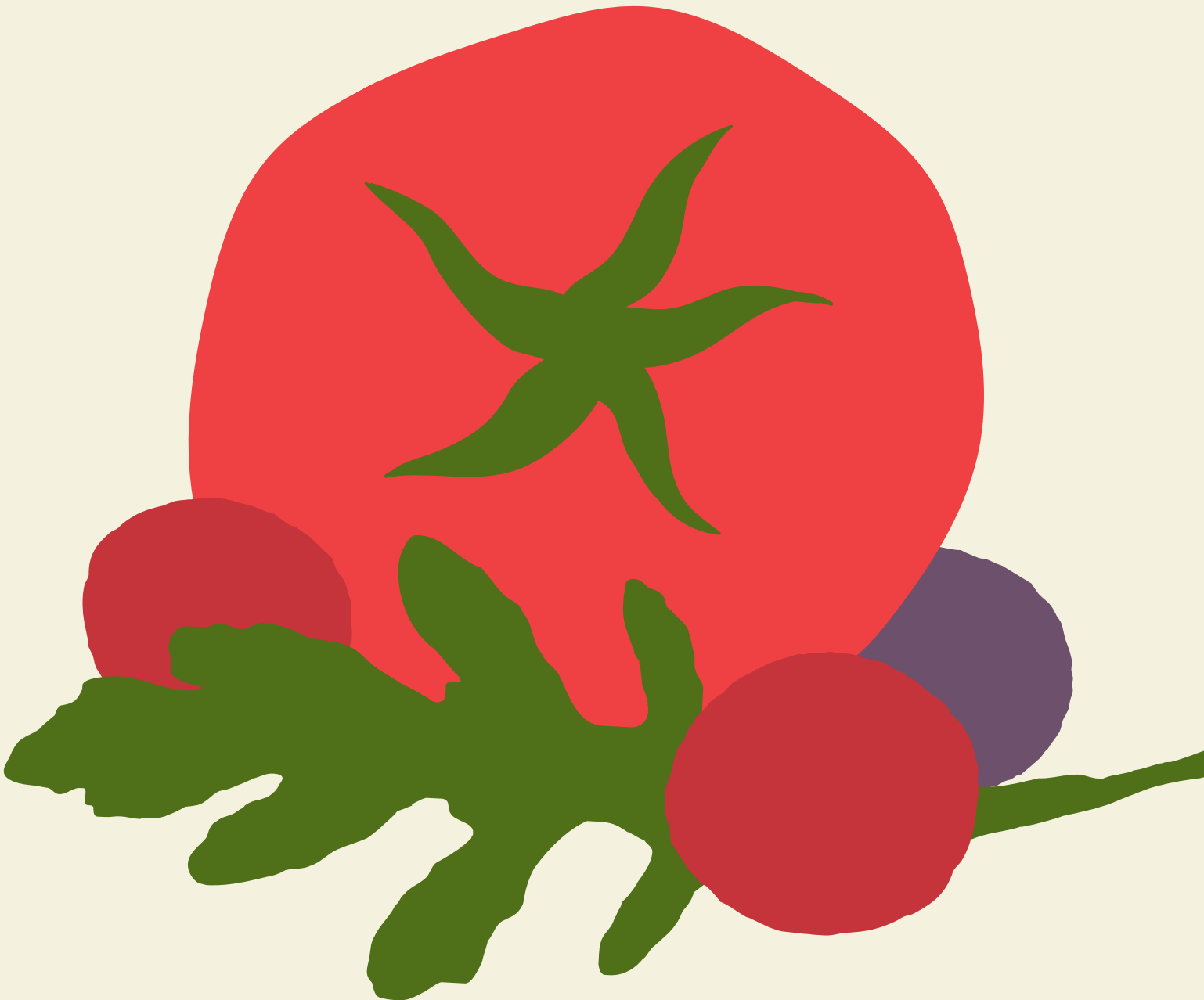




# Healthy Kids Advisors

Impact Report 2021–2024



## Acknowledgement and commitment

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we work, live and play. We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Elders past, present and future.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia have cared for the Country for millennia, and Australian children and young people have so much to learn from their ways of knowing, being, and doing regarding growing, harvesting, preparing, and sharing. We commit to a continued cultural learning journey and partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations where this supports self-determined outcomes.

## Purpose of report

This report provides an overview of the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative, which was supported by the Victorian and Australian Governments and implemented by the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation from July 2021 to June 2024.

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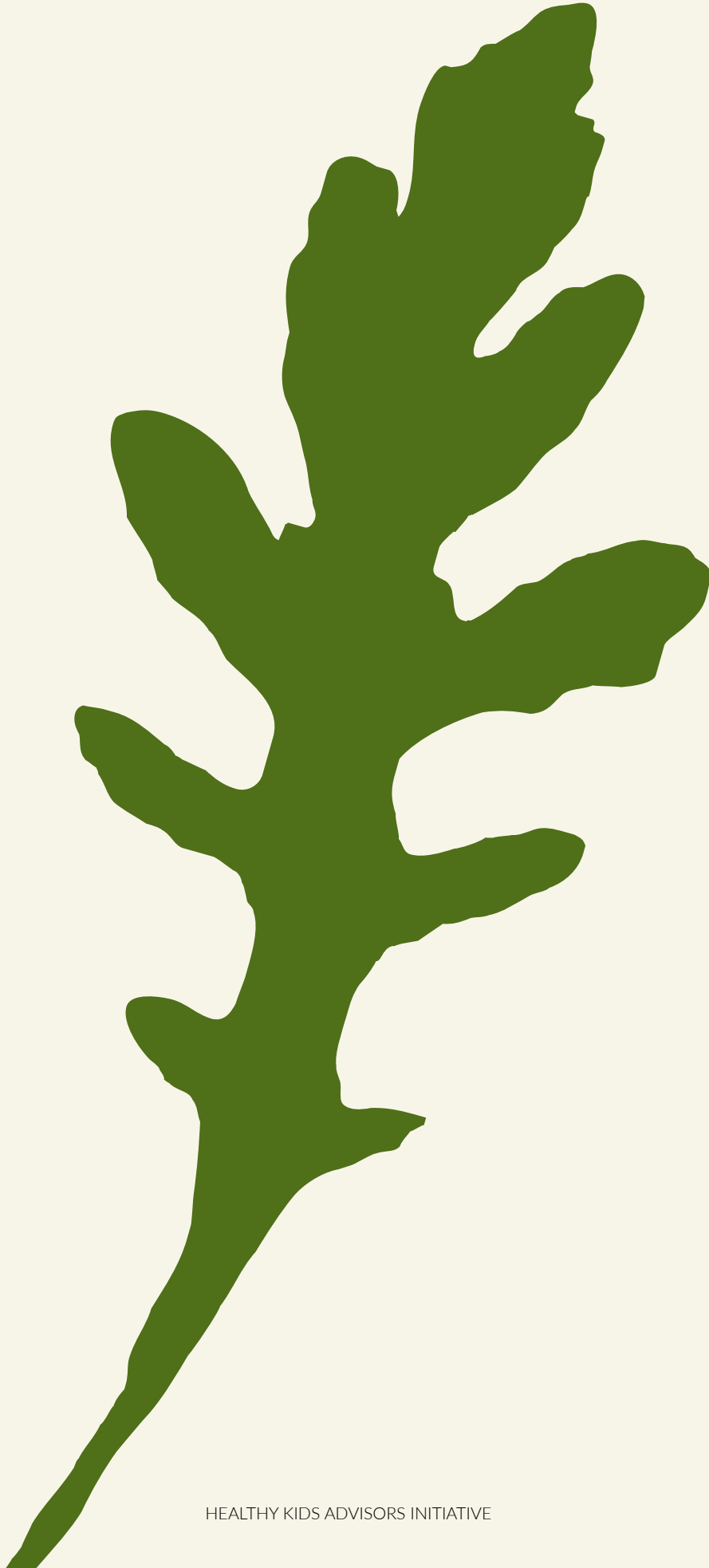
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# 01 Background





## About the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation founded by Stephanie Alexander AO at Collingwood College in 2004.

