

# Greater Dandenong Youth Leadership Forum

## Summary Report

Prepared by | Greater Dandenong Youth and Family Services

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This year marks 15 years of Greater Dandenong City Council's [Young Leaders Program | Youth](#). As part of this milestone achievement and celebration, Youth and Family Services developed several projects in 2024 which put 'youth leadership' in the spotlight.

Council's focused attention on 'youth leadership' is not only attributable to the significant milestone of celebrating 15 years of Council's flagship leadership program; but also based on the consultative feedback received from young people, where they have expressed a need to see greater, diverse representation of young people in leadership roles. Discrete research projects, led by Council's youth services team in 2023-24, particularly in relation to young people's experiences of racism and discrimination in the local community, highlighted that future action should prioritise bolstering skill development opportunities for young people, as well as proactive measures to increase the visibility of culturally diverse community leaders, who can act as positive role models.

Greater Dandenong City Council embraced this feedback and have led several projects that pay homage to past and current youth leaders, as well as furthered our work in this space, alongside young people, to jointly consider what steps can be taken to pave the way for building future youth leaders.

## 2. CITY OF GREATER DANDENONG | A LOCAL YOUTH PROFILE

The City of Greater Dandenong is the most culturally diverse community in Australia. It has a strong history of migration. One in six residents is a young person, aged 12-25 years (30,548 individuals). 50.5 per cent of students in Greater Dandenong were born overseas, and 70 per cent speak a language other than English at home.

Focusing on youth leadership and promoting active citizenship in a multicultural community such as Greater Dandenong yields numerous benefits. Youth leadership helps young people from diverse backgrounds feel valued and included. It promotes self-confidence and encourages active participation in society, promoting understanding and bridging gaps across cultures, fostering mutual respect. This understanding reduces prejudice and strengthens community bonds.

Youth leaders can promote cooperation among groups, making communities more resilient to social challenges and can bring a youth perspective to decision-making. Investment in active citizenship encourages young people to participate in civic activities, contributing to shared goals and a collective sense of responsibility and strengthening democracy.

These efforts build a more cohesive, inclusive community by equipping young leaders to bridge cultural divides and foster a shared sense of identity.

### **3. BACKGROUND**

#### **3.1 Profiling Past and Present Youth Leaders | City of Greater Dandenong**

In response to young people's call to action for profiling diverse youth leaders, Youth and Family Services Staff this year, commissioned the 'The Year of Youth Leadership Project', an initiative which explores and showcases just some of the 300 plus remarkable young people who have graduated from the Young Leaders program over the last 15 years.

The project highlights diverse community youth leaders, their stories, and the positive impact the program has played in helping shape their future leadership journey. A selection of these stories and testimonies were collated and presented via a windows exhibition at Harmony Square, (exhibited during September and October 2024), as well as an online video series, and a podcast series. [Year of Youth Leadership 2024 | Youth](#)

#### **3.2 Building Future, Diverse Youth Leaders | City of Greater Dandenong**

Our assertive engagement activities with young people as well as our own locally, conducted research informs us that young people want to hear and see more from culturally diverse community leaders, who can act as positive role models. Some young people suggest feeling reluctant to participate in citizenship and leadership activities, often due to a lack of relatable role models in public media and in decision making bodies, including parliament. Culturally diverse young people need to know that there are pathways for them to participate in decision-making processes at local, state, and federal levels. Young people tell us that there needs to be discernible pathways for young people of culturally diverse backgrounds, to be encouraged and supported to build their leadership skills and experience.

To strengthen 'youth leadership' in Greater Dandenong and encourage young people to have a pivotal role in shaping what future actions could be prioritised locally, Council's 2024 Young Leaders planned and delivered a Greater Dandenong Youth Leadership Forum. The forum brought together youth leaders from across the community, with the forum's theme titled **"You can't be who you can't see."** The title draws inspiration from Marian Wright Edelman, an American activist for the rights of children, who originally used this quote. She believed that children are less likely to be inspired for their future if they do not have visible role models. The same can be said from the voice of our own, local young people, who in various consultation and engagement initiatives, have spoken widely of the need to give prominence to the positive contributions young people make to the community; and equally the need to invest in youth leadership, including diverse representation.

The forum called upon local youth organisations and youth leaders to come together to discuss, collectively, how we can develop and invest in youth leadership, particularly strengthening efforts in securing 'diverse' youth representation. Developing leadership skills in young people empowers them to take on roles that influence and inspire others. This empowerment helps ensure a steady pipeline of capable future leaders.

### **3.3 The Value and Benefits of Investing in Youth Leadership**

Investing in diverse youth leadership fosters innovation, enhances decision-making, and ensures broader representation, as young leaders bring unique perspectives to problem-solving. This investment builds community engagement by empowering young people as advocates, which increases civic participation and drives social change.

Leadership programs also provide essential skill development through mentorship and training. The economic benefits contribute to growth, experience, job preparedness, and in time, job opportunities. Additionally, these young leaders forge and build networks, across communities, laying a sustainable foundation for their future.

Investing in diverse youth leadership offers a multitude of benefits that can positively impact individuals, organisations, communities and more broadly society. Efforts to collaborate and mobilise collective resources from across the local youth sector can only strengthen our deliverables on the ground to young people.

## **4. THE GREATER DANDENONG YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM**

Greater Dandenong Youth and Family Services invited the following youth organisations and their respective youth leaders to attend. We acknowledge these organisations for their support and ongoing participation.

- Centre for Multicultural Youth, Community Support Group South Sudanese
- Foundation House
- Uniting
- South East Community Links (SECL)
- Southern Migrant Refugee Centre (SMRC)
- Headspace
- Youth Support and Advocacy Services (YSAS)

### **4.1 Youth Leadership Forum Agenda**

The forum agenda was demarcated into four key areas of shared experience, questions, reflection, and table discussions.

1. Guest speakers, profiling youth leaders, paving the way for innovation and positive change.
2. Q&A panel comprised of the guest speakers.
3. Identification and discussion of priority youth issues
4. World Café Style, Youth Voice, Leadership opportunities, Youth Representation

### **4.2 Guest Speakers**

1. Ramzi Hussaini - Diversity and Inclusion Delivery Coordinator at Life Saving Victoria and volunteer surf lifesaver
2. DJ Alexandre - Representative at RIDDIM, a community-driven organisation hosting culturally sensitive and inclusive events and programs around Australia
3. Ashvina De Zoysa - Founder/President of Cook4Cald, an organisation which aims to provide non-judgmental support to CALD families through food relief.

### 4.3 Identifying Priority Issues

The forum provided an opportune time for youth organisations to engage with young people and discuss what they believe to be the priority issues facing young people in Greater Dandenong.

Greater Dandenong Young Leaders led the activity and used a variety of consultation methods, including brainstorming and guided questions to elicit young people views.

Forum participants identified the following priority issues facing young people in Greater Dandenong.

#### 4.3.1. Priority Issue | Mental health

Young people identified mental health as a key issue. Young people highlighted that stigma around mental health concerns makes it difficult to openly talk to friends and family. They emphasised the need to normalise conversations about mental health with health professionals and within the wider community.

Young people discussed that mental health and social connection are inextricably linked. Social connection is seen as crucial for enhancing positive mental health, with friendship and community connections being key factors. Additionally, young people highlighted the important connection between mental and physical health, emphasising the positive impact of physical activity.

To address mental health concerns in the Greater Dandenong community, young people proposed the following solutions:

- Increase visibility of mental health literacy information in places frequented by young people, such as shopping centres, markets, public transport, public amenities and waiting areas.
- Increase opportunities for social and community connections based on the needs and interests of young people.
- Promote and provide free or low-cost opportunities for physical activity, emphasising its benefits to mental health.

### **4.3.2. Priority Issue | Education and Employment**

Young people emphasised the importance of an inclusive and accessible education system, particularly for newly arrived youth.

Young people highlighted the need for local employment opportunities and pathways, expressing a desire to find work close to home. They discussed the importance of work for financial independence and supporting family members, which is challenging in the current environment of financial stress.

Young people talked about wanting to feel more prepared for the workforce by accessing programs that provide the skills and experience needed for employment. Volunteering and skills-based programs were cited as potential solutions, however young people felt that these opportunities were hard to find.

Additionally, young people stressed the significance of feeling safe at work, with some noting struggles with discrimination and not understanding their work rights.

To address education and employment concerns in the Greater Dandenong community, young people proposed the following solutions:

- Promote and provide opportunities for work experience, skill-based programs, and volunteering opportunities as a method to build work-related skills.
- Provide accessible education about work rights for young people entering the workforce.
- Continue to advocate for an education system that is inclusive of all needs of students.

### **4.4.3. Priority Issue | Perceptions of Safety**

Young people discussed feeling unsafe in certain community areas – hot spots, including train stations, public transport hubs, and public places, due to crime, violence, and discrimination. They emphasised the importance of having safe spaces in the community where they can congregate without fear of violence or discrimination.

Young people highlighted the need for increased police presence in areas such as public transport, including at night, as well as support for police to

receive trauma-informed practice training. Participants also discussed the importance of having helplines to call for 24-hour help in an emergency and that perceptions of safety can be enhanced through design environmental factors such as brighter streetlights.

Young people discussed the role of the media in exaggerating youth crime, which affects public perception of young people in the community.

To address safety concerns in the Greater Dandenong community, young people proposed the following solutions:

- Advocate for increased police patrols within the community.
- Increase promotion and education of accessible helplines for young people to contact authorities.
- Advocate for better illumination in community areas with streetlights to provide a sense of safety.

#### **4.3.4 Priority Issue | Physical Activity**

Young people highlighted that having good physical health was an important to young people. Despite this, they noted a lack of parks and recreation facilities where they could play sports and be active. They also discussed the difficulty in accessing sports and recreation programs, including free after-school programs, as many were expensive or difficult to get to. Young people emphasised schools as key places to get information about the importance of being healthy and active, and learning about where these opportunities could be found.

Vaping and drug use were also highlighted as a growing concern for many young people.

To address physical health concerns in the Greater Dandenong community, young people proposed the following solutions:

- Activate local parks and recreation facilities with events to attract young people.
- Promote and provide free or low-cost opportunities for physical activity, including competitions, clinics, training, and workshops.
- Increase health literacy on vaping and drug use by providing education through social media campaigns and print media throughout Greater Dandenong.



## 5. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION | KEY FORUM THEMES

Youth leaders participated in world cafe style discussions, mobilised around the key themes of youth voice, youth leadership and youth representation. A series of questions were posed and discussed at each table, where young people cycled through each table theme, responding to key questions, and framing prospective recommendations for each topic.

### 5.1. Youth Voice

*In the community, explore and discuss how young people's opinions, perspectives and feedback is sought/heard?*

Participants discussed that young people's views were gathered through social media, services, schools, consultation opportunities, hands-on activities, and targeted youth events/forums. However, some noted that young people's voices are often missing, especially on topics such as youth crime.

#### **Solutions:**

Youth leaders recommended that organisations working with young people increase their promotion of ways for young people to get involved in their programs. Young people expressed that they would like to see regular networking events, long-term leadership programs, and increased promotion of leadership opportunities, including volunteering and job prospects.

### 5.2. Leadership Opportunities

*What types of local leadership opportunities are accessible to young people?*

Young people highlighted several leadership opportunities in Greater Dandenong, including youth forums, targeted youth programs, leadership roles in schools, and volunteering opportunities. However, they noted that finding and securing these opportunities can be challenging.

#### **Solutions:**

Young people expressed a desire for more events to connect, network, and learn about different services and opportunities. They suggested that it would be beneficial to not only hear from but also work directly with role models. Youth leaders recommended that organisations working with young people

increase efforts to promote current leadership, employment, and volunteering opportunities.

### **5.3. Youth Representation**

*How is diverse youth leadership represented in Greater Dandenong?*

Young people noted that youth leadership in Greater Dandenong is diverse due to our culturally diverse population however mentioned there is scope for improvement. Participants highlighted the need to include all ages, LGBTIQ+ representation, neurodiversity, all abilities, gender, race, ethnicity, languages spoken, geographical location, lived experience, consumers of services, mental health, socioeconomic status, and education.

#### **Solutions**

Youth leaders recommended the following to increase diverse youth representation - boosting promotion where young people frequent or via young people's networks; host more events for young people to network and learn about different services/opportunities; sharing culturally accessible information about local programs and services; engaging role models and mentors to work directly with young people in the community and more funding opportunities for youth programs.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The report emphasises a commitment by Greater Dandenong Council and key local youth organisations to prioritise youth leadership and active citizenship, particularly among our culturally diverse young people. Key findings from recent consultations reveal a need for visible, relatable role models and skill-building opportunities, encouraging diverse youth representation in leadership. In 2024, council has showcased past and current youth leaders and led a collective Youth Leadership Forum, themed "You can't be who you can't see," to address young people's concerns and inspire future leaders.

Greater Dandenong, Australia's most diverse community, has prioritized youth leadership to bridge cultural divides and promote social cohesion. The report identifies youth concerns in mental health, education, employment, safety,

and physical health. Young people proposed solutions, including increased mental health resources, work, and education opportunities, enhanced public safety, and accessible physical activity options. Discussion themes at the forum focused on youth voice, leadership opportunities, and diverse representation, highlighting the desire for accessible networking, mentorship, and representation across all identities.

The report concludes that investing in diverse youth leadership enhances community resilience, innovation, and engagement, building a more cohesive and inclusive society.

Greater Dandenong Youth Services will be implementing actions to support the recommendations in its planning for 2025 and will share these recommendations to participating organisations, Council, and the broader youth sector to support youth leadership.

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