



CLIMATE CHANGERS FORUM



Summary Report

Prepared by Youth and Family Services, in
partnership with Sustainability Planning

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change is here, and its impacts are already affecting our environment, our society, and our economy. To tackle climate change our efforts need to correspond with the size and scale of the problem. We need to take urgent action, and more of it. From an individual level through to large scale, global, collective efforts to effectively tackle the problem.

What can we do at the local level? Local governments play a critical role in helping their communities reduce emissions and adapt to climate change. This is because the projected impacts of climate change cut across almost all areas of local government responsibility, including the critical assets, infrastructure, and essential services that councils provide for their local communities. This includes how we work with community to reduce our impact.

Greater Dandenong City Council's roadmap for action is outlined in its endorsed Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plan 2020-30. This Strategy sets the course to help the City of Greater Dandenong become a resilient, net zero carbon emission city with an active community prepared for the challenges of changing climate.

In accord with Council's Climate Emergency Strategy, Council's Youth and Family Strategy 2021-26 highlights *'encouraging students and families to take positive action on the environment and the communities in which they live'* as a key tenet of the strategy. This is in keeping with community sentiment, and specifically speaks to local students' views of their concern for the environment. This local sentiment is congruent with the 2022 Mission Australia Youth Survey which found that the environment ranked as the most important issue for young Australians.

Under the theme, Engaged and Valued | Objective 2.2 of the Youth and Family Strategy, Council's Youth and Family Services team committed in 2023 to facilitate a Youth forum, to engage local secondary school students in championing youth led responses to climate change and environmental issues. Held in June 2023, Greater Dandenong City Council's Climate Changers Forum hosted 60 students from five local secondary schools the opportunity to come together to share their thoughts and ideas about climate change.

Offering a complement of both structured activities and small group discussions, participants had the opportunity to express their views and consider prospective actions to enhance environmental sustainability in Greater Dandenong.

This report summarises the main findings reported by students throughout the Climate Changers Forum. The findings from this event will help inform future advocacy and youth led environmental projects delivered by Council's Youth and Family Services, while informing the broader work of Council and the community to work together to reduce our environmental impact.