The Foundation inspires and equips educators to run the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program in a way that fits their individual school or service needs. The program is recognised worldwide as a proven, impactful, curriculum-linked framework that delivers learning, wellbeing and sustainability benefits for children and young people and the families and communities that surround them.

Over 1,000 early childhood services, primary schools and secondary schools across Australia run the Kitchen Garden Program. The program centres on pleasurable food education, encouraging children and young people to understand and connect with fresh, delicious food through fun, hands-on learning.

Pleasurable food education empowers children and young people to develop practical skills, an appreciation of seasonal produce, and a positive, confident and healthy relationship with food — for life.

In addition to the Kitchen Garden Program, we lead community place-based projects, working alongside community partners to address local health, wellbeing and learning priorities and address inequities for children and young people.

We draw on 20 years of deep experience working with school communities to support our partners to achieve the change they want, in the places where children and young people learn and play.

We partner with philanthropic organisations, government, corporations and individuals to make positive changes in the food, health, wellbeing and sustainability habits of all Australians.



## About the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative

From July 2021 to June 2024, The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation proudly delivered the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative on behalf of the Victorian Government.

The Healthy Kids Advisors initiative presented an innovative, bold, new approach to public health which significantly exceeded impact expectations in supporting children and young people to lead healthy lives and generating local community momentum for change.

Leveraging the Foundation's pleasurable food education approach and community engagement model, the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative took a systems-thinking approach, connecting with and leveraging existing resources and working collaboratively with our partners to achieve change.

Our locally based Advisors practised co-creation and engaged with the community with a strengths-based approach to encourage participation and embed change.

The initiative was a flagship of *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures* – the Victorian Government's five-year action plan. *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures* has a strong focus on creating supportive environments for healthy eating in the places where people spend their time.

The Healthy Kids Advisors initiative was designed in alignment with the Commonwealth Government's *National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030* and the *National Obesity Strategy 2022-2032*.

The workforce of Healthy Kids Advisors was locally based in 13 targeted local government areas (LGAs). These communities were allocated to the initiative because of their close alignment with VicHealth's Local Government Partnerships:

- Buloke Shire Council
- Central Goldfields Shire Council
- City of Greater Bendigo
- Colac Otway Shire Council
- East Gippsland Shire Council
- Glenelg Shire Council
- Greater Dandenong City Council
- Greater Shepparton City Council
- Hume City Council
- Melton City Council
- Mildura Rural City Council
- Northern Grampians Shire Council
- Southern Grampians Shire Council.

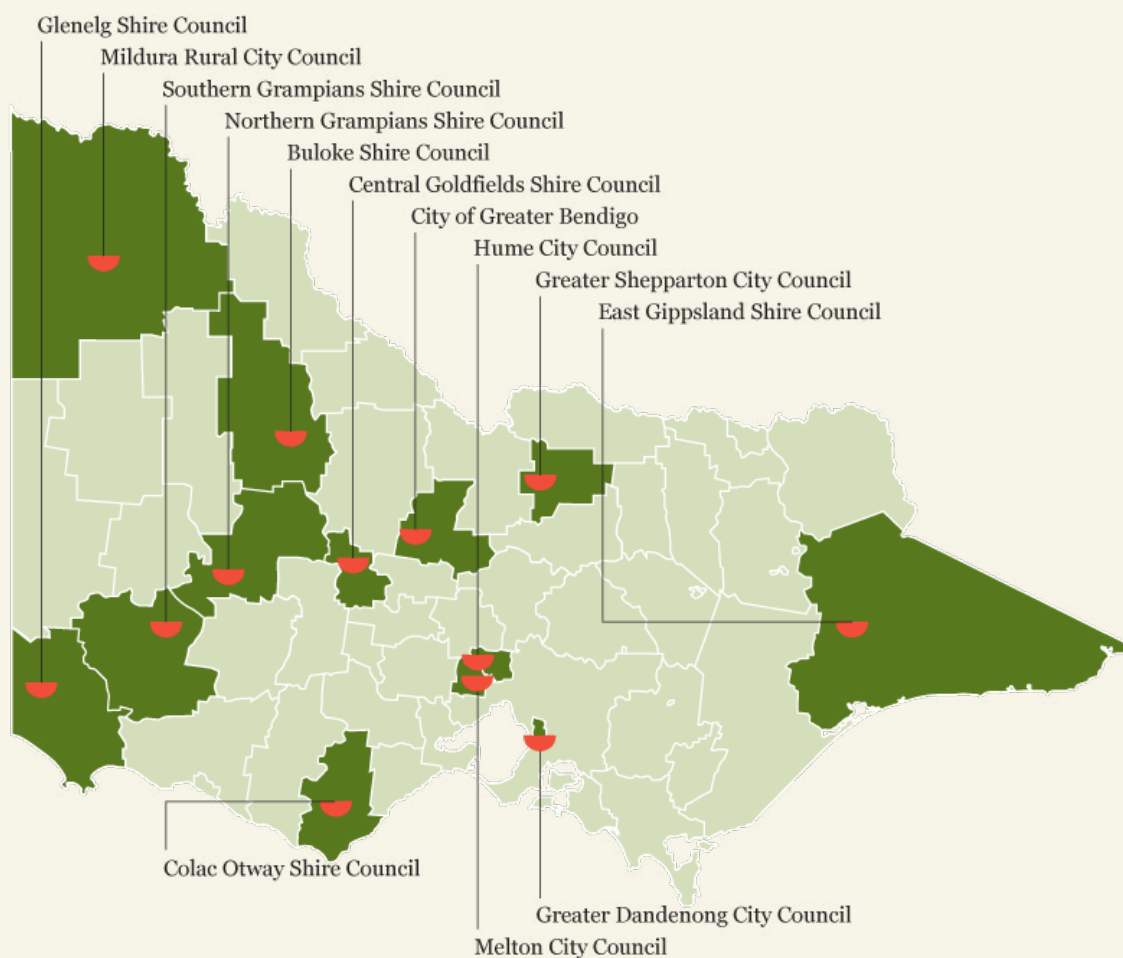


Figure 1: Local government areas supported by the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative

Our Healthy Kids Advisors worked alongside each community's existing health promotion workforce and other community allies to address inequities in health outcomes and improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people in these communities. They achieved this by boosting access to fresh, healthy food and drink options, in the places where families gather:

- primary and secondary schools
- outside school hours care (OSHC)
- sports clubs
- community or council-run facilities.

Each Advisor worked directly with these organisations to provide tailor-made support to achieve their distinct healthy food and drink goals. Advisors drew on the Foundation's pleasurable food education and engagement expertise to support the changes the community wanted to see and encourage participation in the state-wide Vic Kids Eat Well program.

Vic Kids Eat Well (VKEW) is supported by the Victorian Government and delivered by Cancer Council Victoria's Achievement Program and Nutrition Australia's Healthy Eating Advisory Service.



## Impact statement

From June 2021 to June 2024, the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative engaged over **62,000 young people in over 450 youth settings**. The initiative has significantly exceeded expectations and demonstrated the success of the Foundation's fresh new approach to community place-based projects.

