2021 57% of College families were ranked in the bottom quarter of disadvantage and only 3% in the top quarter. Publicly available NAPLAN results show students have educational results similar to students with similar backgrounds, except results are well below for several domains in year 3. Attendance is lower than the Victorian average, with variation across year levels⁷.

The Seymour Family and Children's Centre is located onsite at Seymour College and includes an Early Learning Centre (ELC), with sessional three and four-year-old kindergarten, as well as a Maternal and Child Health (MCH) service. The ELC is managed by Mitchell Shire Council and operated by Kids First Australia. Kids First Australia is an independent

⁵ SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, 2016

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, Community Profile.

⁷ NAPLAN results (2021) My School website

child and family services provider and early education specialist organisation. Its vision is for all children and young people to thrive in resilient, strong and safe families and communities.

ORIGINAL CONCEPT

Prior to the introduction of Our Place, Seymour College and Mitchell Shire Council were exploring an opportunity in 2016 to form a partnership that would enable the provision of early childhood education on the Seymour College campus. The existing Seymour kindergarten, located nearby, was an ageing building in need of repair.

Mitchell Shire Council's approach to new facilities was based on the philosophy that it was good practice to co-locate early learning on school sites and support the child's journey from kindergarten to school. Mitchell Shire Council was also interested in establishing an integrated service provision model where possible, in recognition of the fact that increased parenting support was required due to the number of families identifying with complex issues within the community. In addition to this, the benefits of co-location were recognised, both in terms of allowing practitioners and educators to collaborate when onsite together, and enhancing referral systems to support families, particularly those with complex needs and where early intervention is needed.

Mitchell Shire Council successfully attracted funding for the Family and Children's Centre through the DET Shared Facilities Fund in mid-2017. Mitchell Shire Council and Seymour College by this stage were committed to working together. Following the funding announcement, the designs

and construction planning commenced for the facility to be built on the school site. The plans for the new facility included spaces for kindergarten, MCH services, and supported playgroups.

The partnership between Mitchell Shire Council and Seymour College to deliver early childhood education and care on the school campus strengthened their existing relationship. Collaborative planning activities and workshops took place which helped develop a shared understanding of community issues, policy directions, and demographic, educational and child development data. Early discussions took place about the potential governance arrangements that would be needed to manage spaces and support collaboration.

In their quest to provide integrated and wraparound support and services onsite to families, Mitchell Shire Council and Seymour College advocated for additional resources and jointly approached DET for Seymour to be selected as an Our Place site.

SITE SELECTION

In March 2018 the Education Minister at the time officially announced a partnership with the Colman Education Foundation (CEF) through the Our Place initiative in Seymour. Seymour was one of several sites selected to expand on the Colman Education Foundation's success at Doveton. The announcement also supported the visions of both Mitchell Shire Council and Seymour College to provide continuous education for children and wraparound support for families on a single site.

The joint approach from Seymour College and Mitchell Shire Council to the Colman Education Foundation started the site





selection process, and in late 2017 following initial meetings in Melbourne, the CEF Chair and Our Place Executive Director, Services visited Seymour to learn more about the challenges experienced in this community. This was a pivotal moment in the journey.

The inclusion of early childhood education and care on the school site, along with MCH, was vital for site selection, and the evidence from analysis of the population data and identified social disadvantage was central to Seymour's fit with the Our Place vision and mission. The complex needs of this community, in addition to the inclusive education program offered onsite, demonstrated the need for the Our Place approach of supporting families and children from birth. These factors also required a level of sensitivity in bringing about change to the existing school structure.

The selection of Seymour as an Our Place site was a significant milestone in the extensive advocacy for Seymour by Mitchell Shire Council, the Goulburn Regional Partnership, and local community groups for social and economic initiatives to address long term disadvantage in the town had previously occurred. The Seymour Revitalisation initiative led by the State Government in 2019 included a focus on health and wellbeing service planning, a theme for which advocacy continues.

Bringing the Our Place approach to Seymour also supported Seymour College's existing relationships with local supports and services. Prior to the introduction of the Our Place partnership, Seymour College had established connections with service providers in the area that provided wellbeing support for students. The school also had relationships with educators in Mitchell Shire Council's two local kindergartens to support children in their transition to school. School teachers would visit the kindergartens during the year, observe the children and get to know parents and educators.

PARTNERSHIP FORMATION

Before the introduction of Our Place, a solid partnership already existed between Mitchell Shire Council and Seymour College. Both organisations were committed to the Our Place approach of working in partnership with service providers onsite. Planning meetings between the successful early learning provider Kids First Australia and Mitchell Shire Council's early years team started late in 2018, and this provided an opportunity to build a strong commitment to the partnership approach. Kids First Australia has a long history of providing services to children in Victoria. Established in 1896 as the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Kids First Australia has a model of service that is strength-based and trauma-informed, recognising the impact of trauma on child development.

Prior to the establishment of the formal Our Place Site Partnership Group (SPG), a Project Control Group (PCG) was set up in 2018 to oversee the facility construction. The PCG included the Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA), DET, Mitchell Shire Council, Kids First Australia and Our Place. The role of the PCG was to oversee the building of the Seymour Family and Children's Centre onsite and to plan, discuss and problem-solve any issues arising.

The SPG came together in mid-2019 with appointment of its Chair and the recruitment of the Seymour Our Place Partnership Manager. The inaugural Partnership Manager was a former Department of Education executive in the region, and previous school Principal, who brought valuable educational and government experience to the partnership. The SPG members represented Seymour College, Mitchell Shire Council, Kids First Australia, DET North Eastern Region, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), and later in September 2021, a Taungurung Traditional Owner joined the group.

“

The partners are committed to the children that we are there to serve. Success will rely on their commitment to work together and overcome blockages and run with the enablers.”

Department of Education and Training representative

The first Our Place Community Facilitator was appointed in late 2019, and the second commenced work in early 2020. Alongside the SPG, the Our Place team has continued to work closely with the School Principal and Kindergarten Director, and Mitchell Shire Council's Early Years Managers to brief them on the Our Place approach and guide the work of the site implementation process.

“The great thing is that community members know the Community Facilitators – they have a presence. They go gently, sensitively and are always welcoming.”
(Principal, Seymour College).

In 2020 the partnership members reviewed each other's organisational visions and mission statements and arrived at a shared vision that reflected their common aspirations for the best outcomes for children, families and communities:

‘Every child thrives in resilient strong families and community and has the best learning and developmental opportunities to succeed in life.’

In 2019, the William Buckland Foundation (WBF) agreed to partner with the Colman Education Foundation to provide funding for the Our Place Seymour site for 10 years and is also a member of the Our Place Philanthropic Alliance. WBF is a keen supporter of initiatives that improve outcomes for children, families and communities, and has first-hand knowledge of the achievements at Doveton College through early support of Doveton's music program. A number of the trustees have personal connections to the region with a deep understanding of the needs in Seymour, as well as the possibilities for the region. The funding reflects a significant contribution that will allow this work to build and grow over 10 years and provides an exciting opportunity from which the site's vision can be realised.



SECTION 2

“

We want to see the people and community of Seymour connected and thriving, taking opportunities to engage in education, employment and entrepreneurship on their own terms.”

Chair, William Buckland Foundation



In addition to this, the Gaudry Foundation met with the Seymour College Principal and Our Place team in 2020 to offer its support. In the Our Place approach, playgroups offer an essential means of building parent confidence and belonging through connecting and engaging families, and it was recognised that the Gaudry Foundation could support the provision of a universal playgroup onsite.

A year into its establishment, the SPG reviewed its membership and governance structure. As a result, four working groups were established in 2020 to drive key priority areas, support the effective operation and implementation of the Our Place approach at Seymour and provide advice to the SPG:

“

I realised there was a great and immediate need to give support to women in this community – enabling them to make good decisions, giving them access to all the services. That’s what Our Place is doing. Everything is in one spot – a one stop shop. When you are a first-time mum it’s really scary so it’s good to have access to a supported playgroup. And for the child, it’s an opportunity to play and use those motor skills.”

Founder, Gaudry Foundation

- an 'Operations group' developed policies and processes to support practitioner collaboration onsite;
- a 'Communications group' helped create consistent communication about the work of the partnership and developed a communications strategy;
- an 'Education group' initially mapped an optimal learning journey to help gain a shared understanding of the experience of families in the community accessing education. The 'Education Group' identified gaps and barriers impacting a child along their journey, drawing on advice from Aboriginal support practitioners and representatives from local government and the DET regional office;
- and a 'Services group' was established to identify opportunities for improvement in service coordination, and ease of access for community.

Despite being established during the constrained setting of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it was possible for the working groups to collaborate effectively online. This helped partners get to know each other and provided a concrete way to progress the work despite the impact of lockdowns.

The composition and focus of the working groups have since been refined following a review by the SPG in 2021 to ensure relevance and targeted effort.

The Communications and Operations groups no longer meet as their focus was time-limited and the work has been completed. From 2021 the working groups are comprised of targeted participants and include: Onsite Practitioners Network; Education Advisory Group; Continuity of Learning Working Group; Services Provider and Stakeholders group; and a Families and Community Group.

“

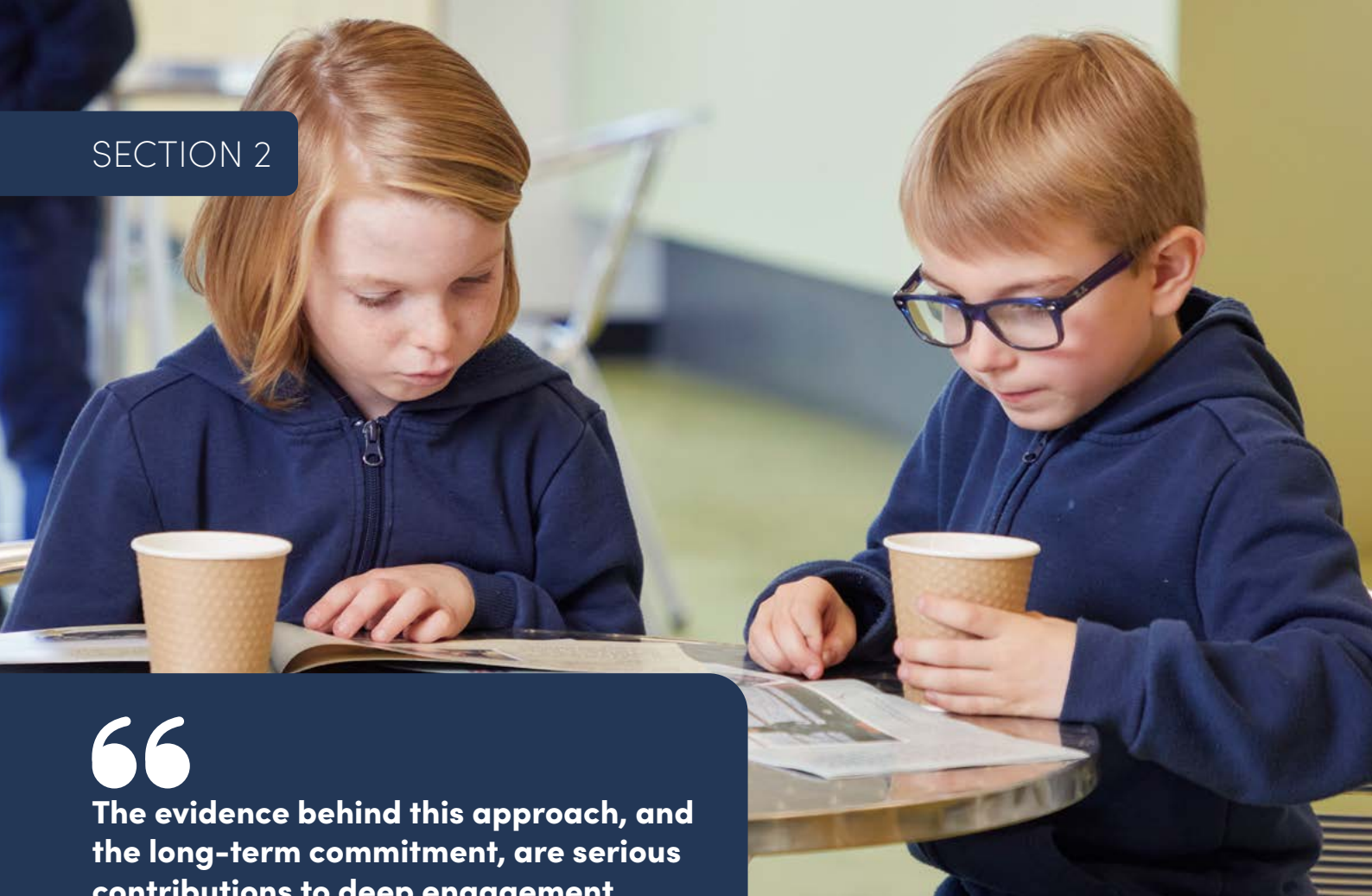
We have had advisory groups established for some time...they have been able to evolve. We have reviewed them and adjusted them to respond to chunky projects to sink their teeth into.”

Community Facilitator, Our Place

The formal Our Place Seymour Site Operating Agreement was sent to all parties for sign off in July 2022.

“Everyone is committed to the same thing – education is the key to the door – there is a great sense of purpose going forward.”
(Partnership Manager, Our Place)





“

The evidence behind this approach, and the long-term commitment, are serious contributions to deep engagement and early intervention trying to turn around some of the ongoing challenges experienced by some families and children.”

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing representative

THE FIT WITH OUR PLACE

The values of Our Place and its place-based approach to improving outcomes of vulnerable families resonated with both Seymour College and Mitchell Shire Council from the outset. The idea of including an integrated Family and Children’s Centre onsite fitted with the College’s and Council’s vision. There was also shared agreement about a need for improvements to the service system in Seymour, and strong appetite at a local level to bring about positive change.

The plans to include early childhood education and care on the site of Seymour College followed a significant school regeneration initiative that consolidated primary, secondary, developmental special school and trade schools on the one campus. These plans were closely aligned with the Our Place approach.

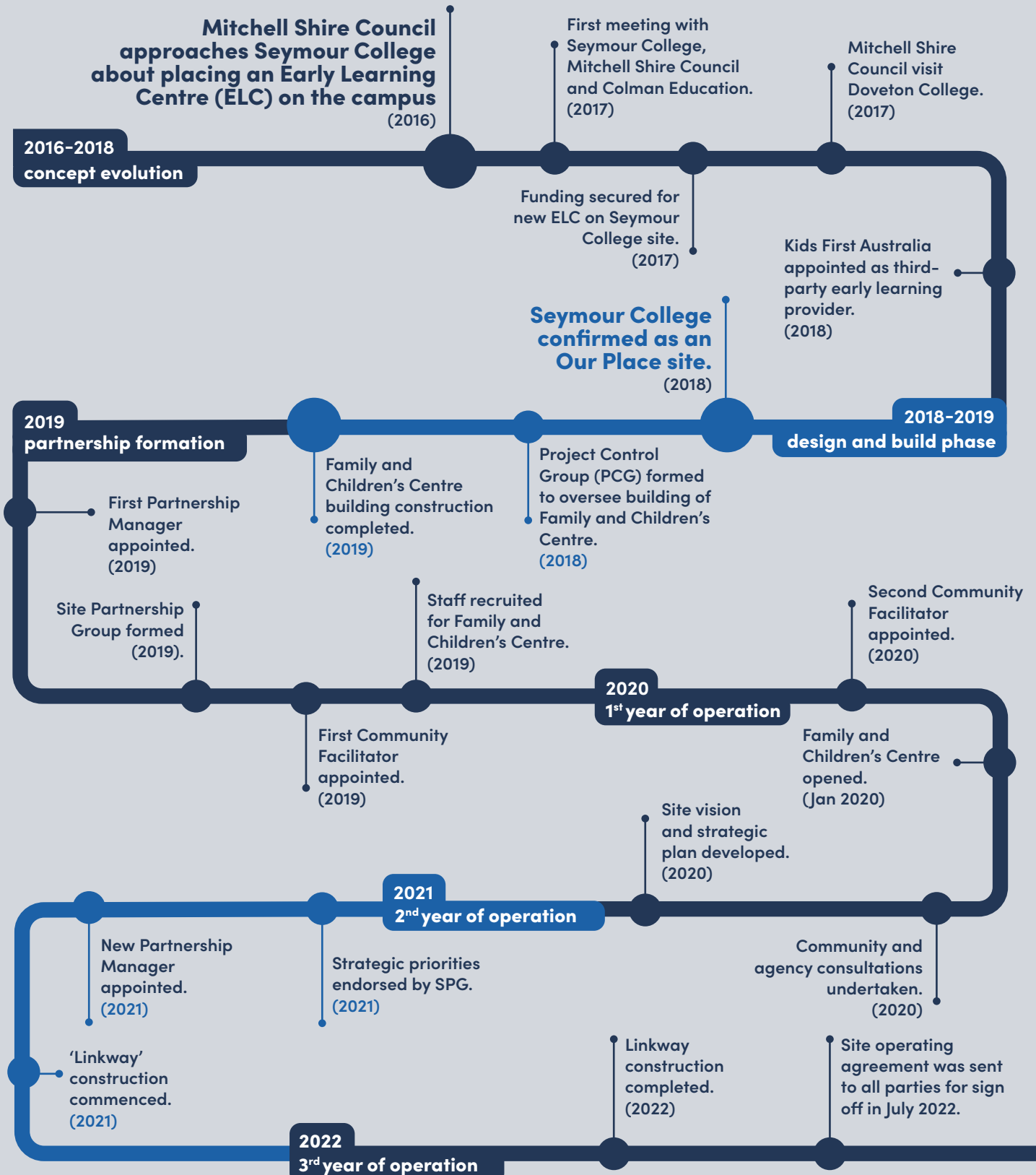
The stakeholders in Seymour have been strongly advocating for the community and responding to opportunities to develop the potential of Seymour. There is a commitment to ensure that the children and students have access to opportunities in life that they are entitled to. While children are in the forefront, there is also a high level of care and commitment to support parents and carers in their wellbeing and education. This provides an ideal foundation for an Our Place site.

“We will come up with something that is unique for Seymour and that’s really exciting. We are actually looking at what the community needs and building something relevant for the families of Seymour.”

(Maternal and Child Health and Immunisation Coordinator, Mitchell Shire Council)

SEYMOUR TIMELINE

From concept to completion



“

The internet access and computers are great for women who can come into a safe environment, have somebody help step them through what they are looking for.”

Founder, Gaudry Foundation



BUILDING FROM **the ground up**

Seymour College's transformation into an Our Place site began in 2018 when the new Family and Children's Centre was being built on school grounds over the period of that year.

By December 2019 the construction of the new Centre was completed and in January 2020 the building was open and operational. In 2022 the design was enhanced with the completion of an exterior construction connecting the Family and Children's Centre to the school building with an undercover linkway and outdoor meeting space.

THE DESIGN

Our Place has a keen desire to be involved in the design and build phase of all its sites, contributing to ideas and discussions to ensure evidence-based elements are incorporated that will support the aims of the Our Place approach. In particular, the inclusion of a single entrance with a welcoming reception is an essential part of the design. Despite the advocacy for a shared entrance from Our Place, and original plans for the centre to be joined to the school, this was not feasible due to the existing infrastructure and site topography. However, a compromise position was reached.

SECTION 3



“

Everyone is committed to the same thing – education is the key to the door – there is a great sense of purpose going forward.”

Partnership Manager, Our Place

As an alternative, Our Place advocated for a sheltered linkway to be constructed to create a physical connection between the Family and Children’s Centre and the school and create a space for families to connect. The entry upgrade extends the roofline between the Family and Children’s Centre and the school. This provides a stronger sense of arrival and a new welcoming space for community engagement activities with seating and landscaping. While not producing the same benefits of a shared single entrance, Our Place played an important role in ensuring that this structure remained part of the building plan to physically reflect the relational connection between the two buildings. The intention for the design of the Family and Children’s

Centre was to develop a multi-functional hub that was inclusive, child and family focused and that supported the development of a strong sense of place and community into the future. This was informed by extensive consultation and engagement undertaken by Mitchell Shire Council with the Seymour College community, community service organisations and Shire Councillors. Consequently, the Centre includes two kindergarten rooms and four consulting rooms, with two dedicated to MCH, a multipurpose room, a meeting room, communal coffee area, and public space for computers allowing internet access.

THE BUILD

Construction of the Seymour Family and Children's Centre building commenced in 2018 and was completed by the end of 2019, becoming operational in January 2020.

Before the establishment of the Our Place Site Partnership Group in 2019, a state government led Project Control Group (PCG) was set up in 2018 to oversee the building phase of the site, which included representatives from Council, the Department of Education and Training (DET), the Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA), Our Place, Seymour College, Kids First Australia and architects.

Working well together to problem solve issues arising, many discussions were had about barriers and blockers. The VSBA project managed the build of the Family and Children's Centre throughout 2018 and 2019, alongside other upgrades and modernisation works being undertaken on the College site at the time.

As with many building and design projects of this magnitude, there were some technical challenges that required negotiation and advocacy during construction. During the process Kids First Australia worked closely with DET and the PCG to ensure that early learning standards were met. There were aspects of the playground build that needed adjusting to enhance accessibility for all children. This was based on the Kindergarten Director's expertise and previous experience supporting families with complex needs. Improvements were negotiated with the builders and issues were resolved through meetings with DET and the building architects, accessibility expertise provided by Mitchell Shire Council, and advocacy from the SPG.

The linkway construction, in lieu of a single, shared entrance, was constructed and completed in the first half of 2022.





“

There is an opportunity for more listening and empathy around social needs and understanding about intergenerational trauma and poverty. Our Place provides a way to do that – people listening to each other and creating objectives and common goals we can work on together.”

Community Facilitator, Our Place

A young girl with blonde hair, wearing a pink princess crown and a matching pink dress with puffed sleeves and a large skirt, is sitting on a colorful rug and reading a book. She is looking down at the pages of the book. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with a window and some furniture.

OPENING THE DOORS for operation

Seymour Our Place officially commenced when the new Family and Children’s Centre opened on the Seymour College campus in January 2020.

The Centre is adjacent to the College’s Inclusive Education Building and contains an early learning service provided by Kids First Australia, as well as MCH and family services provided by Mitchell Shire Council.

THE SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

While the Family and Children’s Centre was under construction, Seymour College had its own significant redevelopment underway, with multiple changes occurring on site. The school had already grown significantly to accommodate the merger of two primary schools, a high school, the Seymour Developmental Special School and Trade Training Centre.

With the completion of the Child and Family Centre and the arrival of the Our Place partnership came the challenge of developing new ways of working to support the needs of families and young children. The introduction of a much younger cohort of children and their parents and carers from birth up to primary school age has further increased the significant role the College has as a central point for the whole community.

Early collaboration between the school and kindergarten focused on trauma-informed practice principles, and shared professional development has occurred via the Berry Street Education Model.

“

We have absolutely loved it, it has been a joy. We love working with this community – people wear their heart on their sleeve, and you know exactly where you stand. If they are not happy about something they will come and tell you, and that’s good because you can move forward and know how to support them. We all have a common goal and realise it’s a privilege that the community has accepted us so well, I’m very grateful for that.”

General Manager Early Years, Kids First Australia

EARLY LEARNING CENTRE ESTABLISHMENT

An important first step with the newly built Family and Children’s Centre was the establishment of relationships with families. Mitchell Shire Council’s MCH nurses and kindergarten teachers have had a relationship with Seymour College for many years, and with the move from previously separate sites, there has been as strong focus on engaging families within the new location.

For the Kids First Australia team, the importance of developing relationships with the families and children was paramount, and the experience of getting to know the Seymour community has been both pleasing and positive for them.

The move from a standalone early childhood service to an integrated setting has allowed enhanced ways of working together. Practitioners have easy access to each other to share knowledge and seek advice on aspects of child development from colleagues with different specialities, and where consent is provided, have been able to work together to support families.

Practitioners at the Centre have been able to seek support from the Our Place Community Facilitators who have been able to reach out to families who may otherwise feel less confident to seek support. This support has included letting families know about choices they might not have previously had, such as encouragement to access adult education, and other social services. The community facilitators have



also placed stronger emphasis on liaison between the early learning and schoolteachers to help overcome the barrier resulting from the two buildings remaining separate.

“We have given our early years staff a really strong understanding of the impact of some of the social issues that people experience, that has really changed the way they are responding to families.”

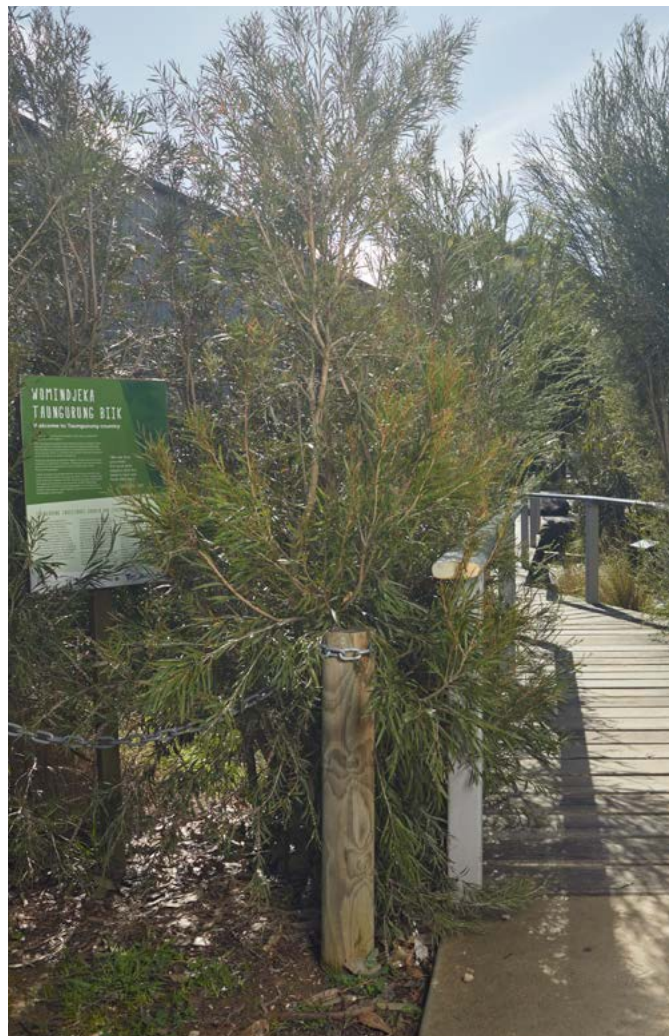
(General Manager Early Years, Kids First Australia)

COMMUNITY SERVICES

The consulting rooms and multi-use spaces in the Family and Children’s Centre provide essential infrastructure to offer health and social services and spaces for social connection. Two consultation suites are used for MCH services, and it is anticipated over time that a General Practitioner and a range of allied health and mental health professionals will also offer services on site.

“The lovely thing is they can come to the maternal and child nurse, the playgroup, then on to kinder. Once you’ve got them, hopefully you can hold onto them until they finish school!” (Founder, Gaudry Foundation)

By 2022 the spaces created by the new building and ways of working have enabled the provision of universal and supported playgroups, spaces for immunisations, new parents’ group, young parents’ group, after school activities, an NDIS Support Coordinator, and an antenatal clinic.



“

We all want the Centre to be a functioning happy and safe place for families to access what they need. All the partners are starting to achieve good things, the best is yet to come and I’m looking forward to it.”

Maternal and Child Health and Immunisation Coordinator, Mitchell Shire Council



THE PARTNERSHIP ROLE IN ACTIVATION

The Our Place team started conversations with partners about a vision for collaboration across the site as soon as the SPG was formed in 2019. As the new Centre opened, incidental referrals started to occur, and the Our Place team played a key role in facilitating relationships and referral practices between the partners.

The Our Place team commenced building relationships with families alongside the construction phase in 2019, and this has been an ongoing priority in the last two years. The Our Place team informally introduced themselves to families, conducted welcoming activities and attended events at the school and Family and Children's Centre where there were opportunities to meet families. The team recognised that gaining trust and confidence from community is something that takes time. Some connections have formed quickly, and for others the team is guided by the pace set by families, taking time to slowly get to know people.

"It's going to be a continually evolving process, and the benefit of this good chunk of time – 10 years – is that we can be responsive to what the needs are. We can see what's working and we can adapt as we go along."

(Community Facilitator, Our Place)

As well as building relationships with families onsite, there has been a lot of work undertaken to establish and maintain trust in the relationships between families and service providers within Seymour. Over time the Our Place team has taken part in broader community activities to build trust, including running a stall at the annual Seymour National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) event in 2021.

The Our Place team has also lent support to Seymour networks, including assisting the Seymour Voices Working Group in the establishment of a Seymour Youth Room. During the COVID-19 lockdown Our Place supported the



school and Kids First Australia by connecting with families, including delivery of food boxes, and games and activities for younger children.

By the end of 2021 agreed priorities for action had been identified based on a shared understanding of the community, and evidence of need based on consultations and a range of data sources, and are outlined in a three-year strategic plan, together with an implementation plan to activate and action change. Our Place, together with partners, will collect data to support measurement of the contribution that the work has on outcomes for children, families and community. A public document, 'Connecting the Seymour Community', outlines the plan and has been circulated widely.

“

We need to engage the community with welcoming activities in the first place – we want them to trust us together in our Partnership work. So, the first objective would be engagement and welcoming.”

General Manger Early Years, Kids First



LEARNINGS

two years on

Throughout its first two years of operation, Our Place Seymour site partners have demonstrated adaptability and resilience and have supported families through periods of pandemic restrictions in 2020 and 2021.

Overcoming these challenges has been possible due to developing strong relationships, establishing new ways of working together, and identifying and responding to service provision gaps in Seymour.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE PARAMOUNT

The shared emphasis on building relationships and trust with the community has been a strength of this partnership. Relationships with other service providers has also been important. Building on the strength of existing relationships has been a key focus for both Seymour College and Mitchell Shire Council.

Kids First Australia were committed from the outset to focus on relationships onsite, and to work with the service providers in the area to develop programs for children and families; this too has been a shared focal point for the Our Place team. The partners learned that time is a critical element of site collaboration and recognised this needed attention. Similarly, the Seymour Our Place team identified the importance of regular interaction and discourse between Our Place staff and the school leadership team, and as a result have scheduled regular meetings to ensure these continue to take place.

"We are in an exciting phase where we can build good relationships and build something fantastic for Seymour families." (Maternal and Child Health and Immunisation Coordinator, Mitchell Shire Council)

NEW WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER

Finding new ways to collaborate to support families, while maintaining their privacy and in a way that best suits their needs, shapes the work of practitioners onsite. This support includes warm referrals, the practice of referring families to services in person by speaking directly to the practitioner on behalf of a family. An unexpected outcome of the interruptions throughout the pandemic was and continues to be a strong sense of optimism in finding new ways of working to support Seymour families.

The co-location of the Our Place team with early years practitioners in the Family and Children's Centre has been seamless, supporting engagement with parents and carers and a shared practitioner understanding of the needs of families. The physical separation of the Centre from the school has meant that proximity to school staff has been somewhat reduced, and the day-to-day informal interactions are not as frequent as that in the Family and Children's Centre.

The increased structured ways of working, such the Site Strategic Planning process, aims of the advisory groups, or continuity of learning initiatives, have all been positive ways to address the separation. There is a shared willingness to work together, and the relationships have grown as the partnership has generated its own story of working collaboratively.

“

We want to be able to provide services to a level that families feel they have somewhere to go, that they are supported, that there are no dead ends and no closed doors. To be able to engender that confidence in the community would be a great thing”

Partnership Manager, Our Place

AVAILABILITY OF LOCAL SERVICES

Attraction of services to Seymour, and their timely and consistent availability for children, parents and carers, has been a challenge for many years and remains a significant issue for the Seymour Our Place partners and community. There are a limited amount of service providers located locally; most are based in either Shepparton (some 80 kilometres away) or outer Melbourne and their presence is often only part-time with limited appointment times, resulting in long waiting lists. Extended wait times for mental health services is of particular concern for this community.

Along with limited services, there is a perception that the community lacks a strong understanding of the services and supports that are available, and that the service system is difficult for many to navigate. This concerning perception is something that the Seymour partners have prioritised and are working to overcome.

“There is a shared frustration about the lack of services in Seymour that we can refer our families to. It can often lead to a dead end. Having the Site Partnership Group assists in getting our message to those making policy or responsible for funding.”
(Principal, Seymour College)

The challenge ahead is to work with service delivery models from larger surrounding areas to help design mechanisms to address the gaps. There has been for some time, and will continue to be, concerted effort by service providers in Seymour, larger providers nearby, and local and state government to address this. Mitchell Shire Council have developed plans and are advocating for funding to establish new health and wellbeing infrastructure within Seymour. It is anticipated this will significantly improve access to services in Seymour, and through the partnership relationships there will be opportunities for collaboration to support access and referrals across the two sites.

RESPONDING TO COVID-19

While Seymour is a regional site, it was notably included in the Greater Melbourne lockdowns as the only regional area, as well as being part of state-wide ‘lockdowns’ in 2020 and 2021. This meant that the already limited services were reduced, creating further unmet need for health and wellbeing support, alongside the hardship of increased social isolation.

Lockdowns also impacted the delivery of the Our Place implementation process which seeks to build an understanding of the community through significant engagement with families, alongside detailed consultation with service providers.



The Our Place team were not able to have the planned face-to-face interactions with community during the lockdown period. However, alternative approaches to consultations allowed community insights to inform the strategic planning process. This included the use of an online survey that was distributed widely through partner networks and existing online communication tools.

Community insights were also captured from informal conversations with families prior to lockdown, and school surveys on the impact of COVID-19. The services consultations were successfully conducted online, enabling the Our Place team to gather data about the service system, and maintain and strengthen contact with local agencies.

The online environment allowed the site working groups to remain active and contribute to an understanding of local need, the Our Place approach, and an examination of some of the local system challenges that could be addressed through collaboration on site.

Additionally, the school implemented effective communication strategies developed by DET – particularly amongst primary school families – enabling them to get to know families through the regular check-ins during lockdown periods.

While it can be challenging to commence engagement in an online setting, once a level of trust is established, or even the beginnings of an understanding developed, online interactions were able to become useful and meaningful.

While further pandemic lockdowns and restrictions in 2021 meant continued interruptions to in-person service delivery, it has been inspiring to see how the partners have adapted to these challenging circumstances, with the focus on relationships remaining paramount, and a commitment to strengthening and growing these regardless of the circumstances. Kids First Australia were able to run kindergarten programs during the lockdown periods and could build relationships with families throughout the pandemic; this also allowed some limited interaction with Our Place Community Facilitators.

The experience of starting a new partnership during a lengthy and disruptive pandemic environment has demonstrated the extent of the commitment, adaptability, and resilience of partners at Seymour Our Place.



NEXT STEPS IN

continuing the journey

Implementing the strategic plan and addressing priorities

The Seymour partnership focus for 2022 is to work together to deliver the strategic plan as it moves from the establishment phase to implementation. The plan, 'Connecting the Seymour Community', attends to four site priorities:

1. Children are engaged and supported in their learning: ensure there is a consistent approach to children's learning as they move from early learning to school, partner with early learning services so that children regularly attend positive and stimulating early learning before they start school, and partner with local clubs and organisations to deliver before and after-school activities that primary school children are interested in.
2. Supporting Families: make it easier for families and children to connect with services, and work with partners to provide services at the Seymour Family and Children's Centre, particularly for new parents and carers.
3. Families are connected and involved in their children's learning: facilitate the delivery of activities at Seymour College where parents or carers can continue to connect with their children's learning.
4. Improving adult learning and employment opportunities: support parents and carers to take up adult learning opportunities, and facilitate opportunities for parents and carers to connect with community.

A comprehensive implementation plan to deliver on these priorities has been developed. It includes a wide range of actions, such as support for parents to provide their children with a positive home learning environment, onsite community activities, and coordination amongst practitioners to enable warm referrals and effective access to onsite and other local services.

"I think we are learning how to really engage with the community and children."

(Department of Education and Training representative)

STRENGTHENING THE PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES

The working groups will have an important role in site governance, and their composition and emphasis will be refined as implementation takes place.

The new Families and Community Group will include parents and carers of children attending the site to provide advice to the SPG, including school and early learning representatives, about a range of matters from a parent and carer perspective. Community views and needs are central to the work of the partnership, and success will come from the relationships with families built over time, with a deep understanding of what is important, and the ability to respond with actions.

INTRODUCING MORE SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES ONSITE

There will be continued effort to support the delivery of services onsite, while building the delivery of core health and allied health services. The Our Place team will work with partners to bolster capabilities in culturally sensitive practices, respond to the emerging recognition of the extent of need for disability support, and to build more in-depth capability across the site to provide support to families with multiple complex needs.



A FOCUS ON CONTINUITY OF LEARNING

Our Place recognises that continuity of learning across early learning and primary school is especially important for vulnerable children who can benefit from consistency and cooperation between those that support them in their learning. This is reflected in the strategic plan and has also been a focal point since the site became operational.

Efforts have been made to lay the foundations for a continuity of learning approach by the Our Place team, Kids First Australia and Seymour College through shared professional learning at the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership and the implementation of a shared approach to trauma-informed practices across the school and ELC.

“

I am excited about the introduction of a common language between the preschool and the school.”

Principal, Seymour College

BABY COLLEGE

In recognition of parents, particularly young mothers, in Seymour requiring support from the antenatal period and throughout the first year of their child's life, plans to implement Our Place's 'Baby College' program onsite have been explored. Baby College is a program developed by Our Place that provides intensive support to families from pregnancy until the age of one. There is a keen interest in supporting the provision of Baby College in Seymour during 2022 in response to community need.

"My hope is that every child has the opportunity to learn, because every child can learn. I also wish that they all flourish, that their families flourish, and that education is lifelong."

(Principal, Seymour College)

CONCLUSION





JOURNEY REPORT

conclusion

This report describes the journey of Our Place Seymour from its original conception into the first years of operation, as well as the intentions for 2022 and beyond. This journey is still in its early days, and it will take considerable time to make progress that is visible and allow contribution towards the Our Place outcomes.

"I would love for people to feel they can participate in the community that we are setting up – that would be a sign that we have done a good job."

(General Manager Early Years, Kids First Australia)

There is a sense of optimism for the Seymour community and momentum to respond to emerging community needs, as well as aspiration for a unified community vision for all people in Seymour to thrive. There is unwavering commitment from the site partners, government agencies and regional institutions to work towards the vision of children in the Seymour community thriving in resilient, strong families with the best learning and developmental opportunities to succeed in life.

"We want to lift the vision, for people to believe that anything is possible, and know that they can get there if they want to."

(Partnership Manager, Our Place)



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Our Place's vision is that all children and their families succeed in life.

ourplace
Seymour

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