



**INTERFACE**  
COUNCILS

*Creating liveable communities in Melbourne's outer suburbs*

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND  
ESTIMATES COMMITTEE  
PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY  
INTO MANAGING SCHOOL  
INFRASTRUCTURE**

**SUBMISSION BY INTERFACE  
COUNCILS**

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## Introduction

The Interface Councils group was invited to comment on the following aspects of the 2017 Victorian Auditor-General's Report No. 253: Managing School Infrastructure by The Public Accounts and Estimates Committee:

- The status of the recommendations made by the Auditor-General regarding the management of school infrastructure.
- Effective asset management arrangements for school assets, including maintenance planning.
- Adherence to the Asset Management Accountability Framework.
- Governance arrangements for asset management, including roles and responsibilities.
- Accountability mechanisms for managing school assets.
- Any of the issues highlighted in the Auditor-General's report.
- Any significant developments since the tabling of the Auditor-General's report in September 2016.

## Situation analysis

Home to more than 1.6 million residents in 2016, Interface Councils is a coalition of ten municipalities that forms an urban ring around metropolitan Melbourne. Comprising Cardinia Shire Council, City of Casey, Hume City Council, Melton City Council, Mitchell Shire Council, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, Nillumbik Shire Council, City of Whittlesea, Wyndham City Council and Yarra Ranges Shire Council, the Interface Councils are vibrant, welcoming and diverse communities.<sup>1</sup>

The Interface Councils Region (ICR) includes seven growth area Councils.<sup>2</sup> The region accommodates 40% of state population and 47% of Melbourne's population. It manages 90% of Green Wedges, including some of Melbourne's most important assets. The grouping represents one of the fastest growing regions in Australia, with anticipated population by 2041 to exceed 3 million.<sup>3</sup> It will accommodate 53% of Melbourne's population growth over the 2016-2031 period. In this same period, there will be an increase in school-aged persons to 20.8% by 2031,<sup>4</sup> which points to the need for more investment in secondary schools as well as kindergartens.

Unprecedented growth and changing demographics within the ICR have put increased pressure on local services and infrastructure that have historically been underfunded in these municipalities.<sup>5</sup> Yet the region is still not receiving State Budget funding allocations in proportion with population growth rates. This poses considerable challenges for Councils to build and maintain healthy, sustainable and inclusive communities.

The Interface Councils Region:

- Has poor education outcomes compared with the rest of the state
- Would benefit from schools coming online sooner to meet current demand and future projections
- Has an alarming shortage of secondary schools to meet demand that requires consistent investment
  - For example, Cranbourne East Primary School opened with 454 students nine years ago and now has a cohort of more than 1200.
- Needs better public transport and utilisation of existing road assets to improve access to educational institutions and contribute to more positive outcomes for young people.

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<sup>1</sup> *Interface Councils Liveability Snapshot*, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2S2iSAI>

<sup>2</sup> City of Casey, Cardinia Shire Council, Hume City Council, Melton City Council, Mitchell Shire Council, City of Whittlesea & Wyndham City Council

<sup>3</sup> Id. forecast 2019

<sup>4</sup> *One Melbourne or Two?*, p17, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2SCXHEv>

<sup>5</sup> *Interface Councils Liveability Snapshot*, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2S2iSAI>

## Responding to specific recommendations

### Recommendation 4.

*“We recommend that the Department of Education and Training test the accuracy of its provision planning forecasting over short-, medium- and long-term projections to understand its reliability over time.”*

The ten Interface Councils appreciate being part of annual school-building pipeline meetings run by the Department of Education and Training (DET) since 2012. There has been an observable uplift in the number of schools delivered in growth areas since that time.

However, there is still a critical undersupply of schools compared to residents living in the ICR. In addition to this, the timing of secondary school builds in emerging areas is a substantial concern for the group. In Mitchell Shire, it is a common experience that a secondary school is delivered once there are three primary schools built, which does not accurately reflect demand.

For the region in general, primary and secondary school requirements in the years up to 2031 are shown in the table below.<sup>6</sup>

#### Estimated Primary and Secondary School Places Required, Interface Councils, 2016-2031

	Primary School Places	Secondary School Places
2016	166,100 places	125,230 places
2031	251,210 places	189,800 places
<b>Additional Places Required 2011 to 2026</b>	<b>+85,110 places</b>	<b>+64,570 places</b>
<b>Additional Schools Required 2016 to 2031</b>	<b>+340 schools</b>	<b>+120 schools</b>

Sources: Forecast id (various); Essential Economics  
Note: Figures rounded

In addition, Wyndham Council has developed a forecast of schools needs in the City, which identifies a shortfall of 12 schools until 2041 that are not planned for but needed.<sup>7</sup>

In Casey Council there are a number of schools operating far beyond their effective enrolments for extended periods of time. There are multiple instances of state primary schools in Casey operating with more than 900 students on sites designed to cater for 500. A similar situation applies for state secondary schools.

This is the case across the region, the impacts of which include:

- Portable buildings occupying outdoor play space to the detriment of children’s health and wellbeing
- Requests from schools to locate portables on adjoining Council land/open space
- Unmanageable traffic congestion and parking issues in the street network surrounding schools
- Students travelling significant distances to schools outside their walkable catchment area

The current situation is the result of a combination of the following factors:

- Inadequate benchmarks for new schools
- Incorrect forecasting of student growth<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *One Melbourne or Two?*, p51, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2SCXHEv>

<sup>7</sup> Sourced from Wyndham City Council Submission. Refer to Wyndham’s independent submission for further information.

<sup>8</sup> Social Planning Teams from Interface Councils have valuable live local knowledge and data such as birth and migration rates, kindergarten utilisation and capacity, and development pace that could support more accurate forecasting. Despite

- Inaccurate and insufficient frequency of modelling<sup>9</sup>
- Inadequate State Budget funding for new school provision

#### Recommendation 5.

*“We recommend that the Department of Education and Training establish guidelines to inform its decisions for managing changing enrolments in established areas – considering school locations, purchasing of land ahead of when it is required, access issues for students and size of school land.”*

#### **New sites required**

The Interface Councils Region will accommodate 53% of Melbourne’s population growth between 2016-2031. As population numbers of established and establishing suburbs continue to grow, new school sites are needed in rapid succession. There is an opportunity for DET to conduct feasibility studies to identify these new school sites. Increased consultation opportunities would provide necessary forums for Councils to communicate such requests to DET.

#### **Incomplete schools**

The staged delivery of schools in newly established suburbs adjacent to growth areas could be improved, as the first stage only provides a partial solution in areas of high demand. The second stage of these schools should be completed as a matter of urgency to meet the shortfall in years 7-9 places in those areas. At present, parents are having to find interim schools or are forced to travel long distances for schooling due to these shortfalls, or else add to existing overcrowding. For example, Doherty’s Creek P-9 in Truganina and Saltwater P-9 in Point Cook in Wyndham City Council were both opened in 2019 as P-6 schools following the completion of the first stage of infrastructure delivery.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Early land acquisition**

The speed of growth in and geographical reach of the Interface Councils Region necessitates that land be purchased earlier than is current practice, especially in order to ensure that land for future sites will be available when needed. Further, this needs to be embedded into a coordinated approach to make sure other necessary infrastructure is delivered in a timely manner i.e. the delivery of roads and early years facilities.

Some Councils have recently entered into MoU’s with developers with the objective of earlier delivery of infrastructure. The department could consider how to work more collaboratively with partnerships in the planning sphere.

Local Councils are ideally positioned, willing to advise and collaborate with DET to determine future sites as internal departments have data available on site readiness, developer intentions and adjacent infrastructure.

In addition, Interface Councils recommends a depoliticisation of triggers for new schools. The cyclical nature of State Budgets and associated planning means that a lack of early land acquisition for schools is severely affecting positive outcomes for young people and the liveability standard of the region as a whole. Residents of the ICR experience higher rates of youth mental health issues and disengagement with the education system than their inner Melbourne or regional counterparts.

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several requests to improve collaborative planning processes through data sharing, the department has not been willing to do this due to confidentiality concerns.

<sup>9</sup> For further information on proposed modelling improvements, refer to Wyndham City Council Submission.

<sup>10</sup> Sourced from Wyndham City Council Submission. Refer to Wyndham’s independent submission for further information.

## Recommendation 6.

*“We recommend that the Department of Education and Training work with local Councils and other partners, particularly in growth areas, to strategically plan and design multi-use, shared and co-located facilities before new schools are funded through state budgets.”*

Interface Councils is encouraged by the additional consultation occurring with DET and the Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA) on future school sites in the last few years. In some cases, this process has allowed opportunities for shared facilities and integration with adjoining sites to be identified in advance of funding announcements.

However, while collocation is supported in principle, the current planning and delivery process and timelines for new government schools locks Local Councils out of an effective partnership role.<sup>11</sup>

### **Integrated facilities**

Interface Councils supports the State Government’s vision of schools as integrated hubs for community learning, recreation and arts, early childhood education and care. Yet there is an opportunity to invest more seriously in the concept of schools as community hubs by improving the strategic planning and designing process to better support education facilities to reduce barriers to accessing some of these services. Moreover, better utilisation of community infrastructure and assets would benefit Local Councils as well as State Government.

Interface Councils has facilitated two School Planning Process Workshops in the past 16 months with participants including DET, the VSBA, the Office of Suburban Development and the Victorian Planning Authority (VPA).

At these workshops, particular issues preventing greater integration and collocation of facilities in the context of the current school planning process were identified. The problems recognised by participants at the first workshop in November 2018 were grouped as follows:

#### **1. Timing and sequencing**

Participants identified the following key challenges in regard to timing and sequencing of events in the school planning and delivery process:

- Inability for DET to participate in early planning of a school during the Precinct Structure Plan (PSP) and development application stages.
- Land acquisition occurs later in the delivery stage of the PSP. At this stage, young people who are living in the new development are forced to attend schools that are outside their local precinct.
- That there is no clear model of delivery (it was suggested that templates are required).
- Timing of involvement for different agencies. For instance, DET and VicRoads are not mandatory referral agencies during the development application approval process.
- Out of sequence development where the early years services are needed before the school site is acquired, forcing them to be built on sites that are not part of the school.
- GAICWIK transfer of land amendment to be transferred earlier.

#### **2. Planning**

Participants identified the following key challenges regarding the school planning process:

- The need for greater cooperation between departments, Local Government, other agencies and the VPA during the development and approval of the PSP and during the land acquisition process. Currently, some key organisations are not mandatory referral agencies for the development application process.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

- The size of the land parcel in the PSP can be too small for an adequate collocated and integrated facility as the actual population numbers are greater than the forecasted population numbers due to higher-than-expected population growth.
- Master planning for a school site is not conducted until the land has been acquired or funding has been allocated. This creates tension as the desire to construct the new facility as quickly as possible conflicts with the time required to actually create an integrated facility, including establishing an operational model
- Ensuring alignment between the type of school nominated at a PSP and Council service planning. For example, high schools and infrastructure for services targeting youth and school leavers.
- The issue of having to approve a design for a facility that is years away from starting.

### **3. Community expectations**

For all parties involved, it is important that unrealistic expectations are not created for the local community regarding the timeframes for the delivery of new schools.

#### **Three-Year-Old Kindergarten rollout**

- DET's Three-Year-Old Kinder Collocation Commitment will have major ramifications for Councils in planning infrastructure provision.
- The rollout and implementation process have been areas of significant confusion for Councils.
- The commitment to deliver three- and four-year old kindergarten 'on or next to' every primary school sit will limit capacity for primary school education/numbers by further reducing land footprint availability.
- Councils should not be expected to accommodate or fund additional services and buildings on their sites that are already constrained, or to purchase additional land.
- DET is currently scoping existing schools with a land footprint where they can deliver modular facilities for kindergartens on existing school grounds in 2022.
- Sites in existing PSPs are funded based on purchasing land for the school at its current model and capacity – without three-year-old kinder facilities.
- Three-year-old kindergarten provision in the ICP/DCP will now be competing with other uses that are already underfunded.
- It is of major concern that, while it appears that the cost of buildings would be a shared responsibility, no strategy or position has been released from DET yet.

### **4. Delivery**

Participants identified the following key challenges regarding the delivery of the school:

- The infrastructure for the school site (i.e. a road) isn't always ready when DET needs to buy the site.
- The expected construction timeframe within which schools are expected to be built does not enable adequate time for planning an integrated facility. This also includes a rigid template approach to the construction of a new school.
- The conservative nature of the principal or school Council may prevent proper integration and collocation.