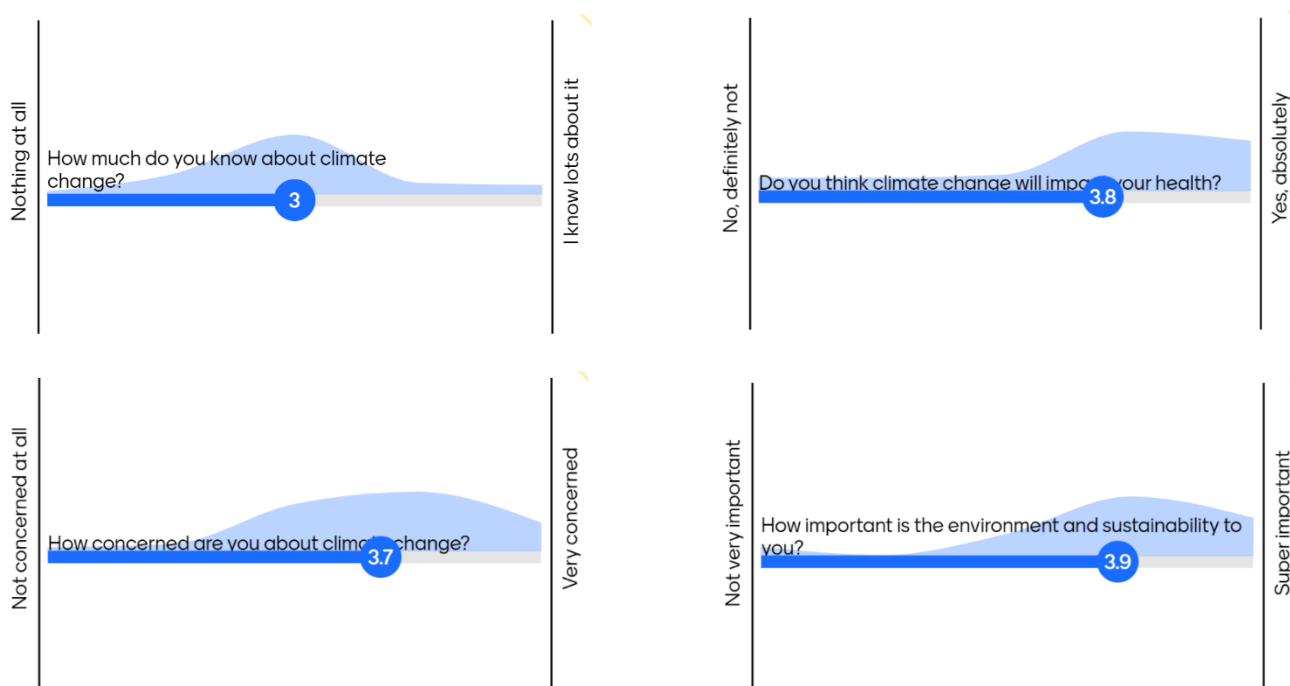
POLL FINDINGS

The forum’s proceedings commenced with an introductory consultation with students, where they were asked to rate their attitude and concerns regarding climate change and environmental sustainability. Using smart devices, students ranked a series of statements using ‘Mentimeter’ - an audience engagement platform that allows participants to provide real-time feedback. A total of 188 responses were collected.

Figure 1 below shows how students rated themselves on the following four questions:

1. How much do you know about climate change?
2. How concerned are you about climate change?
3. Do you think climate change will impact your health?
4. How important is the environment and sustainability to you?

Figure 1: Students’ attitudes and concerns



79 percent of students cited knowing about climate change, a weighted average score of 3 out of 5. 93 percent of students reported being concerned about climate change, with 25 percent of students stating that they are very concerned.

83 percent of students cited that they believe climate change will impact their health, with one third strongly agreeing. Specifically, students reported being very concerned by the associated health implications resulting from climate change. 94 percent of students reported that environment and sustainability were important to them, with many students producing powerful images and related captions during the Instagram activity, this is discussed further in this report.

BIGGEST CONCERNS

Students were asked to anonymously submit what they consider to be the biggest concern relating to the environment and climate change. Individual input, contributed to a collective ‘word cloud’ displayed in Figure 2 below. These themes were then explored in more detail through a guided group discussion.

Figure 2: Biggest concerns reported by students



The most cited issue was natural disasters, reported by 20 percent of students. Participants referenced rising sea levels, floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis as common concerns. They reflected on the adverse impacts that natural disasters have on communities, including “erasure of culture”, loss of resources, housing, and security. Students shared concerns about the financial implications of resource loss, particularly inflation and the rising cost of living.

“Financial stress is probably a big reason why people don’t take [climate] action.”

“Natural disasters affect our way of living - they can lead to people being without a home, food, and security.”

Global warming and the future of our planet were the second-most cited concerns, reported by 15 percent of respondents. Students elicited links between rising temperatures and extreme weather events, such as droughts and bush fires. Students were concerned about physical health impacts, including increased food - and water-borne illnesses, air pollution, pandemics, and possible animal extinction. They also discussed possible impacts on mental health, particularly stress and anxiety. Students were worried that these consequences will be amplified for future generations, with young people largely shouldering the burden.

“We’re mucking up the planet and don’t have another. We need to fix it now; time is running out.”

“Impacts on health because [climate change] affects our lifestyle and surroundings. Our duration of life may be shortened.”

“The air quality and risks of inhaling pollutants, like getting asthma or cancer.”

Impacts on animals was the third-most cited concern, reported by 13 percent of respondents. Students spoke about habitat loss and “mass destruction from deforestation”, as well as impacts on sea life from marine pollution and changing pH levels in the ocean. Students shared an underlying concern about the loss of animal species due to extinction.

“Future generations won’t see the animals we once enjoyed - they will be in museums.”

ACTION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Students were asked to identify changes they could make at school to promote sustainability. Students brainstormed a range of prospective measures that could be adopted, from enhancing school infrastructure and strengthening student capacity, student voice and participation in championing and actioning positive change – including Environmental Student Action teams.

The most popular solutions centred around education and awareness-raising. Students reflected that it was critical for schools to inform both staff and students about climate change and strategies to reduce our environmental impact. Students said that “environmental issues” were partially covered in the curriculum – through science, geography, humanities, and some English texts – however, they would like to receive more “practical advice about how to take action”. Students expressed that they needed regular messages embedded throughout their formal learning, but also outside of the classroom, including signage and opportunities to “connect with nature”.

“We need regular reminders about the right thing to do - you can't just tell us once.”

“More school camps and outdoor excursions to build students' appreciation of nature.”

“Provide incursions, workshops and programs for people interested in climate change.”

Waste management was another key focus for students. Students wanted to improve access to bins by increasing placement around the school, but also by upgrading the school waste system to include recycling and composting. Students indicated that this would need to be accompanied by education to teach the school community about “how to dispose of rubbish properly”. Some schools shared examples of successful student leadership initiatives, including where they have created videos to educate peers about ways to minimise waste. Students suggested that schools should also focus on reducing the amount of rubbish produced in the first place. Strategies included digitalisation of processes to reduce paper usage, reducing plastic packaging at the canteen, and encouraging students to bring “nude foods”.

“We need a better bin system - red for general waste, yellow for recycling, and green for food waste.”

“Provide students with reusable water bottles to refill, instead of single-use ones.”

“Year 10 students created a video clip to show students how to recycle, using incentives to encourage action.”

Proposed solutions also included greater investment in sustainable infrastructure and resources. Energy efficiency was a commonly cited priority, including renewable energy / solar panels, automatic sensor lights, and double glazing. Students would like to see some new additions to school grounds including vegetable gardens, beehives, worm farms and animals (e.g., chicken coop) – which would encourage active involvement from students. Water usage was another priority for students, who expressed a need for rainwater tanks, and increased access to clean water fountains to encourage the use of refillable water bottles.

“Monitor how much electricity is used. Be aware of the temperature and use heating and cooling systems less.”

“Plant vegetable gardens and use the produce in cooking classes.”

“More trees and plants, especially around seating areas.”

Lastly, students called for more organised activities and opportunities to platform student voice. Students reflected that primary schools often have a great variety of environmental initiatives, and they would like to see these carried over into secondary school, where there seems to be less focus and investment. Ideas included tree planting, clean up days, fundraising, and recycling activities (e.g., clothes swap, second-hand book sales). They would also like formalised roles for student representatives to make an impact, such as appointing a “sustainability team”, “gardening leaders” or an environmental volunteering program. Students acknowledged that incentives were important for encouraging action from less-motivated students.

“Noble Park Secondary is currently doing a project where we get points for recycling, and when we accrue a certain number of points, we get equipment like basketball hoops for the school.”

“Recognition for students who recycle, like a ‘house cup’ where students earn points.”

“At end of term assemblies, the school could set targets for us to achieve next term.”

“Fundraising for climate action groups and countries that are affected by climate change.”



ACTION IN THE COMMUNITY

Students were asked to brainstorm ways that Greater Dandenong City Council could support students and the community to take climate action. Like secondary schools, there was a large emphasis on education and awareness raising. Students identified a range of methods for Council to effectively engage with community, including interactive workshops and events to educate residents in a “fun and interesting” way, social media campaigns, print media, and radio announcements. Students suggested that Council could develop resources to inform schools and workplaces and offer incentives to encourage action – such as “providing funding or materials to build gardens.” Students emphasised the importance of access to information in different languages to educate our diverse community, and paring messaging back to basics i.e., “what climate change is? and how what they do will affect the environment?” Students were largely unaware of Council’s environmental initiatives, such as the Sustainability Festival, and suggested that better promotion, particularly targeting school communities was needed to help “spread the word”.

“Advertise what Council is doing on TikTok, billboards, shopping centres and urban screens.”

“Have a climate change board at the library with books and news articles. Library kids’ activities could also have a greater focus on climate change / sustainability.”

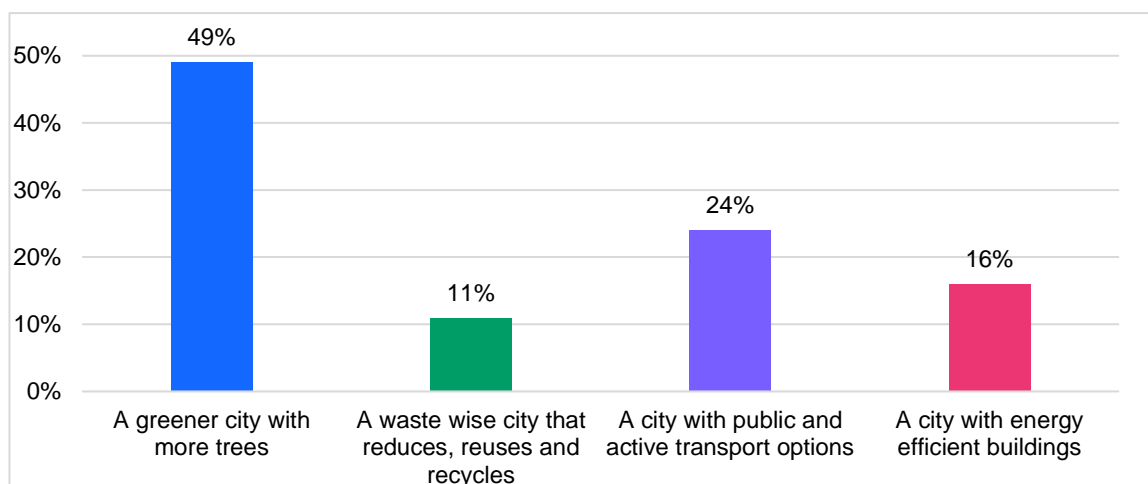
“Profile changes happening in other parts of the world and the positive impact that can be made.”

Group discussions were coupled with a polling activity, where students were required to vote for what they considered to be the most important environmental priority for Council to invest in. Students had the choice of four options, shown in Figure 3 below. “A greener city with more trees” emerged as a clear standout, accounting for almost half of students’ votes (49 percent). Students suggested that Council could create more green space by supporting the establishment of vertical / rooftop gardens for high rise buildings and apartment blocks, coordinating more community tree planting days, and seedling programs for households.

“Having more trees cools the environment and creates more oxygen.”

“A city with public and active transport options” was the second biggest priority, voted by 24 percent of students. Students identified that “Council can make transport easier and more enjoyable” by increasing access to bike paths, advocating for frequent and accessible bus routes, and investing in infrastructure for electric vehicles. Students acknowledged that some changes were beyond the remit of local government and emphasised the important role that Council plays in creating healthy public policy and “advocating to higher levels of government about these issues”.

Figure 3: Priorities for Council to invest in, as voted by students



16 percent of students voted for “a city with energy efficient buildings”. Students suggested that Council could play a central role in providing information and incentives to residents, schools, and businesses, to encourage them to install solar panels. Students commented that Council should strengthen community education efforts, to provide residents with information about how to be more energy efficient and minimise their carbon footprint.

“Council could provide incentives like energy ratings for businesses.”

Waste management was also a priority for students. Although only 11 percent of students voted for “a waste wise city that reduces, reuses and recycles”, it was one of the most cited topics during group discussions. This may be because students have more topic knowledge about waste management compared to other environmental issues. Students observed a lack of community awareness regarding ways to correctly dispose of, and recycle, waste. They reflected that education needs to in the early years, but also capture older residents through “ads about littering” and “recycling and waste education programs”. Students would like to see the addition of compost / food waste recycling incorporated in our green bin system, as demonstrated by many other Local Government Areas. Students were also concerned about the amount of litter polluting our environment and suggested that Council could coordinate more community clean up days.

“Council should run community clean up days, for a whole day once a month, and provide incentives like free lunch or gift cards.”

“There should be stricter action for people who don’t recycle.”

“Early education, beginning in kindergarten and primary schools, about the 3Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Make it relatable, positive, and tangible.”

Lastly, students were enthusiastic about the possibilities for Council to support youth action through organised activities. Common suggestions included after school programs, such as a youth environmental group or advisory body, supporting students to make a positive environmental impact. Students expressed that they would like more environmental forums where “students can engage in small group discussions and influence change”. Students also highlighted the critical role that Council could play in supporting schools, by coordinating interschool events and excursions, like the Climate Changers Forum, and providing incursions / workshops for schools.

“Encourage inter-school activity and collaboration.”

“We would love an environmental education bootcamp (1-2 days) to connect with nature, learn about endangered animals and plants, and how to create change.”

“Council should have a youth group to organise events, like FReeZA for the environment.”

MESSAGING FOR STUDENTS

To conclude the consultation, students were asked to reflect on the types of messaging that influences them. Students independently designed an Instagram post – drafting an image, caption, and hash tags – which they believed to be the most effective way of communicating with their peers, to persuade students to take climate action. The most common communication tactic, used by 41 percent to act now. Visuals highlighted the dangers of climate change, such as natural disasters (particularly fires), damaged natural habitats, and extinction. Clocks / hour glasses were used to symbolise that “time is running out”.



“If we don’t act now, global warming will destroy our earth.”

“Time is running out! The longer we push our climate problem aside, the quicker our time on earth will run out. If you want to see the world as it is now in 60 years, YOU need to make change NOW!”

“If you don’t save our planet, this could be you in 30 years!” [Image of tombstone]

A sense of unity and collaboration was the second-most common communication tactic, used by more than 37 percent of students. Messages encouraged students to join forces and be part of a larger movement, to make a collective impact. “One like = one tree” was a common callout – suggesting that Council could run a campaign, similar to One Tree Per Child, where it commits to planting a tree for every “like” the post gets.



“Help us change the world. Like the oceans, we rise.”

“Join the team! We're bringing the community together for a better, more sustainable environment.”

“We have a single mission: to protect and hand our planet to the next generation.”

Less common communication tactics included incentives, referenced by 9 percent of students. Students suggested that their peers may be influenced by the opportunity to win prizes or receive freebies, such as food and water bottles. Six percent of students created positive messaging, using visualisation to paint a picture of the positive changes we can make by taking action. Six percent adopted an informative approach, providing direction without emotive language. Key messages are summarised in Figure 4 below, which displays students's hash tags in a 'word cloud'.



“Greater Dandenong Youth Services is hosting a local clean-up day, where you can earn prizes for the most rubbish picked up. Come along and help, we need YOU!”

“Planting extra trees would make our community look amazing. Join us to plant trees and help make our city beautiful!”

“Remember the 3Rs - Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.”

Figure 4: Hash tags suggested by students



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

A waste wise school that reduces, reuses, and recycles:

- Increase accessibility to bins around school grounds, ensuring availability of recycling bins to separate waste.
- Digitalise school processes to reduce paper usage.
- Reduce single-use plastics by providing alternative packaging at canteens and encouraging “nude foods” and reusable water bottles.

A resource wise school that conserves energy and water:

- Increase renewable energy sources by installing solar panels.
- Conserve energy by installing automatic sensor lights or switching lights off.
- Prioritise sustainable building design, including heating and cooling systems.
- Install rainwater tanks.

A school that demonstrates environmental leadership:

- Increase access to workshops, programs, and activities for students to learn about the environment and climate change.
- Incorporate climate change and environmental sustainability into classroom learning.
- Support the establishment of a student environmental team or sustainability representatives.
- Encourage action through coordinated activities, such as clean up days, tree planting, fundraising, clothes swaps, or second-hand book sales.

A greener school that supports biodiversity:

- Invest in eco-friendly assets, such as native beehives and worm farms.
- Increase access to green space at school, planting more trees and garden beds.
- Plant edible / vegetable gardens and utilise produce.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNCIL

A Council that supports environmental education and action:

- Deliver engaging interactive workshops and events to community with better promotion.
- Provide information to schools, workplaces, and community through social media campaigns, print media, and radio announcements.
- Ensure information is accessible, considering multilingual material with basic messaging.
- Offer incentives to schools and communities to encourage environmental action.
- Support environmental youth programs.

A greener and more energy efficient city:

- Support the establishment of vertical / rooftop gardens for high rise buildings and apartment blocks.
- Coordinate and promote additional community tree planting days and seedling programs.
- Provide information and incentives to residences, schools, and businesses to switch to renewable energy sources such as solar panels.
- Strengthen community education around energy efficiency and how to minimise carbon footprints.

A city with public and active transport options:

- Increase access to bike paths, provide more frequent and accessible bus routes, and investing in infrastructure for electric vehicles.
- Advocate for a healthy public policy to higher levels of government.

A Council that promotes waste management:

- Start waste management education earlier and include all age ranges.
- Increase community knowledge around waste disposal including recycling.
- Promote recycling and waste education programs, push out littering campaigns and coordinate community clean up days.
- Implement compost / food waste recycling in the bin system.

CONCLUSION

Through a variety of consultation activities, valuable insights were gained around students' thoughts and ideas about climate change. Majority of students reported to be concerned about climate change, with students citing natural disasters, global warming and impacts on animals being the most prominent issues.

Students identified sustainable changes that could be made in schools and the wider community including promoting waste management, conserving energy and water, greener environments that supports biodiversity, increased accessibility to public and active transport options and continued environmental education and action. Students also reflected on what types of messaging influences them to take action on climate change. Students suggested creating messages that used the sense of urgency and highlighted the negative consequences of not supporting sustainable options. They also referenced using a sense of unity and collaboration or providing incentives to increase the likelihood of students taking action.

Youth and Family Services have recommended a range of solutions in response to the students' needs. Continuing to deliver activities, programs and services and advocating for system changes in Greater Dandenong are all priorities for action.

The insights gained from the Climate Changers Forum will assist Council to develop local policies, programs and services that are both reflective and responsive to the recommendations shared by students in our community. Following the release of this report, Youth and Family Services will be advocating to local services and secondary schools to ensure that the views shared by students are heard and actioned.

Any agency or organisation with an interest in working collaboratively to support the implementation of the reports' recommendations is encouraged to contact Youth and Family Services on 9793 2155 or email youthservices@cgd.vic.gov.au.