

Kindergarten community panel information pack





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Welcome from the Mayor

On behalf of Knox City Council, welcome and thank you for taking part in our kindergarten community panel.

This panel collectively represents the community of Knox; our residents and ratepayers, our local families and service users. Together you will consider the issues at hand and present Council with a statement that reflects what you feel we need to know to make a decision about the future of kindergarten in our city.

Council, and the community as a whole, are deeply grateful to you for undertaking this responsibility. It is vital to us that our community has a voice in our decision making and this panel will ensure we hear from a wide variety of people from around Knox.

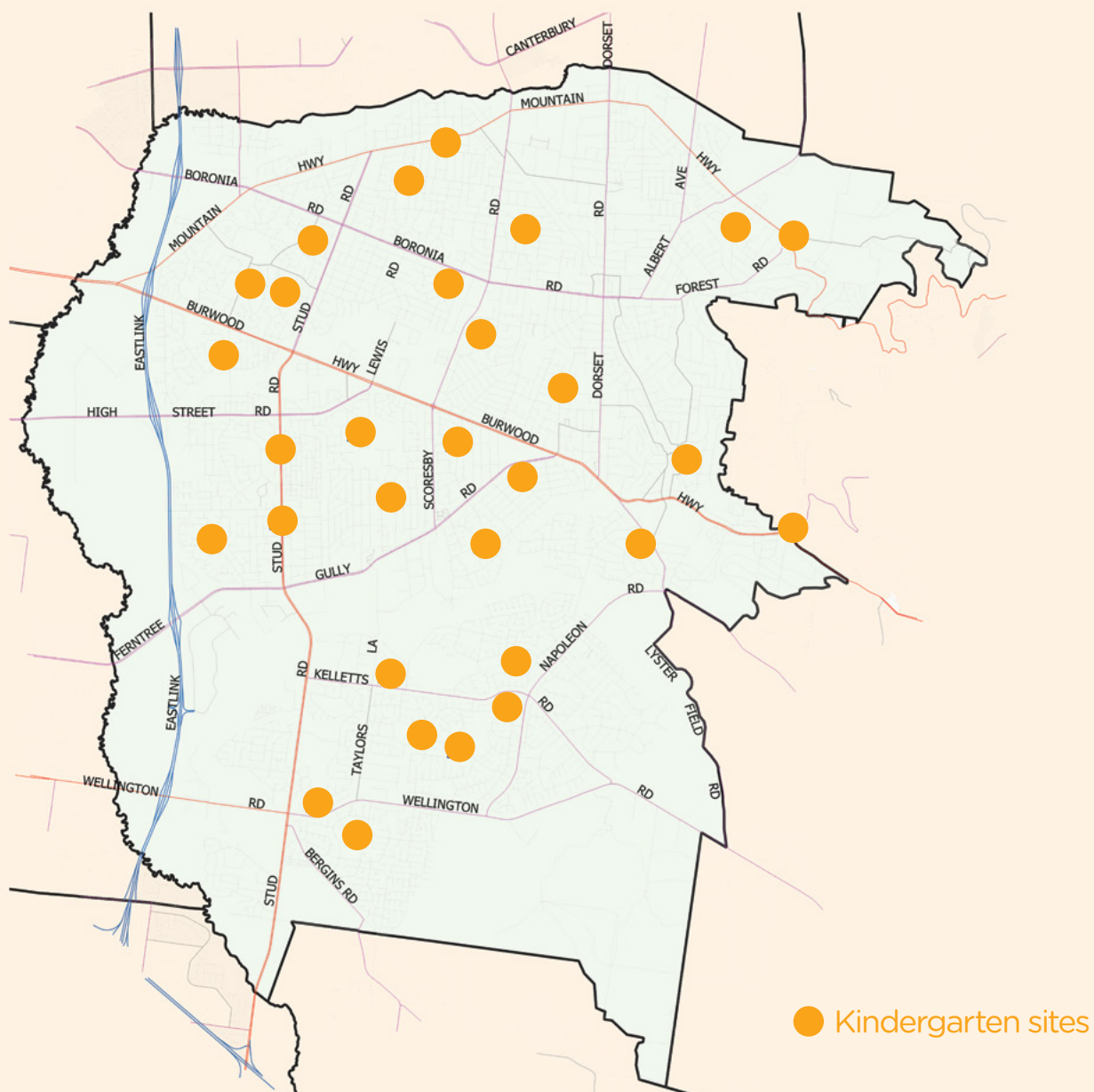
Kindergarten in Knox and around Victoria is changing. The challenges and opportunities this poses are many and varied and we must carefully consider the role Council should play moving forward in providing value for the people of Knox and supporting children and families to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

Over these four sessions, you will be presented with a range of information and perspectives about how kindergarten may look in the future.

Thank you once again for your commitment to this process and your willingness to contribute to the city of Knox. I wish you all the best for your discussions and look forward to receiving the panel's statement.

Cr Marcia Timmers-Leitch
Mayor, Knox City Council

Introduction to kindergarten in Knox



Traditionally Councils were the main providers of kindergarten in Victoria. This has been changing for the past few decades and now families and children access kindergarten in a range of independent, not for profit, sessional and private integrated kindergarten and long day care services.

There are different types of kindergarten services operating in Knox, these are:

- **Sessional kindergarten** – these services offer sessional kindergarten programs at either five or 7.5 hours per day, predominantly funded by the state government. They are provided by both Council and independent community organisations.
- **Integrated long day care** – these services provide funded kindergarten places in a long day care setting sometimes called childcare. They typically operate for around 10 hours per day. They are funded by the state and federal governments and are provided by private, not-for-profit and government providers.



Unlike many local government areas, Knox Council has continued to be the majority provider of kindergarten places and services in Knox. In fact, Council has historically run up to 30 kindergarten services, whereas the next council with the most services in the eastern metropolitan region only runs three.

In 2021, there were 76 funded services operating kindergarten programs in Knox, 30 of which were Council's services. This includes the two early years hubs which operate both sessional kindergarten rooms and integrated kindergarten in long day care. The remaining 46 funded services are provided by 35 different funded service providers.

In addition to operating kindergarten services, Council plays several other roles in supporting children and families:

- **Municipal early years planner** – leading strategic planning activities that seek to support families to access to high-quality services for children from birth to school age
- **Early Years Manager** – this refers to any organisation that operates more than three kindergarten services. It involves:
 - managing central registration and enrolment for Council kindergartens
 - providing professional leadership and community networks
- **Community infrastructure manager** – Council maintains and manages a large suite of facilities on behalf of the community to support families and children (some occupied by Council and others by independent service providers). Council also provides infrastructure like family friendly parks, recreation and open spaces.
- **Provider of other early years services** – Council delivers a diverse range of services and facilities for families and children, including Maternal and Child Health, playgroups and libraries.

Regardless of whether Council delivers kindergarten services, our roles as a municipal planner, infrastructure manager and provider of MCH, playgroups and other local services and facilities will continue.

Providing services for our whole community

Knox is home to around

166,000

people

predicted to be almost

179,000

by 2031.

1/2

of households are families with one or more children, but our population is ageing.

30%

of residents were born overseas and **25%** speak a language other than English at home.

There are more than

14,000

businesses that call Knox home and we're a community that relies on cars to commute.

5%

of people require assistance in their day-to-day lives due to disability.

Rates pay for the services and facilities our community values and relies on. The state government 'rates cap' limits the income Council can earn. Like everyone else, Council must also deal with the rising costs of construction materials, fuel prices, utilities and wages.

Our teams deliver many services and facilities the community told us they want, but we can't do everything. This leaves us with some increasingly difficult choices about what we need for the future and what we can afford right now.

Council directly provides and supports a range of services for different segments of our community, including:

- Active ageing and disability services
- Repairing footpaths, roads and buildings
- Building new community facilities
- Saving energy and the environment
- Festivals, arts and culture
- Sport, leisure and libraries
- Parks and gardens
- Community safety and wellbeing
- Kindergarten, playgroups, childcare, maternal and child health nurses and school crossing guards
- Youth services
- Collecting rubbish, recycling and hard waste
- Keeping the community informed

Demand for kindergarten services



Over the last few years and since the introduction of funded three-year-old kindergarten, we've seen a change in how families choose to access kindergarten.

In 2016, **61%** of the four-year old population in Knox were enrolled in a Council sessional program.

This has declined year-on-year since then. In 2021 Council's sessional kindergartens attracted **53%** of the four-year-old population.

In the first year of offering three- and four-year-old kindergarten in 2022, Council's programs attracted fewer than expected enrolments.

The four-year-old program attracted approximately **50%** of the four-year-old population. Council's three-year-old program, which ran for five hours per week, attracted approximately **20%** of the three-year-old population.

There is a growing trend of local families choosing a long day care setting rather than a sessional kindergarten service, as these typically offer more hours each week.

The pandemic led to a further reduction in service use as families faced financial stresses, changing work patterns, increased illness in the community and vaccination mandates.

When registrations and enrolments are low, Council receives less funding from the Victorian Government and further additional costs must be funded through the Council budget. The costs of this are borne by the whole community as funds are diverted from other services and programs.

In 2023, Council is delivering the same number of kindergarten places across fewer locations to be more sustainable as it responds to reduced and declining demand.

Viable and sustainable kindergarten services offer bigger, fuller groups than Council has historically offered. Remaining the majority provider of kindergarten would leave Council exposed to further fluctuations in demand, utilisation and policy and funding changes. At the same time, Council providing the majority of services may be deterring other providers from establishing or expanding their services here, which reduces choice for local families.

Why are we undertaking a review?

Kindergarten is changing. State and federal governments over the last decade have introduced several reforms of the early childhood sector. This has meant Council has needed to continually review and assess the services they provide to ensure they are being delivered in the most effective and sustainable way possible.

While being a direct service provider supports Council to ensure families have access to quality early childhood programs, it poses financial and operational risks to local Councils, not least because the utilisation, funding, regulatory and policy environment is ever changing and outside Council's control.

In 2020, the Victorian Government announced the introduction of two years of funded kindergarten, the largest ever reform of the early childhood sector. This effectively doubled the number of children eligible to access funded kindergarten. While previously three-year-old kindergarten places were provided by a few independent providers in Knox, Council's kindergarten program had never offered three-year-old sessions.

Since then, Council has been working to consider the impacts of this change in three key phases:

- 1.** An assessment of whether we could expand our existing kindergarten service to provide five hours for three-year-old children. Council undertook an assessment in 2021 and agreed to deliver five hours of three-year-old kindergarten alongside the existing four-year-old program from 2022.
- 2.** An assessment of the infrastructure impacts if kindergarten services are expanded to accommodate the additional three-year-old program. Council determined in November 2021 that while it has invested around \$20 million in new kindergarten infrastructure since 2014, any further expansion would need significantly increased state government contribution.
- 3.** A review of the future of Council kindergartens. A comprehensive review of the costs, opportunities and risks associated with Council's kindergarten service and consultation with the community, of which this panel process is a key part.

The work undertaken to date has confirmed some key facts that must be taken into consideration when planning for kindergarten in the future:

- Council has forged a strong relationship with local families that starts at birth, providing advice, care, education and advocacy to support children to thrive and grow. Families value the services Council offers and there is a desire for Council to continue running kindergartens (see page 14 for more on what our community has told us).
- We are no longer in a position to provide kindergarten services on the scale we have historically. Due to declining registrations and enrolments, in order to make it sustainable financially and in terms of ongoing operations Council would need to limit the number of kindergarten services it provides.
- Longer kindergarten hours means more classrooms will be needed. The buildings and classrooms available in Knox are on average 50 to 70 years old and despite our significant investment in them (\$26 million) since 2014, they are not fit for purpose for the future vision of kindergarten in Victoria. These buildings would need significant work to refurbish, renovate or rebuild and state government funding will only provide a small portion of the money needed. This investment will mean redirecting funds from other council projects and services.
- Council's current service agreement with the Department of Education and Training (DET) expires in December 2024. Council needs to make a decision about whether it intends to continue being a kindergarten service provider or not and provide DET with as much notice as possible.
- Any changes to Council's role would be effective from December 2024. However, we will work with DET to manage the impacts over an appropriate timeframe, for example transitioning our services to other providers.
- Council being the majority provider means Knox has fewer private and independent service providers compared to other municipalities. Council offering fewer services could create more opportunities for other providers.

The options we are asking the community panel to consider

Three options have been developed for Council to consider for the future of our kindergarten services.

Option 1: Remain a sessional kindergarten provider and create a more sustainable service

What does this look like?

- Council would continue to directly operate kindergartens and employ educators and support staff.
- Responding to reduced demand and community preferences, our services would be consolidated to a maximum of 20 sites from 2024, but the program will be expanded to include 15 hours for all 3 and 4-year-old children.
- Families will continue to have a choice between Council and externally-operated kindergartens.
- By signaling that Council does not intend to continue being the majority provider, independent providers may be able to establish or expand their existing programs.
- By 2026, Council will conduct a further review to determine how best to address the Victorian Government's requirement for 30 hours of kindergarten a week for four-year-olds.



Option 2: Remain a sessional kindergarten provider in the two early years hubs only

What does this look like?

- Council would no longer operate kindergarten in stand-alone facilities which would impact staff employment.
- Council would continue operating the sessional kindergarten in the two early years hubs (at Wantirna South and Bayswater)
- Council would work with DET to transition these services to new provider/s from January 2025.
- Council would continue to lease/license buildings and facilities to external service providers.
- This may provide opportunities for existing independent community providers/Early Years Managers to expand their services.
- Council would explore other roles it can play in supporting families.
- Some co-located services such as Maternal and Child Health may be moved to different sites.
- Council would continue to assess planning applications from developers/providers who can provide longer-hour programs and contemporary facilities.

Option 3: Cease providing sessional kindergarten in all locations

What does this look like?

- Council would no longer operate any sessional kindergarten programs which would impact staff employment.
- Council would work with DET to transition these services to new provider/s from January 2025.
- This would not impact funded kindergarten places in integrated long day care in the two early years hubs.
- Council would continue to lease/license buildings and facilities to external service providers.
- This may provide opportunities for existing independent community providers/Early Years Managers to expand their programs.
- Council would explore other roles it can play in supporting families.
- Some co-located services such as Maternal and Child Health may be moved to different sites.
- Council would continue to assess planning applications from developers / providers who can provide longer-hour programs and contemporary facilities.

What the community has told us to date

In November and December 2022, we reached out to our community to find out what they value about kindergarten and provide information on where to stay up to date with any changes.

We distributed 3000 postcards, called out for input via social media and held 11 pop-in sessions at libraries and immunisation sessions to answer questions and discuss the service review, asking the community to tell us what they value about kindergarten in Knox.

This included receiving more than 550 responses from children in our kindergartens.

The children told us they value the range of experiences offered at kindergarten – including the play equipment, seeing their friends, arts and crafts, toys and playing outdoors in nature.

Their parents and other adults in the community value the quality of teachers and educators and the relationships formed in Council's services, the quality of education programs and the local community feel in our services.

What do you value about Kindergarten in Knox?

We are considering our role as an Early Years Manager and kindergarten service provider through a formal service review.
Please write your answer and share what is important to you. Post back to us on this reply paid postcard. No stamp needed.

Need more space? Scan here and answer online.
haveyoursay.knox.vic.gov.au

Find out more
haveyoursay.knox.vic.gov.au
or call 9298 8000



 Kindergarten Service Review **knox** 

What is your favourite thing about Kindergarten?
Draw a picture, write words or ask someone else to write down what you say

Teachers!



 Kindergarten Service Review **knox** 

The community panel overview



We have brought together a diverse mix of community members to help answer this question:

How can we manage the changes needed to our kindergarten services to provide the best value to the whole community?

Over four sessions you will have the chance to further explore the background information, seek additional information and as group deliberate over the options.

Your role as a panel member

Your role as a panel member is to:

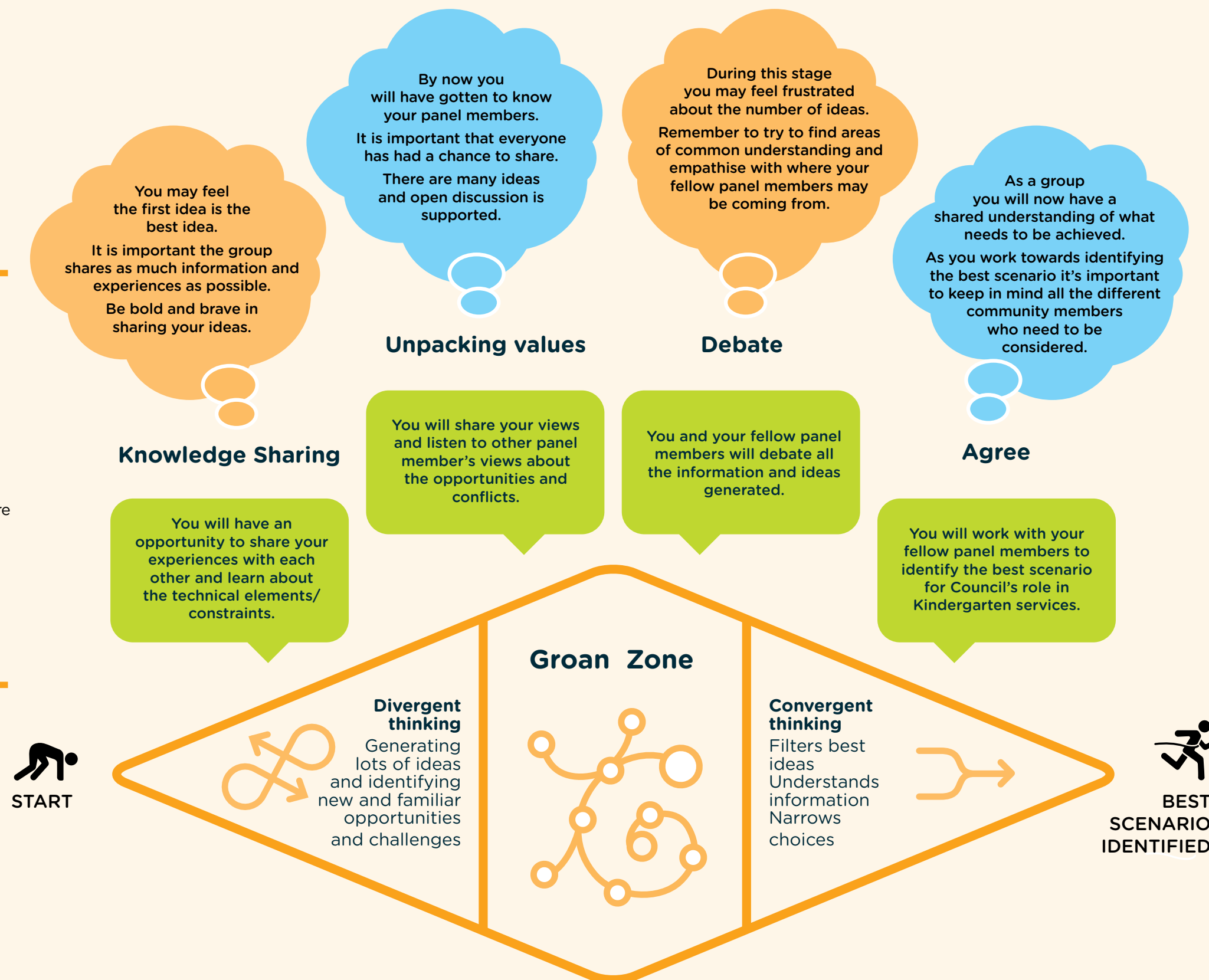
- seek to expand your understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Council and kindergarten provision in Knox
- critically consider the three options presented
- provide your personal view of how these options might impact you and members of your community
- listen to, and consider, the views of other panel members
- identify opportunities for council to add value in the future and in particular, provide your recommendations and advice on the preferred model.

It is also expected that panel members will disclose any conflicts of interest as they arise.

What you can expect during the process

During the process, you will connect with people of different ages, genders, cultural backgrounds, and who have varied connections to kindergarten services.

You may meet people who share similar views to you and others who have different opinions. This is important as it ensures the group discussions capture the community's mix of views and experiences.



The panel process is exciting and challenging. There will be times during this process where you may feel like we will not be able to come to a group consensus. This can be frustrating, yet it is an important part of working through options and considering everyone's input.

The figure on the left depicts the panel process through a series of stages and highlights the kinds of thoughts or feelings you may experience at each stage.



Overview of sessions

The panel will come together over four in person sessions in March and April 2023. You will be asked to attend all four sessions totalling 13 hours and engage in any pre or post reading activities.

The figure below provides an overview of each of the four sessions.

Between each session you will be provided with a summary of the discussion from the previous session so that you can be prepared for what is going to be discussed moving forward.

All sessions will be held in person.

More details will be provided about this in the lead up to the sessions.

It's important that participants are available and committed to attending all four sessions, but we understand last minute life events happen. If you are unable to attend a session, please contact us (see details on back page)