Independent evaluation demonstrates **up to five times effectiveness** (quantitatively measured) in implementing healthier food and drink environments for children and young people, compared to areas without our support. Furthermore, between **seven to thirteen times the expected boost** was achieved (see Key data and evaluations on page 10, for more details).

This success is based on the Foundation's approach to community place-based projects, which prioritises collective capacity building, youth engagement, and culturally informed and inclusive practices. Our experience has taught us that focusing on youth participation, peer-to-peer learning experiences and shared decision-making between youth and adults is fundamental to creating long-term, positive changes in attitudes and behaviour for young people and their communities.

Drawing on the Foundation's 20 years of deep expertise in pleasurable food education and authentic, collaborative engagement with the community and stakeholders, the initiative maintained a strong, respected position across the 13 priority communities.

The Healthy Kids Advisors provided practical support focused on long-term sustainability and community-led momentum to create healthier food options in schools and child and family-focused settings with a clear focus on the Vic Kids Eat Well action areas.

Our dedicated workforce had a significant impact and made measurable changes in Victorians' health through their presence and support in schools, settings, and communities. With three years of demonstrated success in community-led projects, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation has never been better placed to take on another partnership of this scale.

We are excited to build on the momentum of Healthy Kids Advisors by growing our community place-based projects. We welcome conversations and opportunities to explore new collaborations across Australia.





## Building a healthy community from within, East Gippsland Shire

Each locally-based Advisor had an intimate knowledge of place and people, which helped bring about meaningful and lasting change. Kristina Stafford (Healthy Kids Advisor – East Gippsland) grew up in Orbost and knew the lay of the land intimately when she started talking to community members about the changes they'd like to see. This collaborative approach helped bring meaningful change to this small town of 4000 people.

Residents have had to work together to overcome devastating floods and fires, as well as the lingering effects of the pandemic. Kristina soon became a key link for the community, helping to create new connections and start conversations about simple changes.

At Moogji Youth Group, Kristina engaged young people in new food preparation skills. Now, when they hold a community event, the youth group can prepare a healthy alternative to hiring a fast-food van.

Mooji Aboriginal Council's Youth Resilience worker, Amber Wade, saw firsthand how beneficial this approach to food education has been for the community. "The education that Kristina provided helped our young people understand the benefits of a healthy balanced diet and how delicious it is," she says. "Many of our young people had very limited understanding about food prep, and now they have some basic skills to use in the home. Kristina has been an amazing mentor for our young people."

Kristina's measured, community-led approach has amplified healthy food and drink access at other sporting and community events in Orbost and has had an extraordinary impact on this small town.

"Throughout 2023, Kristina was pivotal in assisting our organisation to encourage Orbost youth at our after-school program to adopt healthier foods in a fun and inviting way," says ReLink Sports Coordinator, Sara Stres. "This included sourcing recipes that were able to be youth-led and allowing the kids attending to be active in exploring new foods and learning how to prepare them for others. Orbost has benefited from Kristina's support across various programs."



## Central Goldfields Food Network, Central Goldfields Shire

For the sprawling population of Victoria's Central Goldfields, accessing fresh food on a regular basis comes with real challenges. Here, the main factors that impact food security are the rising cost of living, limited employment opportunities and physical accessibility.

Despite these vast challenges, when Ciel Lindley (Healthy Kids Advisor – Central Goldfields Shire) stepped into her role, she found the region was built on a strong sense of community-led action.

"They have a really great collaborative practice here," said Ciel. "It's sort of ingrained that you become part of a network to create decisions together. It has that strength. Despite all these barriers, there is this promise of really good, sustainable solutions being created for the region."

This instinct for community-led conversation is what led Ciel to form The Central Goldfields Food Network, a space where different frontline workers – from social workers to health promoters and other locals involved or interested in the area's food systems – could come together to talk about the community's biggest challenges. Rather than having different programs all functioning in parallel, this created a chance to share resources and plan for meaningful change.

The Central Goldfields Food Network became a wealth of inspiration, opening up a chance for other organisations, such as FoodBank and FoodShare, to learn about the community in a trusted and honest space. The conversations led to workshops and planning around how to affect food literacy in the Central Goldfields region – a point identified as being integral to long term food security.

From these roundtables, Ciel proposed an Issue and Opportunity Paper – the first of its kind for the region – that gathers useful community data and identifies the food security needs of the region while also providing a space to share local stories.

The hope is that the paper will be the jumping off point for more conversation, providing a platform for everyone working to the same purpose of food security to create meaningful and sustainable change. A voice from the community, for the community.



## Key data and evaluations

Throughout the project, we significantly exceeded targets for implementing Vic Kids Eat Well, as evidenced by the PowerBi Dashboard developed by Cancer Council Victoria to capture quantitative impact data.

The Victorian Department of Health Policy and Programs Branch in the Public Health Division expected a 'boost' of 20-30% in the implementation of Vic Kids Eat Well due to the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative. This boost was calculated on state-wide Vic Kids Eat Well achievements in the local government areas (LGAs) that had the support of Healthy Kids Advisors, compared to LGAs that did not.

Based on the comparison between registration and small bites achieved in the allocated LGAs compared to LGAs without a Healthy Kids Advisor, the estimated **'boost' in registrations was 208%, and the 'boost' in small bites was 377%.**

Additionally, evaluation by FPC Consulting demonstrates that LGAs with support from Healthy Kids Advisors were up to **five times more effective** in implementing healthier food and drink environments for children and young people than areas without our support.

The following numbers give a high-level snapshot of the Vic Kids Eat Well impact over the past 3 years.

- Across the 13 priority LGAs, 492 schools and settings were actively supported by Healthy Kids Advisors, with 401 of these schools and settings currently registered to Vic Kids Eat Well.
- Across the 401 registered schools and settings, 2070 'small bites' were attained (through 'achievement', 'already comply', or 'advanced standing' measures).
- This represents 38% of schools and settings registered to Vic Kids Eat Well state-wide, and 43% of the small bites attained across Victoria.
- 56% of 'new small bites' have been achieved in LGAs with Healthy Kids Advisors support.

The 13 LGAs supported by Healthy Kids Advisors comprise:

15%

of the Victorian population

14%

of Victorian schools

43%

of Vic Kids Eat Well 'small bites' recognised across the state

200% +

boost in Vic Kids Eat Well registrations

370% +

boost in Vic Kids Eat Well 'small bites'

62,000+

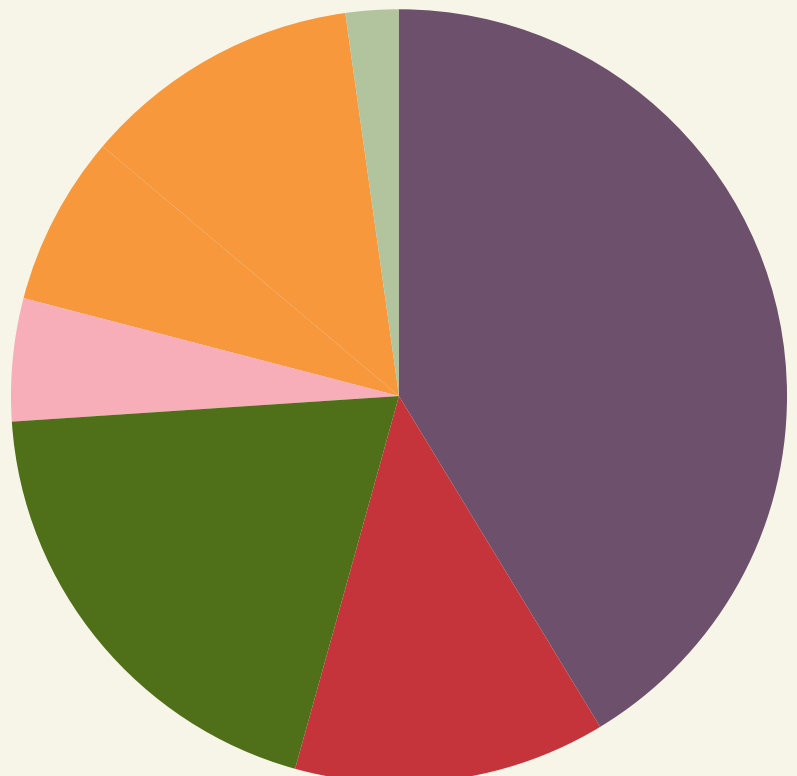
children and young people engaged

450+

schools and settings engaged

Figure 2: The breakdown of schools and settings registered to Vic Kids Eat Well across the 13 priority LGAs.

- 192 schools
- 61 sports clubs
- 91 OSHC
- 24 leisure centres
- 33 community/council-owned facilities
- 10 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCOs)
- 54 additional settings
  - (14) Community Health Services
  - (13) Community orgs including disability and employment support
  - (8) Council departments
  - (4) migrant resource centres
  - (4) neighbourhood houses
  - (3) community gardens
  - (3) food networks
  - (3) kindergartens
  - (2) libraries



# 02 Our approach





## Our approach

Children and young people are on track to live shorter lives than their parents. Almost 95% of children aged 2-17 years do not meet the daily recommended intake of vegetables<sup>1</sup>, and fruit consumption is also significantly below recommended levels<sup>2</sup>.

With the combined impact of COVID-19, natural disasters, school disengagement and the mental health crisis, there is an urgent need to take a holistic approach to population health and planetary health.

The 13 priority communities we operated in were experiencing significant place-based inequities and structural barriers to change. We developed a personalised, adaptable approach for each community to engage a wide variety of schools and settings and build meaningful connections and credibility across the state. Our commitment to understanding the specific needs of each setting and tailoring our approach to support community-identified needs was critical to our success.

Promoting delicious, fresh food to children and young people is, and always has been, at the heart of everything the Foundation does. We leveraged the Foundation's knowledge of grassroots community engagement to support communities in designing and implementing self-directed programs and implementing the Healthy Kids Advisors approach.

The Foundation's reputation has been a powerful engagement 'hook' with schools and settings. Communities have been excited about working

with the Foundation outside our renowned Kitchen Garden Program model.

There are four key pillars in the Healthy Kids Advisors approach that are fundamental in our work and progress to date.

- **Adapting to regional contexts**
- **Connecting with diversity**
- **Empowering young people**
- **Boosting collective capacity**

1. Health and Wellbeing Queensland (2022) *Impact of Obesity on Life Expectancy in Queensland*, accessed 15 August 2024

2. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *Dietary behaviour: Key statistics and data about child and adult consumption of fruit and vegetables*, accessed 15 August 2024

## Adapting to regional contexts

For some schools and settings, there was an immediate interest in and connection to the Vic Kids Eat Well framework, but for many regional schools and settings, they saw Vic Kids Eat Well as 'too hard' or not designed to match their needs.

Instead of passing these schools and settings by, our approach was to take the time to understand the complexities and challenges of regional communities and seek out inventive ways to provide the extra, hands-on support they craved.

A significant number of rural schools in Victoria do not have a retail food or drink environment (e.g., a canteen or vending machine). At first glance, Vic Kids Eat Well was of little relevance in this context, and many schools were hesitant to participate. The Healthy Kids Advisors approach built on local knowledge, established genuine relationships, and worked with curiosity and creativity to solve common barriers.



### Highlight: Branholme-Wallacedale Community School, Southern Grampians Shire

Branholme-Wallacedale Community School (BWCS) in the Southern Grampians is comprised of 12 students from Prep to Year 6. Principal Natalie Bennett was introduced to Monique Sobey (Healthy Kids Advisor — Southern Grampians Shire) to discuss ways to reinvigorate her regional school with a fresh approach to healthy food. A resident of nearby Hamilton, Monique was already familiar with the school's history and its importance to the surrounding farming community.

Monique visited the school and worked with the children to replant and rejuvenate the vegetable garden and run a workshop on the superpower benefits of fruits and vegetables. From these initial discussions with the principal and children, an idea was born to have a student-operated canteen to raise money for their end-of-year camp.

Students were keen to be involved in all the decisions, from surveying food choices, naming the canteen, harvesting from the vegetable garden and running the canteen like a small business. To help them prepare, Monique sourced wholesome, long-life snacks to help them earn a profit and demonstrated fresh, healthy recipes that the students could easily recreate. Thinking ahead, they planted pumpkin seedlings in time for a bumper season of nourishing Winter soup.

With a grand opening date set, our Advisor continued to support the school community by preparing and sharing colourful fruit salad cups, chicken salad wraps, zucchini muffins, and handmade sausage rolls brimming with vegetables. Families and community members were invited to see the big project unveiling. An old-fashioned sports carnival with egg and spoon relays and wheelbarrow racing made the day extra special.

Along the way, our Advisor guided the school through Vic Kids Eat Well, fitting the milestones to suit BWCS's unique needs. The school has earned two bronze certificates, and two nominations for the Vic Kids Eat Well awards by switching to a healthier array of food and drink and embracing creative fundraising.

## Connecting with diversity

The Kitchen Garden Program has always been about so much more than teaching children how to grow and cook. Independent academic research shows how our program fosters social cohesion, celebrates diversity, and gives kids a sense of belonging and connectedness through food.

Our Advisors worked alongside community members to strengthen our foundational knowledge and awareness of diverse identities and cultures. This relationship-focused work ensured that we established culturally informed and inclusive practices within schools and settings and communities.



### Highlight: Dandenong Primary School, City of Greater Dandenong

Throughout her time in the role, Belinda Nowakowski (Healthy Kids Advisor – City of Greater Dandenong) worked to incorporate a culturally diverse taste of home into the food environments of local children and young people.

With a large cohort of students coming from Afghan backgrounds, Dandenong Primary School facilitates a Community Hub, with women from the Afghan Women's Organisation Victoria. This group consists of parents and carers from the community who gather weekly in the staff kitchen to connect and cook delicious meals from home, engage in discussions, share knowledge about food nutrition and learn how to plant herbs important to their cuisine.

Belinda was introduced to the group led by Keery Gibson when she started with Dandenong Primary School, and together they collaborated to kickstart the school's very first Afghan Kitchen. With no canteen running at the school, Belinda and the women in the group identified an opportunity to bring fresh, culturally significant food to student lunches. With delicious items like Kabul burgers on the menu, many ingredients were sourced right from the school's sprouting veggie patch, including traditional gandana, coriander and parsley, all enjoyed by students and staff.

Creating a connection for these students between home and school, Belinda also worked with the Afghan Women's Organisation to host cooking programs in their head office with newly arrived migrant women from Afghanistan. With the goal of expanding their cooking knowledge and recipe repertoire, the women learnt how to make delicious meals from other cultural cuisines, using new spices and herbs they'd grown in their thriving backyard garden.



### Highlight: Sunbury Aboriginal Corporation, City of Hume

When Christie (Healthy Kids Advisor – City of Hume) was introduced to the Sunbury Aboriginal Corporation Youth Group they already had a wonderful set-up with, with Elizabeth Smith, the Youth Group Coordinator, passionately taking the lead in enhancing the student's outdoor education. With their existing raised garden beds, the group were excited to get Christie's support in sourcing and planting more bush tucker plants to get their garden going.

Elizabeth has been supporting the young people of the community to engage in learning useful outdoor life skills, such as fishing, and connecting this to Culture and Tradition. With Christie's help, they were able to begin refining their gardening skills and knowledge, planting indigenous herbs, learning about plant and herb life cycles, and discussing useful gardening techniques such as plant cuttings. The older students even begun linking their garden sessions to their interests in biology.

The group also participated in monthly cooking sessions with Christie. With an abundance of Warrigal greens earlier in the year, students learnt how to make Warrigal greens pesto and fritters packed with Warrigal and ricotta. Another favourite was creating pickled pepperberry pigface and karkalla. "The best part," says Christie, "was that we got to use the pigface and karkalla that we planted together."

Repurposing leftovers was another kitchen strategy the group picked up with Christie, making fresh muffins using apples leftover from the fruit she supplied for Healthy, Happy, Deadly day. Together, they sprinkled the apples with ground up dried cinnamon myrtle and tested baking their muffins in the air fryer.

## Empowering young people

A foundational part of the Healthy Kids Advisors approach was ensuring that we centred the perspectives and voices of children and young people throughout our work in the community. This focus on youth engagement and participation, included peer-to-peer learning experiences, local research opportunities and shared decision-making between youth and adults. Our approach was fundamental to creating both short-term and long-term, positive changes in attitudes and behaviour for young people and their communities.

Although participatory approaches are often applauded because of the benefits to initiative outcomes, this was only one reason we adopted a participatory approach. For us, empowering children and young people to be part of making change is essential to our participatory methods and to build a range of food literacies more broadly. Specifically we wanted children and young people to develop key knowledges and skills that will help them contribute to making change in local food environments both now and into the future.

The Healthy Kids Advisors team developed several approaches to support student engagement and participation. One way we put these methods into practice was at events, participating in 44 community events across the life of the project. Partnering with local health promoters and partners, these events led to:

- increased awareness and profile building in the community
- connection with local families, advocates and decision-makers in schools and settings
- engagement with children and young people through pleasurable food education.



### Highlight: Children's Food Bowl Festival, City of Greater Shepparton

At the end of Term 1, 2024, the entire Shepparton community gathered in Victoria Park Lake for the highly anticipated Children's Food Bowl Festival. Spearheaded by Katie Thorp (Healthy Kids Advisor—City of Greater Shepparton), this free event celebrated the Goulburn Valley food bowl, bringing together the community and hosting various local fresh food organisations to engage over 300 children and families from across the City of Greater Shepparton.

Children were able to visit and learn from interactive stalls held by various local organisations such as Fruit Growers Victoria, Shepparton Foodshare, Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Corporation, Goulburn Valley Water, Culture Kitchen, the Shepparton Art Museum and many more.

Our stall was a popular stop among attendees, engaging hundreds of children throughout the day. Starting off by tasting a variety of microgreens, children learnt how to plant their own by walking through the hands-on stations set up at the stall. The children were excited to take home their creations and kick off their own gardening projects. Christie McIntosh (Healthy Kids Advisor – City of Hume) took to the main stage, walking children through 'Composting Fun'.

This event was a great demonstration of the combined force of local communities, and how the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative creatively engaged and empowered regional communities to continue the work around fresh, healthy food and drink for children and young people.







## Highlight: Bayview College Portland, Glenelg Shire

Bayview College Portland is a vibrant, student-centred school with 260 students from Year 7 to Year 12. Jane Killmister (Healthy Kids Advisor - Glenelg Shire) was introduced to the college's Circle Program, which guides 50 Year 9 students through personal growth and community development. The students were already committed to improving their school's food environment, so they discussed with Jane how they could develop solutions together, action improvements and share findings outside their school gates and into the local community.

From these initial conversations came four months of collaboration and planning with the teaching staff and the Circle Program students. After consulting with the young people about their self-identified needs, a series of healthy eating workshops were developed in collaboration with Bayview College staff. Teachers and learning support staff introduced the group to nutrition topics such as metabolism, body and brain power, reading food labels and starting the day with good nutrition.

Jane hosted a 'Switching up the Snacks' session to spotlight fresh and tasty snack ideas like healthy smoothies boosted with microgreens. Ideas were sparked, with students identifying the potential to redesign the food menu at the school's Breakfast Club and plan a canteen menu to nourish all year levels.

After these training workshops, the Circle Program students took their learning into the community. They coordinated and led a peer-to-peer education day with over 90 students in three neighbouring primary schools: Portland South Primary School, St Johns Lutheran Primary School and Portland North Primary School.

The peer interaction between older students and younger students was an inspiring occasion of positive social influence. New dialogues were sparked, and staff noticed the younger students tasting and enjoying the food they'd previously refused from adult leaders.

The community day was an exciting, practical way to share knowledge across age groups and neighbouring schools. Seeing the power of this positive peer support in action and witnessing the impact of our Advisor's role at Bayview College, both Portland South Primary School and Portland North Primary School signed up to work with the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative.

## Boosting collective capacity

From the earliest stages of its design, the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative had a sharp focus on building collective capacity. We were deeply committed to sustained community success in creating healthier food and drink environments so children, young people and their families can thrive.

The intentional engagement process and meaningful consultation with each of our priority communities ensured we were well-positioned to leverage and connect with existing initiatives and not replace or reinvent work already being done in the community.

Throughout the project, we brokered new partnerships and strengthened opportunities to transform local food environments by identifying and establishing working groups, community resources and forums for locally-led change.



### Highlight: Health Promotion Network, Melton City Council

Maryann Barsoum (Healthy Kids Advisor - City of Melton), led the establishment of a Health Promotion Network. Previously, there were no network meetings or healthy eating alliances in Melton.

This collective brought together the VLGP Lead and Health Promotion Officer from council, and four other health promoters working on Vic Kids Eat Well in the LGA. Members met monthly to share local ideas and knowledge, solve problems collectively and identify opportunities for collaboration, one of which was to co-host food education workshops at school holiday program activities at an OSHC in Melton.

The network invited community allies to meetings to educate the group on food security issues relevant to Melton, for example, Foodbank. In May 2023, a large community forum was organised for all health service providers in the region. They came together and explored various health topics, including Vic Kids Eat Well and healthy eating in schools and settings.



### Highlight: Supporting council priorities, City of Greater Bendigo

Over the past ten years, the City of Greater Bendigo has been on a journey to transform their healthy eating landscape. A systems-approach to prevention has been a prominent inclusion in all Greater Bendigo Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plans. Building on this growing movement for change, the City of Greater Bendigo developed a ten-year local Food Systems Strategy and employed a full-time Food Systems Officer.

One of the actions embedded in this strategy was the Healthy Facilities Policy which came into effect in January 2023. This policy aimed to provide healthy, safe and sustainable food and drink options in all council-owned, managed or funded facilities and venues to promote and protect the health and wellbeing of all Greater Bendigo residents.

Rebecca Fry (Healthy Kids Advisor - City of Greater Bendigo), was co-located with the Active and Healthy Communities team at the council and worked alongside the Food Systems Officer to support the implementation of the Healthy Facilities Policy. Schools and settings received free, hands-on support from Rebecca to facilitate the changes required to demonstrate that they were implementing the Healthy Facilities Policy. She used Vic Kids Eat Well as a set of tools to support change and support these schools and settings to work towards implementing the Healthy Choices Guidelines.

In addition, Rebecca focused on integrating the efforts of local stakeholders who were supporting schools and settings to create healthier food and drink environments. She established and managed two regular communities of practice that supported information sharing across the local workforce, created a space for reflection and learning and supported a collaborative approach to achieve a greater impact than each could do alone.



## Highlight: Prevention Network, Northern Grampians Shire

The Northern Grampians Shire Prevention Network was made up of seven health promoters from community health services across the Northern Grampians, along with Lauren Dempsey (Healthy Kids Advisor – Northern Grampians Shire). Developing an integrated plan with shared goals, strategies, and actions, the network executed a collective impact approach, working collaboratively to achieve common goals.

Health promoters from East Wimmera Health Service, Stawell Regional Health and Grampians Community Health met weekly with Lauren to achieve local council actions from the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan, share learnings and strengthen their working relationship. The network's approach of shared trust enabled them to divide up registered Vic Kids Eat Well settings amongst each other which helped to streamline efforts and avoid duplication of setting engagement. Their coordinated, considered efforts in the shire earned them a Network Excellence Award at the 2023 Vic Kids Eat Well awards.



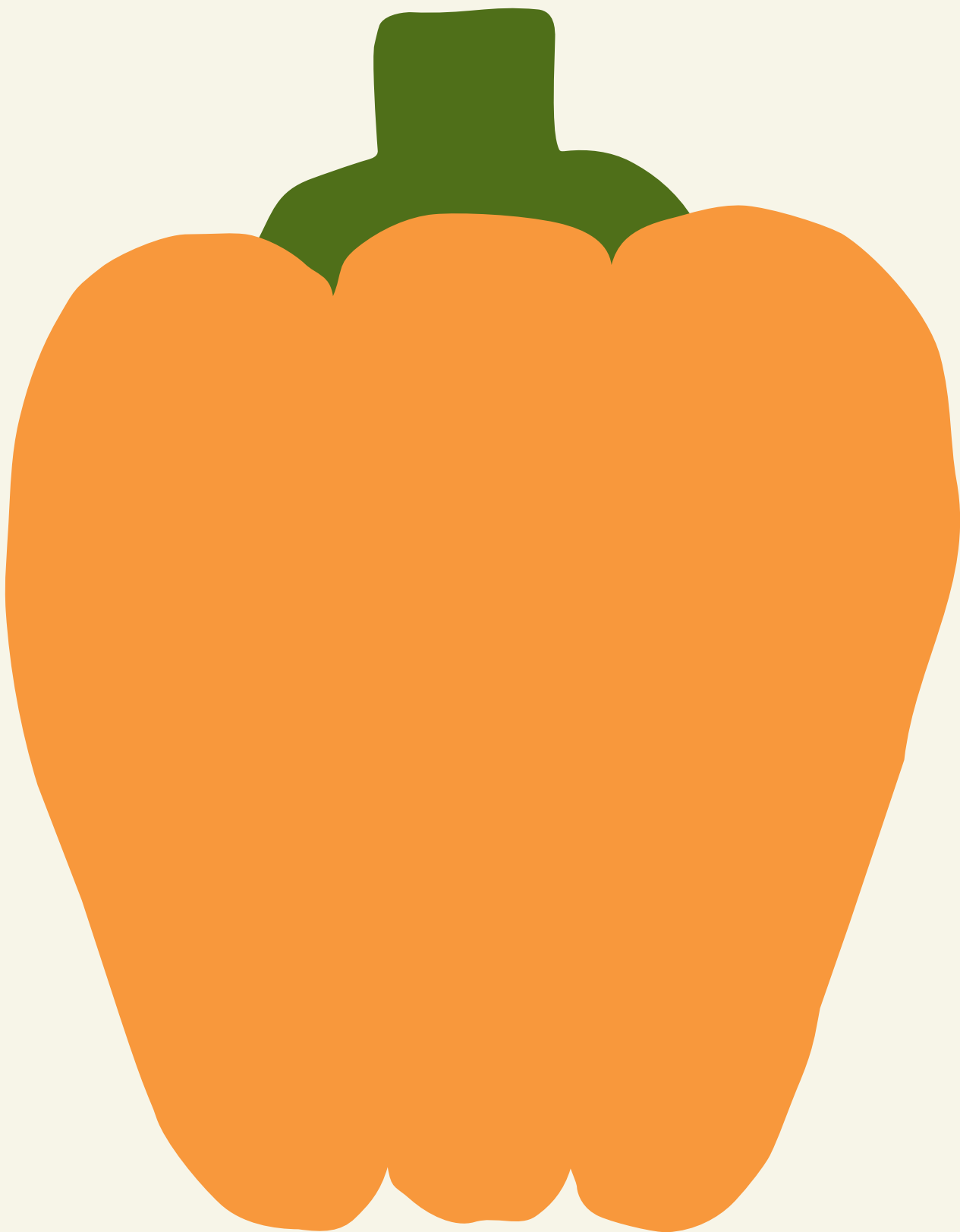
## Highlight: Forrest Community, Colac Otway Shire

Forrest is home to a tight-knit community, with many local champions combining forces to bring fresh food and drink to their neighbours who need it most. Being quite isolated from fresh food options, many local organisations and groups, including Forrest's general store, combined forces to bring fresh food and drink to their neighbours who need it the most.

Running a weekly food drive and a public access community pantry, the Forrest Neighbourhood House hosts local young people in various fresh food initiatives. With the support of Lesley Hendy (Healthy Kids Advisor – Colac Otway Shire), the local youth group gathered weekly to prepare and share delicious after school meals, like DIY toasties loaded with fresh goodness. Students also developed their own veggie garden at Forrest Primary School, with hopes to strengthen their produce stall and increase cooking opportunities.

# 03

## Key insights





## Localised recruitment

Having local people connected to their communities was a key factor in the success of the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative. It helped our team to develop trust, understand the local context and connect with existing healthy eating efforts in local communities.

Through extensive consultation with key partners, including local council and community health organisations, we tailored our recruitment approach to each community and held to our commitment to hiring locally.

Advisors had a deep knowledge of the local context, community need and how to connect with and leverage local networks and existing relationships. This depth of understanding strengthened the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative and supported us in being flexible and responsive in our community-based work.

The Foundation prioritised Advisors having deep knowledge of their local community over qualifications in health promotion or nutrition. The impact of hiring Advisors from a diverse range of professional backgrounds and career stages was incredibly positive. The knowledge sharing across regional, rural and metropolitan communities, age ranges and professional backgrounds created a vibrant, strong and creative community of practice across the project.

The Foundation provided additional resources to our Advisors who were in an early career stage or who were working in community development and health promotion for the first time. Drawing on our 20 years of experience, we provided support, professional development, and coaching to ensure that Advisors were successful in their roles.

Strengthening their skills in community engagement, pleasurable food education, project planning, collaboration with the local council and community health services, and effective school support strategies boosted workforce capacity in critical areas of need in regional communities.

We harnessed local insights with existing health promotion staff and activated and integrated with the local community and workforce. Our commitment to having Advisors embedded in local communities and their work integrated into the existing health promotion workforce was positively received by local partners. Advisors also established several new collaborative groups and networks to support this integrated approach.



## Protected time

A key element underpinning the success of Healthy Kids Advisors was the engagement of the Foundation as an independent organisation to deliver this important initiative. The Foundation's reputation, experience and approach were powerful drivers of progress.

It is also important to acknowledge the 'protected' time and focus for Healthy Kids Advisors created by the Foundation's sole focus on healthy eating, pleasurable food education and building positive food habits for life in children and young people.

A consistent theme across the 13 priority communities was how many areas of responsibility health promoters and local council staff carried within the portfolio of their roles. These staff were often the 'first responders' to crises in their local communities (including bushfire and flood response and COVID-19 recovery efforts) and had the possibility of their work priorities being shifted quickly. Unfortunately, this meant healthy eating efforts often took a 'back seat' compared to more urgent priorities.

Having Healthy Kids Advisors supported by the Foundation allowed us to create focused momentum and progress in this critical area of preventative public health.

## Community engagement budget

Advisors having access to a modest budget to support their community engagement work was a powerful lever for attracting schools and settings to Vic Kids Eat Well. Through a dedicated community engagement budget line, Advisors had access to discretionary funds to support their work on the ground.

A community engagement budget was a critical tool for engaging schools and settings, removing key barriers to implementing Vic Kids Eat Well, and making progress through the 'small bites'.

Examples of how Healthy Kids Advisors used the community engagement budget to support schools and settings included:

- 'sample packs' of healthy food to school canteens, student leadership groups and youth focus groups to support a youth-led recommendation for 'switching up the snacks,'
- supplies and equipment for hands-on workshops run by Advisors in schools and settings,
- working with a local tradesperson to ensure that water taps were accessible and located in 'high traffic' areas at a sports club,
- providing or subsidising the purchase of equipment for schools and settings to make menu changes e.g. sandwich press, smoothie blender.



## Strong partnerships

The success of Healthy Kids Advisors was underpinned by the Foundation's continued commitment to working in partnership with a wide range of organisations. We developed an extensive network of partnerships, with the following being of note.

Our **community partnerships** with settings, schools, local Councils, community health partners and key stakeholders who are at the heart of the work we do.

**Cancer Council Victoria** and **Nutrition Australia** were key partners in implementing Vic Kids Eat Well. The shared planning, resource development and robust community of practice have been a central collaboration over the past 3 years.

We deepened our partnership with the **Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)** to ensure that the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative was culturally informed and responsive to the voices and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We actively collaborated with local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) on emerging opportunities to increase access to healthy food and drink for Aboriginal children and families across Victoria and witnessed some powerful examples of culturally informed, Community led change.



## Highlight: Our Food Connections

In 2022, VACCHO and the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation formalised a partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding, which outlined our shared commitment to supporting community-led, self-determined health and wellbeing outcomes for Victorian Aboriginal Communities.

A clear need emerged to support ACCO-led, self-determined nutrition programs to strengthen Aboriginal children and young people's health and wellbeing. In partnership with VACCHO we have supported 'Our Food Connections' a seed funding opportunity for member organisations to bring community-led projects to life.

In line with the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures* framework, this program focused on:

- boosting community action and drawing on Aboriginal knowledge, skills and wisdom to deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families
- showcasing Aboriginal-led nutrition initiatives and demonstrating the importance of investing in Aboriginal organisations, to drive nutrition outcomes at a community level



## Highlight: VicHealth visits Glenelg Shire

As part of VicHealth's visit to South West Victoria, the VicHealth team and CEO Sandro Demaio scheduled a tour with Heywood & District Secondary College to meet teaching staff and students and hear about the college's holistic approach to encouraging active, healthy lifestyles.

Jane Killmister (Healthy Kids Advisor – Glenelg Shire) met with the VicHealth team to outline her role across the Shire and how she supports different facets of the college's learning experiences. A key area of her support is working alongside educators who run the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program. Together, they use harvested garden produce to build a healthy, fresh canteen menu and equip high school students with skills to design, budget and prepare delicious items like spanakopita, Caesar salad and veggie-packed sausage rolls.

VicHealth visited the college's four unused tennis courts that will soon be converted into an inclusive, accessible community garden. Jane, was pivotal in the reimagining of this space, consulting students of the Kitchen Garden Program to help lead the design of the garden, host fundraising events, and form a local committee to keep the project moving ahead.

The visit was a practical demonstration of the collaboration between VicHealth's Victorian Local Government Partnerships team and the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative, and how our focus on strong partnerships can transform food environments through locally-led change.

- providing self-determined, flexible funding that will enable ACCOs to improve nutrition outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in their community.

Small grants of up to \$10,000 were offered to ACCOs across the 13 priority communities supported by Healthy Kids Advisors. Project specifics were being determined by the local ACCOs, working examples included:

- ACCO-led self-determined nutrition programs (such as nutrition education, meal preparation, cooking, youth programs or other ACCO identified local priorities)
- Community gardens to grow and share food linked to cooking programs and nutrition sessions
- Workshops/Yarning circles with Elders to educate community about traditional foods
- Programs for parents and carers that incorporate nutrition and cooking healthy meals.

We have actively collaborated with **VicHealth** and their Victorian Local Government Partnerships team. Healthy Kids Advisors regularly contributed to the 'building better food systems' community of practice. Advisors also attend quarterly forums and aligned events, and worked to connect aligned initiatives across communities.

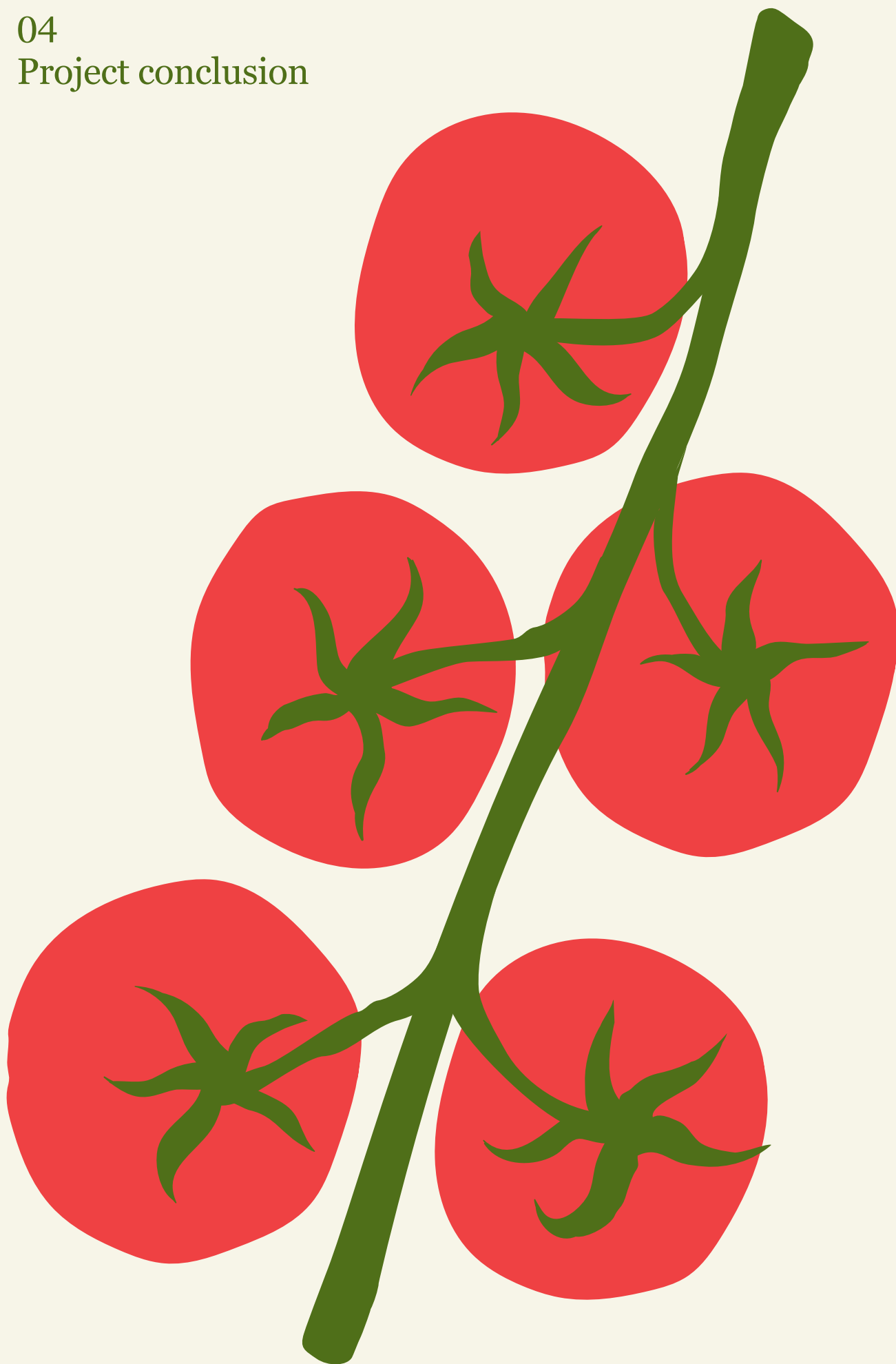
Our partnership with Associate Professor Deana Leahy in the **Faculty of Education at Monash University** heavily informed our youth participation practices and created opportunities for collaboration. We shared knowledge in tailor-made workshops on canteen futures and across state-wide projects and events, including the Little Food Festival and the Shepparton Children's Food Bowl Festival.

At a community level, our partnerships **with local Councils, community health partners and key stakeholders** have been at the forefront of our efforts.





04  
Project conclusion





## Impact sustainability

Throughout the Healthy Kids Advisors funding period, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation remained committed to ensuring that work across the 13 priority LGAs was locally led and likely to be sustained as much as reasonably possible. Throughout the project we have focused on:

- Taking an inclusive, culturally aware, community-based, social approach to ensure the long-term sustainability of the intended and activated change.
- Continued engagement with local councils to embed policy changes and leverage existing council resources to provide ongoing support to participating schools and settings.
- Strengthening partnerships and encouraging leadership through working groups and forums to ensure ongoing funding through other avenues.
- Working with registered schools and settings to develop sustainable activities, such as:
  - Providing appropriate resources and tools to enable them to continue with the programs and systems they have in place.
  - Identifying community ‘champions’ to advocate for continued achievements and momentum.

As noted in the program evaluation, the short-term funding for Healthy Kids Advisors remains the biggest risk to long term sustainability. Over the past few years, the Advisors have invested significant amounts of time to build connections and trust within their communities to generate appetite and momentum for change.

More important preventative health progress needs to be made across these and other communities. The discontinuation of the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative may impact these relationships, which will need to be rebuilt in the future.



## Case study: Continuing the healthy choice momentum, Southern Grampians Shire

Leisure centres are critical places of connection for regional families and young people; and a cornerstone site for promoting active and healthy lifestyle choices. These settings often have limited healthy and tasty food in their kiosks and vending machines. Healthy Kids Advisors guided 24 regional sports clubs and centres through simple, affordable adjustments using the Vic Kids Eat Well framework and emphasising the Foundation's approach to seasonal, delicious produce and hands-on learning.

Southern Grampians is an expansive shire with a population of around 16,500. In her role as the local Healthy Kids Advisor, Monique Sobey was determined to make lasting changes that allow young people, schools and local sporting clubs to access the nourishing food and drink they deserve.

One of the Shire's largest indoor leisure centres, Hamilton Indoor Leisure & Aquatic Centre (HILAC), were encouraged by Monique to add new healthy options to their menu, including granola cups, vegetable snack packs, and homemade sausage rolls. It's a move that the community enthusiastically embraced and – evidenced by a 60% increase in revenue – is here to stay.

HILAC Coordinator Diana Dixon says Monique's advice on healthy menu swaps will continue to shape the way they approach food options well into the future.

"Monique advised on healthy food ideas we could offer in the café that are easily prepared and served.

But she's also helped us plan for the long-term through marketing ideas and how we can continue to create healthy options in the community and educate young people about it."

– Diana Dixon, HILAC

To carry on her work after the conclusion of the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative, Monique worked closely with community health partner GenR8 Change, which brings together community stakeholders like the Hamilton Base Hospital, the Western District Health Service and local schools and businesses to collaborate on improving and promoting the health of the Southern Grampians community.

Monique's relationship-building with local organisations and schools during her time as Healthy Kids Advisor helped GenR8 Change further respond to the community's evolving needs.

"Monique has created an expectation within the community that there will be healthy choices from now on. The domino effect of her approach will have huge longevity in the region."

– Karen Finch-Huf, GenR8 Change

Western District Health Service Group Manager John Hedley saw first-hand the impact that Monique's work had and will continue to have.

"Stakeholders and community groups thrived on having access to a Healthy Kids Advisor, their programs and easily accessible resources. The healthy choice momentum amongst our community has been some of the strongest I have witnessed."

– John Hedley, Western District Health Service



## Case study: Making food education fun, City of Greater Dandenong

Whether talking to schools about tuckshop choices or running community cooking sessions with the Community Hub, Belinda Nowakowski (Healthy Kids Advisor – City of Greater Dandenong), embedding community-led and culturally informed practices were top-of-mind since day one. Her successful approach was keenly observed and adopted by other local health promoters.

“The Healthy Kids Advisors initiative has been pivotal in re-engaging schools and other settings in the City of Greater Dandenong, particularly since the pandemic, and has generated lots of local excitement and momentum for Vic Kids Eat Well and health and wellbeing. Belinda has brought new ideas, hands-on approaches, and activities for engaging existing and new health promotion settings, such as outside school hours care. She has been very welcomed by the community.”

– Laura Ayres, Monash Health

Throughout her time as Healthy Kids Advisor, Belinda guided Enliven, a local health promotion charity in Greater Dandenong and her upskilling will have a lasting impact on how they work moving forward.

“The Healthy Kids Advisors’ specific framing of ‘pleasurable food education’ has enhanced our practice as health promoters. Collaborating with our Healthy Kids Advisor allowed us to explore the concept of pleasurable eating to better communicate the value of fresh, delicious, and seasonal food to the

community. We have learnt a lot from Belinda about facilitating interactive and engaging workshops for all ages. In particular, drawing the connection between growing your food and how easy it is to cook with it, in a hands-on experience for participants.”

– Zoe Nikakis, Enliven

## Concluding statement

The three years of investment in the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative brought a significant impact that has exceeded key project deliverables.

Based on the Foundation's expertise in pleasurable food education and authentic, collaborative engagement with the community and stakeholders, the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative has been an integral, valued element across 13 priority communities.

We have provided practical support to create healthier food options in schools and other child and family-focused settings with a clear focus on the Vic Kids Eat Well action areas. In collaboration with local stakeholders, we created healthy change and had an extraordinary effect in creating supportive environments for healthy eating in line with the vision of *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures*.

From the earliest stages of design, the Healthy Kids Advisors initiative has had a sharp focus on building collective capacity. We have been deeply committed to sustained community success in creating healthier food and drink environments so children, young people and their families can thrive.

We are grateful for the communities we have been a part of. Each one has provided our locally based Advisors with the inspiration, vision, determination and partnership to make fresh, healthy, delicious food available for young people and their families across Victoria.

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation is proud to have led this important public health initiative on behalf of the Victorian Government and looks forward to seeing the impact of these collaborative efforts continue for as long as possible.

With three years of demonstrated success in community-led projects, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation has never been better placed to take on another partnership of this scale. We are excited to build on the momentum of Healthy Kids Advisors by growing our community place-based projects. We welcome conversations and opportunities to explore new collaborations across Australia.







# Healthy Kids Advisors

Delivered by the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation