

## By Five: Securing Our Children's Future – Together

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### Why By Five Exists

**By Five** was established in 2017 through a shared commitment from Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) leaders to ensure every child – regardless of where they live – has the best start in life. Alarming data highlighted the divide between rural and urban children – geography should never determine opportunity.

The early years profoundly shape school attendance, mental health, education, and future economic outcomes, which in turn impact individuals, families, and communities like ours. There is no other organisation in the WSM doing the work of By Five.

While our region has many strengths – strong sense of community, safety, and open spaces – equitable access to high-quality education and health services remains a challenge. Getting the early years right sets up children, families, and the future of our region for success.

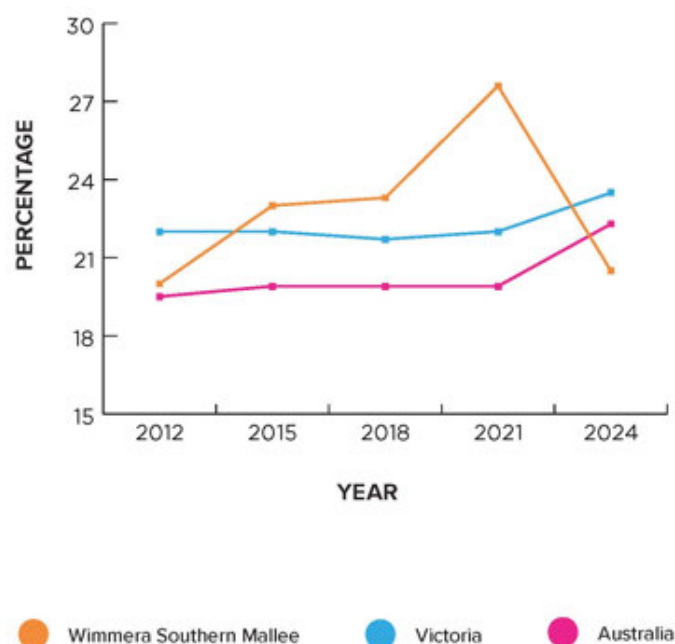
### Our Impact to Date

The collective impact of By Five, particularly over the past four years has delivered measurable results across the WSM region:

1. **AEDC Improvement:** In 2024, the WSM fell *below* the state and national vulnerability averages for the first time in 12 years – against State, National, and broader rural trends.
2. **Paediatric Access:** Wait times reduced by 75%, with over 800 co-consultations supporting more than 500 children in partnership with the Royal Children's Hospital. This initiative also built the capacity of over 100 local professionals, including GPs, Maternal and Child Health nurses, and educators.
3. **Early Childhood Education & Care:** Developed a regional blueprint improving access, quality, and financial sustainability across small rural services. Advocacy efforts have focused on funding reform, infrastructure investment, and workforce priorities that reflect rural realities.
4. **Antenatal Care:** Supported health services to design alternative service models that provide care closer to home, strengthen local capacity, and build the future rural health workforce.
5. **Allied Health:** Trialled a local allied health service model delivering strong results for children, educators, and parents.
6. **Regional Advocacy:** Attracted national recognition and engagement with governments and sector leaders, positioning WSM as a leader in rural early years reform.

## Specific examples for the Yarriambiack Shire

- **Paediatric Services:** 25% (67) of children seen in 2024 were from Yarriambiack, with 84% of all children highly vulnerable. MCH & Allied Health staff participated in monthly paediatric education.
- **Community Voice:** Yarriambiack parental represented on the *Friends of By Five* group. Yarriambiack Shire represented on the By Five Steering Committee and Professional membership on the Advisory Committee. Communities across the Yarriambiack region have hosted many National leading experts to showcase the challenge of early years' service access in rural Victoria, including Early Childhood Australia CEO Samantha Page, Royal Far West CEO, Jacqui Emery and Federal Shadow Minister for Education Hon. Angie Bell.
- **Antenatal:** Partnered closely with Rura Northwest Health Service in understanding adaptive service models which have been showcased across Victoria and Australia. Local women contributed pregnancy and service access experiences, which were shared with the Department of Health, and the Statewide Maternity Taskforce.
- **Allied Health Access:** Connected and supported the introduction of weekly Allied Health servicing to Hopetoun P-12, St. Joseph's and Beulah Primary schools. Evaluation data shows a clinical improvement in clinical outcomes for children, improved parent and educator confidence and wellbeing, with 84% of children stating this intervention has helped them at home and at school.
- **Early Childhood Education & Care:** Yarriambiack have been key partners in driving a more sustainable and accessible ECEC service system for rural areas drawing attention to inequitable funding models that have been acknowledged nationally in the current policy reform space. We have also partnered to submit an EOI for ECEC infrastructure funding for Beulah, Minyip and Rupanyup.



**Figure 1:** 2024 WSM AEDC – Developmental Vulnerability; 1 or more domain

## **Next Steps**

Despite significant progress — including two State Awards for best practice and over 500 community members registering for our 'Back By Five' event in April 2025 — no funding was allocated in the 2025–26 State Budget.

Sustaining and building on this success is critical. Our renewed funding and governance strategy includes engaging the corporate agriculture sector to help secure the region's early years future. Ensuring equitable access to high-quality services and supports remains at the heart of our work.

Our vision remains clear: ***The Wimmera Southern Mallee is the best place to raise a child.***

## **Our Request of Yarriambiack Shire Council**

### **1. Become a Committed Partner**

Join us in our vision and purpose as a key regional partner. Your commitment will demonstrate our region's united focus on improving outcomes for children and strengthen By Five's case for future funding.

### **2. Provide One-Off Transitional Funding**

By Five has reserved funds and is currently supported by WSM Development to operate until 30 April 2026. To complete our transition into a new governance and funding model, we are seeking a one-time contribution of \$33,000 per WSM council (a total of \$200,000 regionally). Without this transitional support, the initiative cannot continue — risking the loss of our hard-won momentum, partnerships, and impact for local children.

### **3. Support Advocacy to State and Federal Governments**

We ask all local partners to continue advocating for investment in rural children, families, and communities through State and Federal pre-budget and election processes, ensuring our region's needs remain visible and prioritised.

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Jo Martin

By Five, Executive Officer