### **5. Process**

Participants identified the following key challenges regarding the overarching process of planning and delivering schools:

- There is no process for planning and delivering integrated and collocated schools that is accepted by the departments and agencies and no agreed guiding principles between State and Local Governments for integration of early years, schools, community and recreation facilities.
- There is no dedicated individual in DET charged with the responsibility for the planning and delivery of integrated and collocated infrastructure.
  - Rather, the focus is commonly on the PSP and school provision planning stages
- There is no owner or sponsor of the planning or delivery of a new school to oversee the project management and timely liaison with agencies.
- Some Councils can be parochial in regard to the planning of a school and cross-boundary opportunities. Equally, there are Councils who have been active in this space with limited success who persist in looking for models for shared infrastructure opportunities.
- There can be a myopic focus on delivering a single output rather than a broader precinct/district focus that encompasses shared use (indoor and outdoor) opportunities and designing accordingly, including the location of the school and local traffic.
- Early years integration/technical knowledge and influence through the build is required from DET.
  - Especially in relation to the requirements of the licenced spaces so there is confidence that the build will ensure licencing occurs.
- The provision rations and benchmarks with integrated three- and four-year-old kinder need to be reviewed.
- Alignment of DET to broader state priorities in the below areas
  - IT
  - Energy
  - Waste
  - Transport

## 6. Operating models

- There is inconsistency with operational models, philosophy and the enrolment process for early years.
  - For example, the state is now delivering new inclusion hubs for children with disabilities (autism.)
- Councils kindergarten philosophy is to provide an inclusive environment for children of all abilities (mainstream service).
- Councils are concerned that a disconnect could develop between their vision and the State Government vision of schools as integrated hubs for community learning, recreation & arts, early childhood education and care.
- Child safety standards and school regulations potentially do not align with Council's standard delivery model of family and community centres. These include multipurpose/inter-generational community spaces and maternal & child health under the same roofline as kindergarten, and they are accessible to the general public.
- Strict confidentiality requirements impede this process.



## Solutions to the problem

Interface Councils recommends the following improvements to the school planning process to improve agency collaboration and facilitate more effective delivery of school infrastructure.

**Develop and implement an agreed process for creating integrated and collocated school facilities.** This could include:

- Standard models and the development of 'template' approaches
- Functional briefs at a community education precinct level
- Informal referral of subdivision applications
- Better indicative planning after PSP is done that includes surrounding infrastructure
- Councils canvassing broader input during the development approval process from agencies that are not mandatory referral agencies

**Better integrated master planning at an earlier stage:**

- Note this master planning will be based on the social needs of the community and will not be for public consultation until the land has been acquired and the final master planning completed.
- The funding of early master planning could be incorporated into ICP funding.
- The master planning process should include a range of agencies, as described in the process development in the suggestion above.

**Develop and implement a best practice project management or governance for the PSP school planning and delivery process.** This could include:

- Establishing a group to commit to having ongoing conversations with willingness to resolve issues
- Setting a singular point of contact from DET/VSBA and Council to have early engagement conversations (topics to cover would range from land acquisition issues to Council needs and master planning)
- An MoU between Council and DET/VSBA on agreed methods to align process and timelines to forecast resources and operational budgets (i.e. aligning process from master planning to acquisition process; outlining construction dates, master planning dates etc.)

**Transparency & engagement:**

- The lack of visibility of contractual arrangements between the VSBA and any head contractor is a significant issue for Interface Councils.
- This makes it difficult for Councils to understand what is in or out of scope and also when to engage.
- Local Council budgets are confirmed annually and dictate expenditure for the following 12 months.
- The issue of very short windows of opportunities for Councils to financially commit to shared projects, which are misaligned with Council budget cycles, means that spaces for shared facilities have been and will continue to be missed.
- In instances where shared facilities are identified, it would be helpful for Council budgeting requirements to be aligned with the project plans and contractual arrangements developed by the VSBA.

### **Early collaborative master planning:**

- Early master planning between DET and Local Councils as the first stage of school development around school and community precincts would maximise integration opportunities with collocated facilities.
- Currently master planning for a school site is not normally conducted until the land has been acquired or funding has been allocated. This causes conflict because the impetus to construct the new school facility as quickly as possible is at odds with the time required to create an integrated facility in true partnership with Local Government.
- Community infrastructure such as sport and recreation, early years and learning facilities cannot be effectively integrated on sites under the current model.<sup>12</sup> Consultation should include co-design of sites in advance of funding announcements. The 'design and construct' contract model used by the VSBA means more detailed site design does not occur until the project is well underway and with very tight deadlines. This is problematic because it limits opportunities to align with Council projects and prevents a thorough exploration of opportunities.

The disconnect in the planning process will have long-term and far-reaching negative consequences for community access of these sites and is a missed opportunity to deliver public value outcomes. To realise the local and ongoing benefits of locating schools within community hubs and precincts, DET and Interface Councils should work together to establish an appropriate model for planning and delivering shared facilities and integrated sites.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid