CITY OF GREATER DANDENONG

COVID-19 RESEARCH PROJECT

Prepared by Youth and Family Services

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PART ONE: PROJECT BACKGROUND

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Throughout 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns created far-reaching and immediate challenges for individuals, families and communities. Youth and Family Services recognised that there would be long-term, scarring effects arising from the pandemic.

Greater Dandenong is a community already known for heightened disadvantage. For young people and families already experiencing vulnerability, COVID-19 has, and will continue to, compound existing issues relating to youth unemployment, mental health, and financial hardship.

Youth and Family Services initiated this research project to hear from young people and families in order to understand the full effects of COVID-19 on this vulnerable cohort. As the COVID situation continues to evolve, it is imperative that their voices are heard in order for Council to effectively respond and support the Greater Dandenong community.

The key objectives for this project were to:

- Understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the local community, encompassing the unique and defining characteristics of the Greater Dandenong community through engaging with a diverse range of community members,
- Gain an in-depth insight into how the COVID-19 outbreak has affected young people and families in Greater Dandenong,
- Identify community needs and appropriate service responses,
- Skill up and invest in young people to consult with their peers.

Since the completion of this consultation, we have seen how quickly the COVID-19 situation can change. As small numbers of new cases have been identified, community concerns have resurfaced, compounding previous worries and anxieties. This highlights the complexity of COVID recovery efforts, and the ongoing likelihood of community needs and issues evolving over time. The key findings of this research project will be used to inform Council's response to community needs as we continue to support the immediate impacts and embark on the process of recovering from this pandemic. Council is also well positioned to be able to share these findings, and to mobilise coordinated sector responses in partnership with other local agencies (where appropriate).

METHODOLOGY

The project sought to engage with the following cohorts:

- Young people aged 12-25 years who live, work, study or have a strong connection to the City of Greater Dandenong; and
- Parents or carers of a child/young person aged 8-25 years, who live in the City of Greater Dandenong.

This research project was conducted over five months, commencing mid-August and concluding in mid-December. (Note consultation was paused for a period of five weeks whilst Council was in 'caretaker' mode, leading into Council elections on 24 October 2020).

For much of the consultation period, COVID-19 restrictions impeded opportunities for direct engagement with community members. As such, consultation was principally conducted online or via the phone. In order to capture a diverse range of voices and experiences, Youth and Family Services secured the support of a number of local agencies and services who worked to engage their clients in the project. (See the full list of partners over the page.)

A number of mechanisms were devised to facilitate young people's involvement in this research project.

Consultation methods	Description
Focus Groups	Small group discussions, open to either young people aged 12-25 years or to parents or carers.
	Focus groups for young people were co-facilitated by Peer Research Assistants*.
	Focus groups were held online, using Zoom.
Online Surveys	Separate online surveys were developed for young people and parents/carers, and conducted using Survey Monkey.
	Note: access to the youth survey was restricted to young people aged 15-25 years due to the sensitive nature of some questions.
	Young people or parents/carers wanting additional support could opt to provide their contact details for a follow up call with Youth and Family Services staff.
Interviews	Conducted via the phone, these provided a one-on-one discussion between a young person or parent/carer and a Youth and Family Services staff member.

A total of 17 focus groups, 15 interviews and 139 surveys were completed, engaging over 260 young people, parents and carers *(refer to page 5 for participant demographics).*

Peer Research Assistants

A key feature of this project was the recruitment of four Peer Research Assistants (PRAs). PRAs were employed on a casual basis with Youth and Family Services. All four were graduates of the Young Leaders program. As part of the recruitment process, the successful applicants demonstrated strong skills in facilitation and engagement, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the local community.

PRAs undertook approximately 10 hours training, completed remotely via Zoom, before co-facilitating focus groups alongside Youth and Family Services staff. Ensuring youth involvement in all aspects of the project, the PRAs have also supported the data analysis process; and assisted in identifying the key themes and recommendations set out in this report.
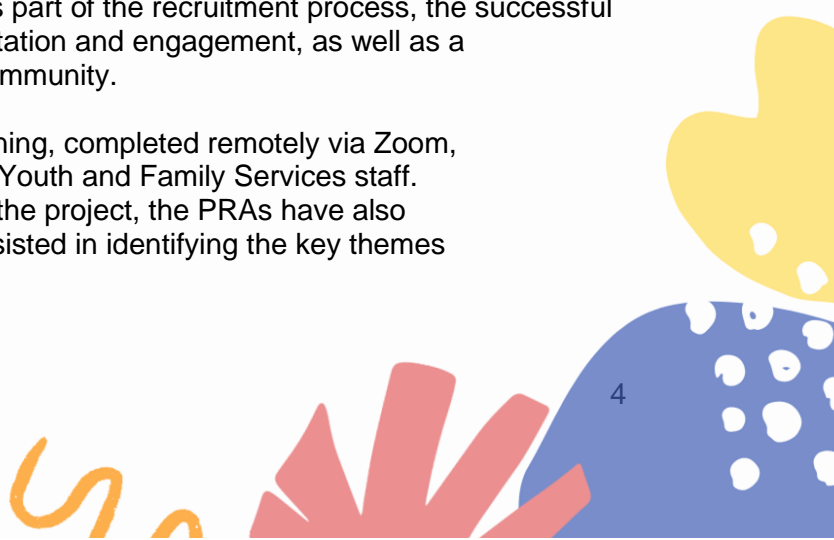
External Agency Support

Youth and Family Services acknowledges the support of the following agencies and organisations, in facilitating their client's participation in this research project.

- ▸ AMES Australia
- ▸ Chisholm Institute (EAL students, Foundation College and international students)
- ▸ Killester College
- ▸ Lyndale Secondary College
- ▸ Mission Australia
- ▸ South East Community Links
- ▸ Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre
- ▸ Uniting – KOMAK Program
- ▸ WAYSS

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 267 individuals participated in the research project – 209 young people, and 58 parents and carers. A detailed breakdown of participant demographics can be found below.

Young people

Of the 209 young people who participated in the consultation, 77% resided within the City of Greater Dandenong. The remainder frequented Greater Dandenong for study (45%), work (21%) and recreation (13%).
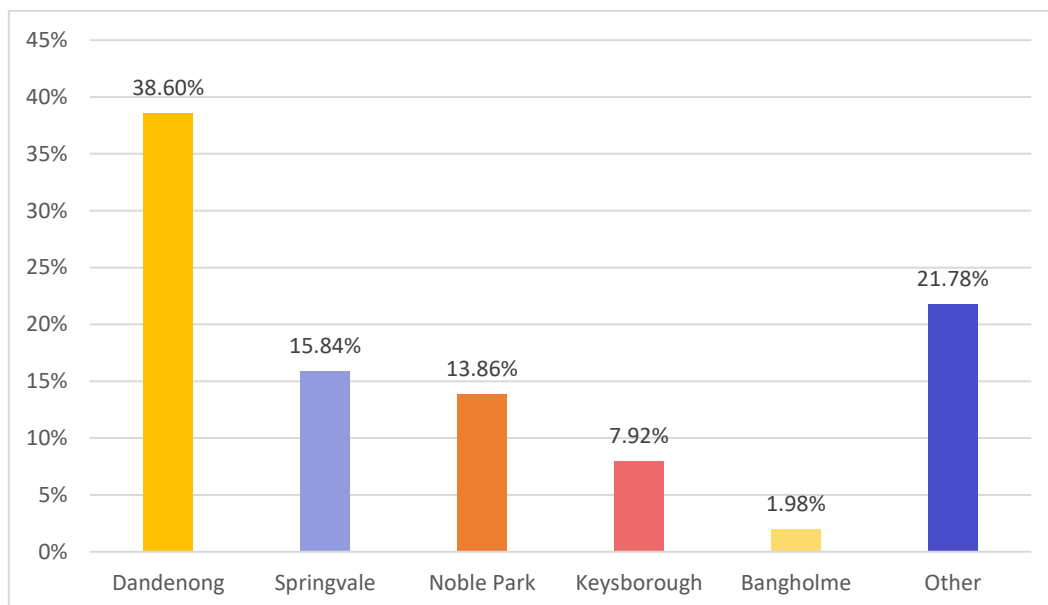

Figure 1: Place of residence for young people

Just over half of participants (56%) were female, 43% were male, and 1% identified as "other". For the most part, young people were at the older end of the age bracket, with almost half of participants (46%) aged 19-25. More than one third (37%) were aged between 15-18 years, and a small portion (17%) were aged 12-14 years – this age group is notably lower as young people under 15 years were not eligible to complete the online survey, and were therefore reliant on interviews and focus groups to participate.
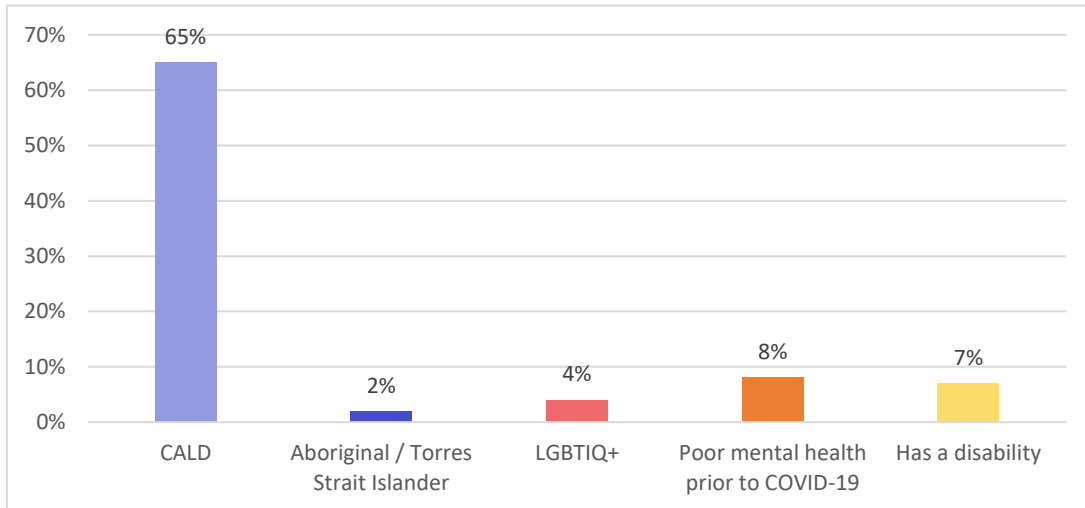
Figure 2: Demographics of young people

Notably, almost two thirds of young people (65%) identified as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), and 8% reported experiencing poor mental health prior to COVID-19.

Parents and carers

A total of 58 parents and carers participated in the consultation. Of these, just over a quarter were male (28%), two thirds were female (70%), and 2% identified as "other". The median number of children cared for by participants was 2; with children most commonly aged between 7-14 years. More than half of parents and carers (55%) identified as culturally and linguistically diverse, and 12% reported experiencing poor mental health prior to COVID-19.

Figure 3: Demographics of parents and carers
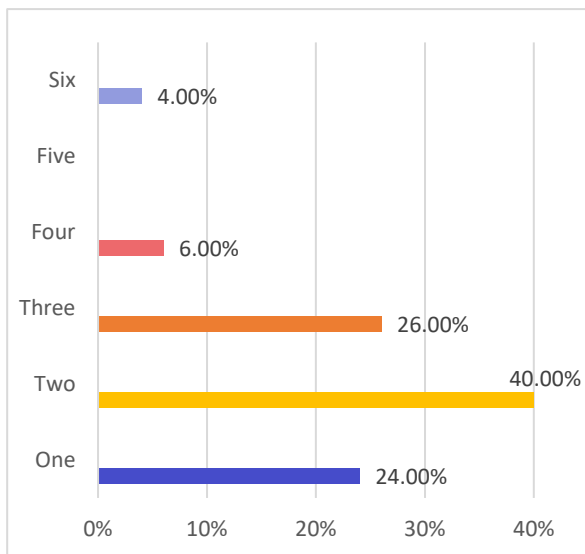
Figure 4: Number of children in participants' care
Total number of children = 115
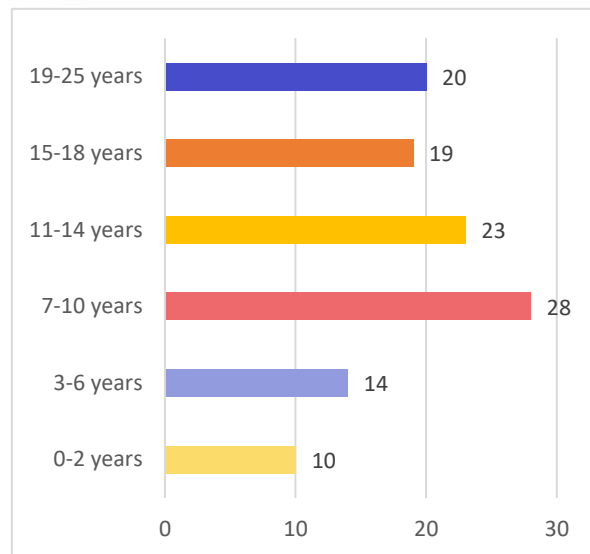
Figure 5: Breakdown of ages for children under participants' care

Response rate

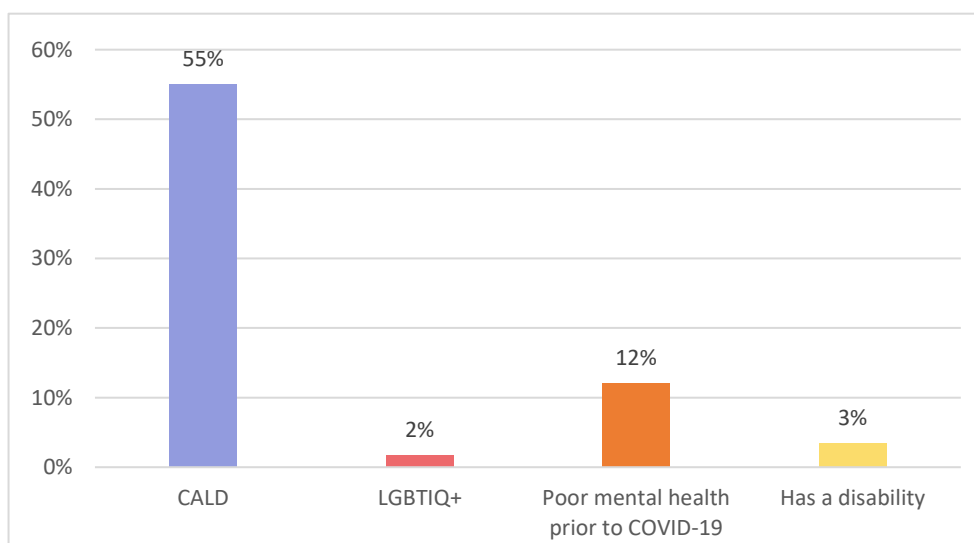This report provides a snapshot of the needs and experiences of young people and families in Greater Dandenong during the COVID-19 pandemic (August – December 2020). The research had a strong engagement rate of 267 participants. Consultation activities were delivered flexibly, allowing participants to opt for which questions they felt comfortable answering. As such, not all participants may have answered every question. Around a tenth of survey respondents (14%) chose to partially complete the online questionnaire.

TIMELINE

The following timeline *(Figure 6)* provides an overview of key events related to COVID-19, at a state and local level during 2020. It is intended to provide context to selected occurrences referenced within this report, and may not be inclusive of all changes that occurred during COVID-19.

With consultation for this research project taking place across several months (from August to December 2020), the findings note discernible trends in how the community perceived their situation as restrictions were introduced, extended and eventually eased across this period.

Figure 6: Timeline of key events in 2020

	State-wide	**Local events**
March	First social distancing measures introduced; School holidays start a week early.	First confirmed case diagnosed in Greater Dandenong, on 20 March.
April	Stage 3 'stay at home' restrictions are introduced; Term 2 commences with remote learning.	
May	Some restrictions begin easing from mid-May (including a return to on-site learning) as case numbers decline state-wide.	
June	Case numbers begin to grow, with clusters in Melbourne's western and northern suburbs.	
July	Stage 3 restrictions are reintroduced across metropolitan Melbourne from 7 July. Remote learning recommences for Term 3. Face coverings become mandatory from 22 July.	As at 16 July, there have only been 39 cases in Greater Dandenong. Cases will spike over the coming month, reaching 407 cases by 17 August (with 384 active cases).
August	Amidst growing case numbers, metropolitan Melbourne enters Stage 4 'stay at home' restrictions for six weeks from 2 August, limiting travel to 5km from home and limiting movement for exercise and shopping.	Anti-lockdown protests in the vicinity of George Andrews Reserve, Dandenong attract large crowds and gain significant media attention. From 24 – 28 August, police make nine arrests and issue 48 fines.
September	After six weeks, Stage 4 restrictions are extended for a further two weeks, until 28 September.	On 2 September, the Chief Health Officer names Greater Dandenong and Casey at hotspots and a testing blitz commences. By 18 September, a south-east cluster has been identified with 36 cases.
October	Term 4 recommences with on-site learning. Restrictions progressively ease throughout October and November as case numbers continue to decline. Zero new cases are reported for the first time on 31 October.	The last case in Greater Dandenong (from the 'second wave') is diagnosed on 15 October.
November	As of 24 November, there are zero active cases in Victoria.	By November, the final three remaining cases in Victoria's 'second wave' are all located in the south-east (Greater Dandenong and Casey). The final active case is cleared on 24 November.

Consultation period (August – December)

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions may assist in the reading of this report. It is worth noting that young people may sometimes use these terms interchangeably. Where required, the correct term has been noted throughout the report for clarity.

Term	Definition
Isolation / Self Isolation	People who have a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 or are suspected of having COVID-19 (e.g. they are showing symptoms or are awaiting a test result) are required to enter isolation. They may only leave their home in an emergency or to seek medical care/testing.
Quarantine	People who have: ▸ Returned from overseas, or ▸ Been in close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 Must be in quarantine for 14 days. If they test positive or develop symptoms during the 14 days, they then commence isolation.
Stage 3 Restrictions	Introduced in March/April, and again in July in Victoria. During this time there were only four designated reasons to leave home: 1) To shop for essential supplies 2) To exercise 3) To seek or provide medical care or assistance 4) To work or study, if you could not do so from home
Stage 4 Restrictions	Introduced in August, Stage 4 consisted of the same designated reasons for leaving home, with additional restrictions including: ▸ Limiting shopping and exercise to within 5 kilometres of your home ▸ Restricting shopping to one person per household, once per day ▸ Restricting exercise to one hour per day outside of your home ▸ Only essential industries permitted to operate, with workers requiring a permit issued by an employer to verify travel to and from work. Childcare was open only to the children of works with a permit.
Lockdown	Whilst no official definition of 'lockdown' is available, this commonly refers to periods with Stage 3 or 4 restrictions in place. The Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews has also frequently referred to these restrictions as 'lockdown'. Many young people also refer to lockdown as being 'in iso' (short for isolation, but distinct from the official measures of isolation as defined above).

PART TWO: KEY FINDINGS

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

A key aim of this project was to capture the concerns and associated impacts of COVID-19 for young people and parents or carers in the City of Greater Dandenong. Participants completing the surveys were asked to identify their top three *concerns* relating to COVID-19. The highest ranking areas of concern are highlighted below for each group.

Figure 7: COVID-related concerns for young people and parents and carers

Young people	Parents and carers
1. Health of family and friends (60%)	1. Education outcome for my child/ren (53%)
2. Own health (45%)	2. Health of family and friends (49%)
3. Education (41%)	3. Money – ability to afford basic needs (44%)

To gain a deeper insight into how COVID-19 has affected young people and families in our community, participants were then asked to share what the biggest impact has been for them and their family. Responses highlight that the effects of COVID-19 have been many and varied – from health and wellbeing, to education and employment, the pandemic has influenced all spheres of life. The majority of participants were able to identify both positive and negative impacts. The key themes to emerge are outlined below.

Relationships and social connections

Social isolation and disconnect were the most commonly reported negative impacts from COVID-19. Almost half (49%) of youth survey participants said that they felt lonely and isolated "always" or "often" during lockdown. Young people acknowledged that while they were able to connect with others virtually (via phone and video call, messaging and gaming platforms), these methods didn't provide the same quality of connection as face-to-face contact. Many participants described experiencing significant digital fatigue, which had flow-on effects for their social lives, reducing their desire to connect with others online.

"Socialising with others feels like a chore after I've studied online all day. It's really difficult to bring yourself to send a text to someone instead of talking, which is so easy."

Survey findings show that during lockdown 63% of young people felt less connected to their friends, and almost half (49%) felt less connected to family who they do not live with. Young people also reported missing social events and opportunities to meet new people. This was particularly pertinent for newly arrived young people and those in key transitional stages (e.g. commencing high school or university), as COVID-19 restrictions prevented them from establishing social connections within a new, unfamiliar environment.

> *"Because of COVID-19 I can't start my life here."*

> *"Not being able to socialise made COVID-19 seem much more daunting.
> It felt like it was going to be a lot harder to get through."*

The health and safety of loved ones was also a significant stressor during COVID-19, ranking as young people's top issue of concern. Almost two thirds (63%) of survey respondents reported that they "always" or "often" worry about loved ones catching the virus. Young people described feeling worried about their family members in community-facing jobs, as well as those overseas in high-risk areas, who were more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19. Several participants shared experiences of loss, having family members pass away during the pandemic, and the difficulty of being unable to travel to grieve with their family.

> *"My brother works at Woolworths so there was this constant fear because he's in a
> high-risk situation. At the same time, I was also worried about my mum in India
> because it's not very safe over there. You can't help worrying about the worst-case
> scenario."*

While young people felt disconnected from those outside of their home, a significant portion reflected that experiencing lockdown with their household members brought them closer together. One of the most commonly reported positive impacts for young people was strengthened relationships with family, as they were able to pause their busy lifestyles and spend more quality time together. 50% of survey respondents reported that they feel closer to the people they live with, and many reflected that they hope to continue spending more time with family members after COVID-19.

> *"The best part of lockdown was getting closer with my family. I've formed
> better connections with each one of them individually."*

> *"I normally don't see my siblings often because they are always at work, but
> because of lockdown I got to see and spend time with my siblings every day.
> That was nice to be close to them again."*

Although COVID-19 may have inhibited young people from making new social connections, many participants reflected that it's given them the chance to reconnect with existing friends and build stronger bonds. Participants suggested that this experience will enhance future social interactions, as it has made them grateful for the relationships in their lives and increased the value that they place on face-to-face connections. Some also highlighted that COVID-19 has increased their sense of community belonging, as it's brought neighbourhoods together to support one another.

> *"Even though I couldn't socialise with my classmates, all of us experiencing COVID
> and remote learning together has allowed us to get to know one another and relate
> to each other even more. We all knew we were going through it together."*

Mental health

A significant number of young people experienced negative impacts on their mental health. Many reported increased feelings of stress and anxiety, and one third (34%) of survey respondents said that they felt sad or depressed "always" or "often" during COVID-19. Participants also described having difficulties maintaining a positive mindset through lockdown. Without their usual routines and activities that make them happy, young people struggled with boredom and finding the motivation to complete daily tasks. Several young people described needing mental health support and accessing counselling services for the first time during COVID-19. However, for others, the transition to telehealth was a significant barrier that prevented them from accessing professional help.

"I've been living by myself and left alone with my thoughts. It hasn't been fun. I haven't reached out for support because I don't like phone calls or web chat. I want to talk to people face-to-face, so I'm waiting until I can seek help in person."

"I've been trying my best to keep motivated, but it's not easy when you're in the same room, in the one place, with the same people. It's really hard."
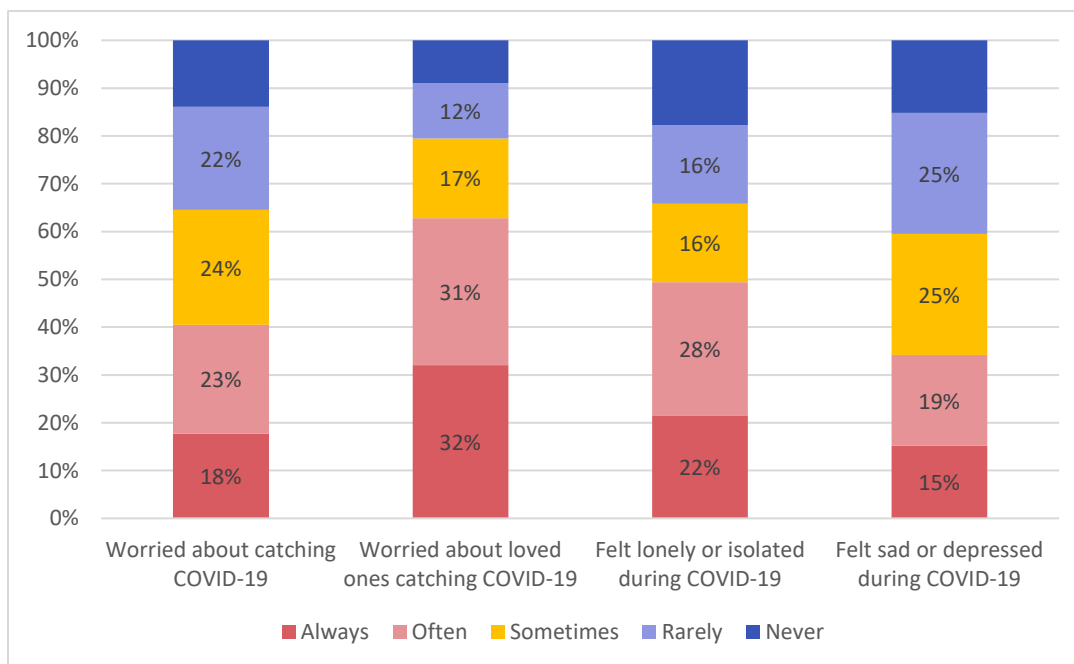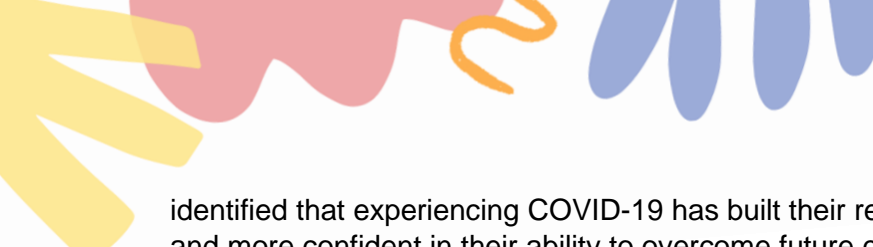

Figure 8: Mental health indicators for youth survey participants

On the other hand, a significant portion of young people suggested that COVID-19 has had a positive impact on their mental health, by creating more time for them to stop, reflect and care for their own health and wellbeing. Young people commented that, prior to the pandemic, they weren't as attuned to their own thoughts and feelings, and didn't make enough time for themselves to rest and relax. During lockdown, many developed new hobbies and self-care practices which have enhanced their mental wellbeing and taught them to prioritise their own health – both now and following the pandemic. Participants also

identified that experiencing COVID-19 has built their resilience, and that they feel stronger and more confident in their ability to overcome future challenges.

"It's taught me to slow down and take care of myself."

"I've started going to yoga classes, doing breathing techniques, learning how to stay calm. I'm doing things that before COVID I probably would have laughed at."

"It's an experience that makes you stronger. I feel more prepared in life now. Everything's been a mess, but knowing that we got through it and we'll be fine gives me hope."

Physical health

The impacts of COVID-19 on young people's physical health have been mixed. On the one hand, young people have reported increases in sedentary behaviour and unhealthy eating. Conversely, many reported being able to maintain active, healthy lifestyles at home. The absence of sports and recreation activities was identified as a significant challenge for young people. Organised sport plays a big part in many of their lives, and participants expressed that not being able to participate in sport (or attend the gym) took a large toll on both their mental and physical wellbeing. Participants also shared concerns about increased screen time, consumption of junk food and weight gain during lockdown.

"I haven't been walking around as much, so I feel like my bones and joints are deteriorating. I have barely left my house and I'm constantly sitting down and not getting exercise. If I don't have a reason to leave the house, I won't do it, so I've just stopped walking."

While some have struggled, the physical health of others has thrived during COVID-19. Around a tenth of participants reported increased physical activity during lockdown, enjoying the excuse to leave the house and be outdoors. Many participants developed healthier sleeping patterns, as they no longer had to get up early to travel, and were appreciative of the opportunity to catch up on rest. Young people reflected that COVID-19 has also improved their hygiene habits (e.g. hand washing and sanitisation)– a practice that they hope to continue after the pandemic.

"COVID has been reminder to look after our health and wellbeing."

"We spent a lot of time as a family exercising together - bike riding, scooting, skateboarding, walking, cricket, tennis. Anything to get us outside. It's been much better quality time than sitting around watching movies like we'd usually do."

Education

The pandemic has presented many challenges for young people enrolled in education. Just over half (52%) of survey participants reported that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on their education, and two thirds (68%) felt disengaged or less interested in their studies. Young people largely spoke of experiencing difficulty in adjusting to online learning.

They raised concerns about being able to set and follow a routine from home; not having a suitable learning environment; and having less access to support from their teachers. Further

compounding these challenges, 12% of participants (1 in 8) reported that they did not have access to the resources needed for online learning (e.g. computer, internet).

Young people described having a larger workload during remote learning, and the toll this took on their mental health as they experienced increased pressure and stress. Many expressed worries about their academic performance, commenting that they feel as though they have fallen behind and may have difficulty catching up next year.

"Lockdown made the stress worse… everything takes longer to complete from home. We don't have as much time for ourselves because we feel burdened by schoolwork."

"Being at home, I don't get access to everything I need, and we don't get to talk to our teachers when we need to. You have to email them questions, and it can take hours to get a reply."
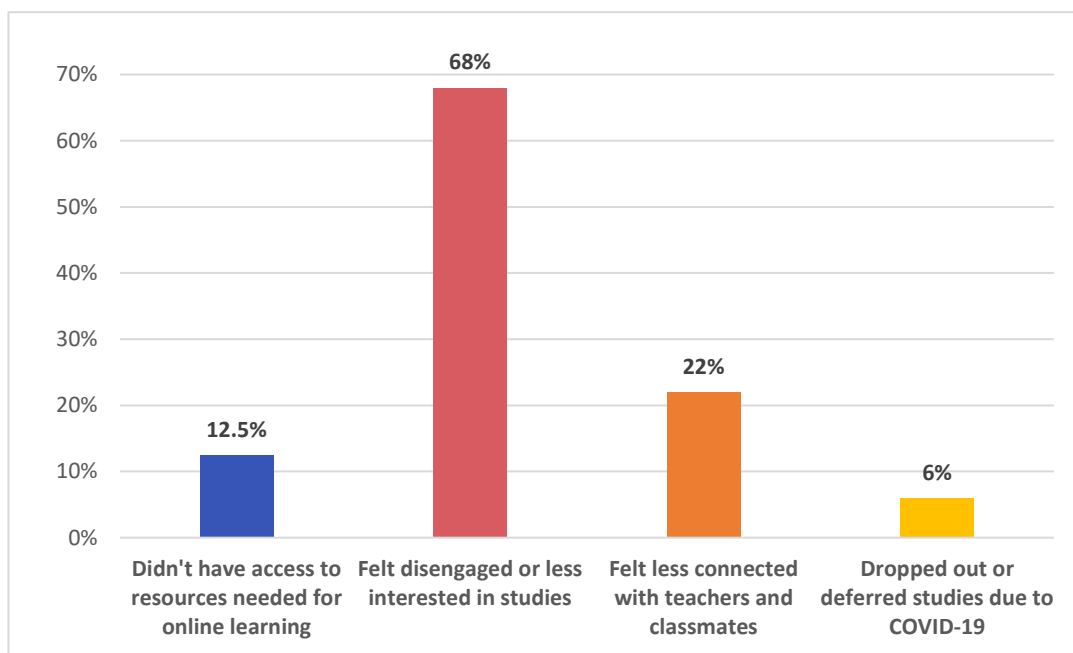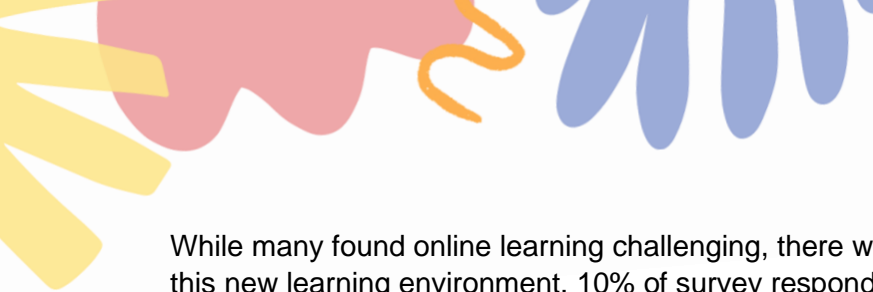

Figure 9: Education indicators for youth survey participants

One of the biggest learning aspects missed by young people was the opportunity to collaborate and share ideas with classmates; and problem solve with teachers face-to-face. Students reflected that online delivery didn't lend itself to these types of interactions, which they found demotivating. For those who had a challenging remote learning experience, 6% dropped out or deferred their studies. Students enrolled in practical courses and TAFE degrees, in particular, expressed concerns that they have been unable to attend class, complete assessments or work placements this year. They expressed frustration that studying this year feels like a waste of time and money.

"You don't feel like you're getting value, you're paying all this money to go to university and then everything is online."

"My engineering course is practical, so I don't have the option of online learning. I feel like I've wasted an entire year."

While many found online learning challenging, there were some young people who thrived in this new learning environment. 10% of survey respondents said that COVID-19 has had a positive impact on their studies. For these young people, the benefits included enjoying self-directed learning, being able to manage their own time and work at their own pace. For the highly motivated, independent learners, this resulted in improved academic performance.

"I participate more in class and get more out of it than I would face-to-face. I feel more confident when I'm online."

"I've learned how to study by myself. At home, we get to decide how and when to do our work, so I've learned time management and how to work independently."

Outside of formal education, having time for personal growth and skill development was the most commonly reported positive impact from COVID-19. Young people used their spare time for self-directed learning – reading more and researching topics of interest; completing online courses; learning new languages and practicing their English. Participants shared stories about exploring new hobbies, getting creative, and developing life skills such as cooking, cleaning and money management.

Employment

A large number of young people identified issues relating to acquiring and maintaining paid employment during the pandemic. Almost one quarter (24%) of respondents either lost their job or were temporarily stood down as a result of COVID-19. A further 4% have had their hours cut.
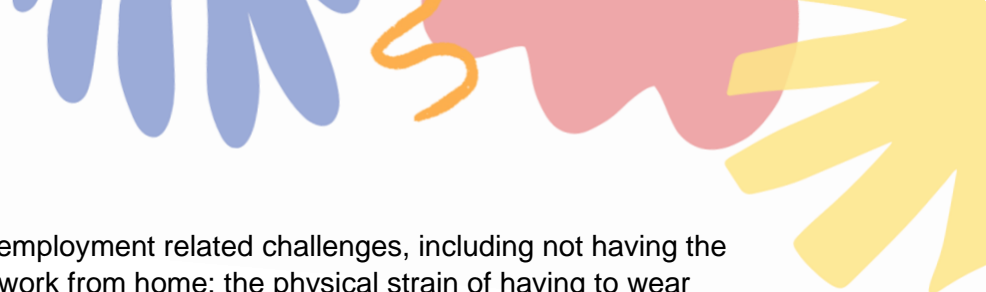
Adding to these concerns, many young people had parents and carers who were laid off during lockdown, and were worried about the flow-on financial effects that this may have on their family. Some young people described being under significant financial stress, and had to move in with relatives because they could no longer afford to pay rent and bills. Others had to pick up work while completing remote learning, to help their families stay financially afloat. Newly arrived young people and international students in particular, expressed concerns about their casualised employment and ineligibity for financial supports.

"It's affected me a lot because I feel a big responsibility to provide for my family, and without being able to work I feel like I'm failing them."

"My parents have lost their jobs, and we can only afford so much with Job Keeper, so I had to go to work for five days a week while maintaining my schoolwork."

"It's such an overwhelming experience, especially as an international student not being able to get access to Job Keeper and Job Seeker... affording food and rent has been difficult."

Nearly 40% of survey participants said that they were looking for work prior to COVID-19 and have been unable to acquire a job. For those who've retained work during the pandemic, young people reported increased levels of stress, worry and job dissatisfaction. Some shared concerns about the security of their employment, while others (particularly those in essential jobs) discussed challenges related to their changed working conditions during COVID-19.

Young people described various employment related challenges, including not having the required space and resources to work from home; the physical strain of having to wear personal protective equipment for long periods; fear of contracting the virus through community-facing work; and increased abuse and mistreatment from customers. There was a shared consensus among young workers that these changes took a significant toll on their mental health.

"Working in a healthcare environment has been super stressful – every time someone comes in with cold or flu symptoms, you can't help wondering if it's coronavirus."

"We were working from home together, living with our parents, working shoulder to shoulder at one desk… If we were stuck at home for any longer, I don't think we would have had the sanity to keep going. You feel like you're living in a 2x3 box."

"Due to the panic buying, abuse at Woolworths increased more and became normalised. It wasn't nice for the staff as we have to constantly deal with that and feel bad about it, even after our shift has ended."
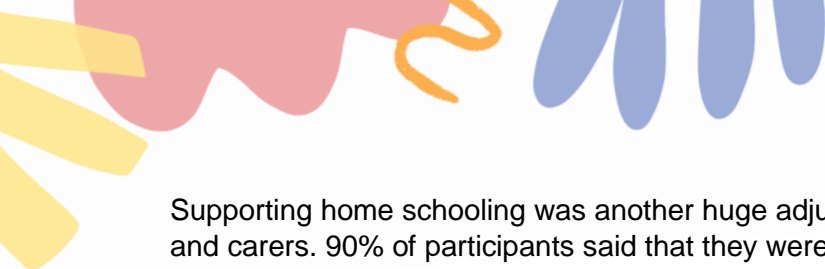
Parents and carers

Like young people, strengthened relationships and social connections was the impact most frequently identified by parents and carers. Three quarters (77%) reported an increase in quality time spent with family, allowing them to build closer relationships with their children. Increased time together wasn't without its challenges, however. Parents and carers described difficulties keeping their children occupied without their usual sports, hobbies and social activities to attend. Those with younger children (who did not yet attend school) found that there was a lack of resources to support parents in providing meaningful activities for their children to learn and play at home. While some preschools and kindergartens did support families with the provision of resource packs, these were not always accessible to families during the second lockdown when travel was restricted.

Without being 'essential workers' and qualifying for childcare during this period, many parents had to juggle these duties while working from home, which has been a significant challenge.

Although for the most part their reflections were positive, parents described missing having time for themselves, and spoke about the difficulty of being isolated from their friends and extended family. Two thirds of participants (66%) said that they felt less connected to their friends, and almost half (49%) felt less connected to family who they do not live with. Almost one third (30%) of participants said that they felt lonely and isolated "always" or "often" during COVID-19. Parents and carers did reflect, however, that being in lockdown has strengthened their relationship with their local community, with many forming new connections with neighbours.

"Staying at home and getting to know my children more has played a major role in making our relationships stronger."

"It really bonded us with our neighbours. That's helped us a lot – connecting with other people around the street, sharing tips, helping each other out."

Supporting home schooling was another huge adjustment that impacted the lives of parents and carers. 90% of participants said that they were assisting their children with remote learning. 29% reported that their children did not have access to the resources required for online learning, and a quarter (26%) had to purchase a laptop/computer so that they could learn from home.

While some cared for children who were quite self-directed, independent learners, others faced challenges in keeping their children engaged – however both cited facing worries for their children's return to face-to-face learning. For those who thrived learning from home, parents and carers expressed concerns that their children won't be given the same opportunities for extension in a class environment. For those who struggled learning from home, parents and carers are worried that their children's academic performance has been adversely affected, and that they'll be "left behind" when they return to school.

54% of survey respondents selected "education outcomes for my children" as one of their greatest concerns during COVID-19, ranking as the top issue of concern for parents and carers. Similarly, more than half (52.6%) of participants said that they were concerned that online learning will impact on their child's academic results.

"At the end of the day I'm a parent, I'm not a teacher. It's different helping them with homework, but when it comes to online learning you clash. My kids would always say 'you're not a teacher, my teacher doesn't do it like that!'... It loses you respect. Especially as a single parent, it was really challenging. Every time I turned away from one, the other would get on their games."

"My grandson tells us how bored he is at school now, the pace of learning back in the classroom isn't challenging enough for him - he's not being extended like he was during remote learning."

Parents and carers also faced issues maintaining employment during COVID-19. Some had to stop working to stay at home and support their kids with remote learning, while others had their hours reduced. Over a third (36%) of participants reported losing their job or being temporarily stood down during COVID-19.

This had negative financial effects for families, with 43% experiencing a decrease in household income. A fifth of parent and carer participants reported being unable to pay mortgage or rental payments, bills and essential items during this time; and almost a quarter (24%) had accessed material aid or emergency relief services. Money (ability to afford basic needs) ranked as the third highest issue of concern for parents and carers, with 44% of participants stating that it was a significant worry for them and their family. Several families told us that they had to move in with relatives or take on boarders in their home to help ease their financial strain.

Lastly, parents and carers discussed a number of impacts on their family's health and wellbeing. Many identified an increase in sedentary behaviour, with just over half (51%) reporting a decline in physical activity, and 93% reporting an increase in their children's screen time. Almost half (44%) reported a decrease in healthy eating, and of the 30% of participants who drink alcohol, 91% reported an increase in alcohol consumption.

In terms of mental health, parents and carers reported a high level of worry and fear for the health of loved ones, as well as their own health. When rating their stress levels, participants' stress averaged a 7 out of 10 during COVID-19 (compared to an average of 4 prior to the pandemic). Concerningly, 44% of parents and carers said that they felt sad or depressed "always" or "often" during lockdown. While these figures are quite stark, many participants predict that their habits will return to normal, and their health and wellbeing will improve after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.
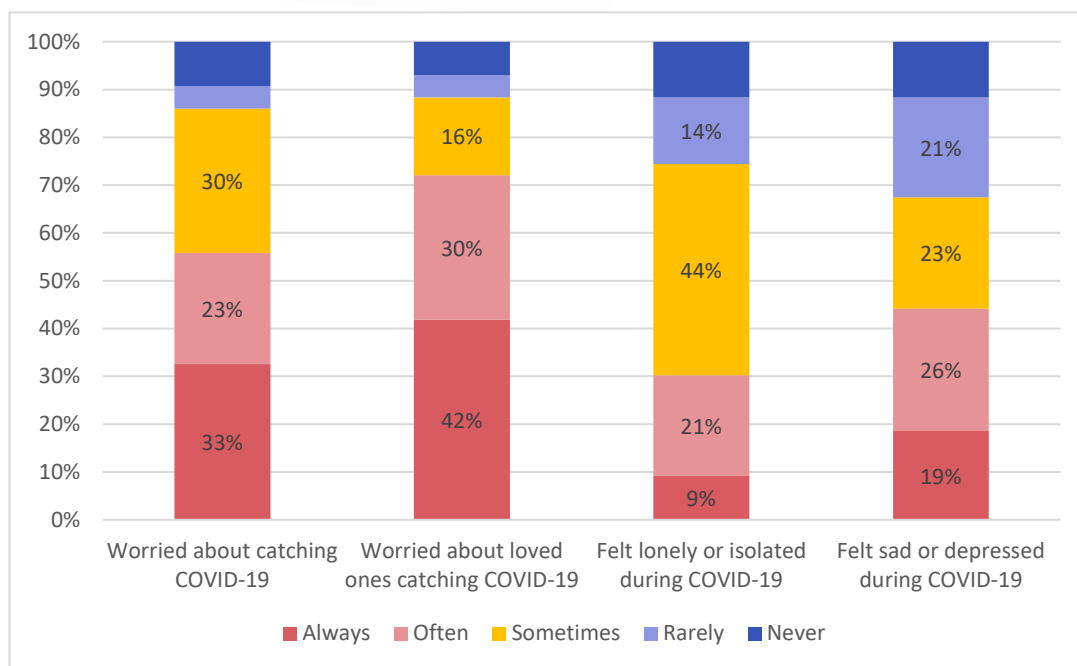

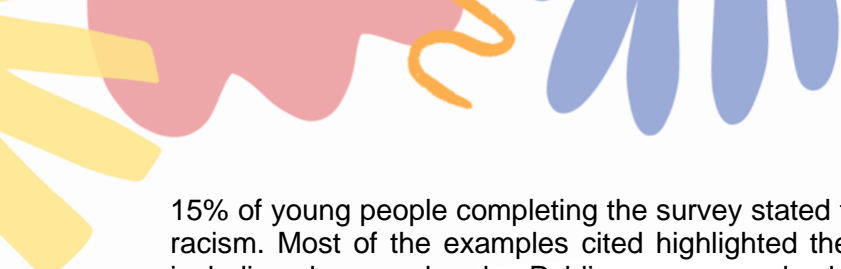**Figure 10: Mental health indicators for parents and carers**

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

As Australia's most culturally diverse municipality, Youth and Family Services were concerned to hear reports about the prevalence of COVID-related racism from the outset of the pandemic. Extensive efforts were made to directly engage young people in a focus group where we could seek to explore and understand the experiences of COVID-related racism in Greater Dandenong.

Unfortunately, multiple callouts yielded little interest in coming together for a collective discussion on this topic. The *Hidden Cost*[1] report released by the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) in September 2020, examines the findings of a state wide research project into young people's experiences of COVID-related racism. The report highlights low rates of reporting of experiences of racism and discrimination, which may explain young people's reluctance to engage in a focus group specifically focused on this topic.

Nevertheless, experiences of racism and discrimination were cited in the youth survey, and also raised in some focus groups. The key themes are discussed below.

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[1] *Australian National University and Centre for Multicultural Youth (September 2020), Hidden Cost - Young Multicultural Victorians and COVID-19. Available at: www.cmy.net.au/resource/hidden-cost/*

15% of young people completing the survey stated that they had experienced COVID-related racism. Most of the examples cited highlighted the prevalence of racism in public spaces, including shops and parks. Public space was also highlighted a key location for racism in the Hidden Cost report *(CMY, 2020).*

> *"Once I wasn't wearing a mask because I was exercising [outside], and then this guy and a girl was [sic] staring at me in their cars."*

> *"When we went to supermarket before masks were [sic] compulsory, people looked at us funny."*

Social media was also mentioned as a setting where racism frequently occurs. Some young people spoke of witnessing racism on social media during the pandemic, even if they did not feel personally impacted or targeted.

Young people from certain cultural and ethnic backgrounds were more adversely impacted than others. Some young people of Asian background mentioned being told to 'go eat a bat', a slur based on a myth circulated widely on the internet at the outset of the pandemic, claiming that the Coronavirus originated from consumption of bat soup in China.

Young people of Muslim background spoke about perceptions that Victoria's second wave of infections was caused by the celebration of Eid Festivals on the first weekend in August. In the south-east this perception was compounded when Victoria's Chief Health Officer specified that a cluster based in the Cities of Greater Dandenong and Casey had emerged as a result of Afghan families visiting one another. (This was not a permitted activity at the time.)
Such perceptions were very hurtful to the many young people and families who were taking every effort to comply with ongoing restrictions. As one young person put it:

> *"Many people often said that the clusters were caused by Muslims and Eid festivals. This was saddening because I had complied with every rule strictly."*

A focus group conducted with international students also raised concerns about the example set by leaders around in the treatment of people from overseas, who reside in Australia.

> *"When ScoMo [Prime Minister Scott Morrison] said 'if it's hard for you, it's time to go back', it was very hurtful…. It's not our fault. We can't go back now even if we wanted to due to the borders being closed. If we go, we can't come back."*

These students asserted that they were on valid visas, paying income tax in Australia, and contributing to the national economy. They felt that these comments from a national leader, and the lack of support for international students during a time of crisis, did not match the vision of a welcoming and inclusive country that they were 'sold' when considering applying to study in Australia.

CMY's research found that 87% of CALD young people were concerned about experiencing racism or discrimination when they resumed their everyday lives and re-entered public spaces after lockdown. This suggests that these concerns will not dissipate following the pandemic and must continue to be addressed.

One young person shared a more optimistic view for how COVID-19 might help stem prejudice in the future:

> *"I am hopeful that this will improve people's understanding of personal beliefs and cultures. After everyone wearing face coverings, maybe people won't look down on others who wear burqas, headscarves etc."*

19

COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

Since Government restrictions were first introduced in March, there have been many changes affecting what Victorian residents are able to do, and who they can see *(see timeline on page 9 for more details)*. We asked participants to tell us how they stayed informed, and what impact these restrictions had on their lives. This section outlines the experiences of young people and families as they shifted in and out of lockdown, and how these changes have affected them.

First lockdown

A lot of young people observed that, at first, the impact of the initial lockdown didn't really 'hit' them. Many reflected that it took a few weeks for 'reality to set in' and that it wasn't until the cancellation of key milestones (e.g. birthdays, weddings, graduation) and significant events that they realised the severity of the situation.

A large portion of participants commented that, although a surprise, they found the first lockdown to be quite a positive experience. Some found it exciting that they were part of a 'historical event' and were living through a very new, novel experience. Many commented that it was like a 'forced holiday' and gave them time to rest and relax. Young people, parents and carers all observed that, prior to COVID-19, many of them lived busy lives and had little time to stop and focus on themselves.

Participants reflected that this experience has taught them to prioritise their own health, and suggested that this is something they intend to continue post-lockdown. Many participants reflected that the first lockdown was a lot easier as there were no geographical restrictions in place, and so they could go outside of their immediate neighbourhood to socialise and recreate.

> *"When lockdown started, I was actually looking forward to the restrictions because it was a good opportunity to take a break."*

> *"I think during the first lockdown I was kind of excited because this had never happened before. But as the lockdown kept going on, the feeling of loneliness started to creep in."*

> *"At first it was a little bit exciting because it was a global pandemic and I felt like 'OK we're part of history now, this is something to tell my grandchildren.' But as we entered deeper into it and restrictions started getting stricter and stricter, I started feeling a bit hopeless."*

On the other hand, some participants found the first lockdown more challenging because it hit them unexpectedly, and they weren't prepared for the changes that it would bring to their lives. Participants recalled observing a change in the demeanour of people around them, as fear began to set in during the first lockdown. They discussed how frightened they felt by others 'panic buying' and behaving aggressively towards one another. Many reflected that they felt a lot safer with restrictions in place, and felt uncertain when Government restrictions were lifted for the first time.

> *"The first lockdown was very unexpected, so it was harder for me. The second one, I knew what to expect and how to handle it."*

> *"People got really scared, and that seeing sudden change in people was really shocking."*

Second lockdown

A small portion of participants found the second lockdown easier because they felt 'more prepared' and had a range of strategies and self-care techniques that they'd developed during the first lockdown to assist them. Some participants observed that they 'expected a second wave', so they weren't caught off guard as they had been at the start of the year and felt more mentally prepared. Other participants had adapted well to learning and working from home during the first lockdown, and so were quite pleased to return to their at-home routines.

"When the second wave hit, I was sad and stuff, but I knew what I was doing, how to take care it and what I had to do to make myself happier and mentally okay."

"I'd kind of gotten used to COVID. I'm actually one of those people who's not really looking forward to going out again because I prefer working at home and everything."

Conversely, the large majority of participants commented that the second lockdown was a lot more challenging for them. The process of changing in and out of restrictions and watching the case numbers rise was described as an "emotional rollercoaster". Participants indicated that they were understanding at first, but as lockdown dragged on and community members continued to be non-compliant, their patience wore thin.

The addition of geographical restrictions (5 kilometre travel radius) and face coverings added a further layer of difficulty, altering the way that families were able to utilise community spaces. Being much more restricted in their movement and opportunities for face-to-face interaction, participants reflected that the second lockdown took the greatest toll on their mental and social wellbeing.

"As the restrictions became more serious, everything just started to fall apart."

"I was still able to keep quite social during the first lockdown, but the second one was tough. That's when all the issues came about. Soccer season was cancelled, I couldn't see my friends, and it affected me heavily. I felt a lot of uncertainty with the increasing numbers and cases getting higher and higher, it felt like it was never going to end."

"When went from stage 3 to stage 4, that's when I was starting to feel like 'OK I can't stay positive anymore'. I'm just so sick of it".

Staying informed

When it comes to sourcing information about Government restrictions, young people's approaches were many and varied. A large number commented that prior to COVID-19, they never watched the news, but since lockdown commencing, they'd tune in to the daily updates.

Several participants emphasised that they prioritised "trustworthy sources", citing examples such as the Premier's announcements, ABC and Channel 7 news. Other young people stayed informed via social media, and observed that they had peers who played an active role in sharing new announcements and keeping them updated.

A lot of participants told us that they opted not to watch the news, with some saying that it negatively impacted on their mental wellbeing. This was an increasing trend in the later stages of the consultation period, as 'news fatigue' grew and the impacts of ongoing

restrictions compounded mental health challenges. Young people in particular, relied on trusted adults in their lives (e.g. parents, grandparents and teachers) to keep them informed. These young people commented that they found that information about restrictions was clear, and they thought the Government was "pretty transparent".

Conversely, whilst young people felt that information was readily accessible, they weren't always clear about how these restrictions applied to them. A large proportion of survey participants indicated that restrictions could have been communicated more clearly, with 24% of young people saying that they "always" or "often" felt confused about what was expected of them, and a further quarter saying that they felt confused "sometimes".

Many parents and carers reflected that communications were not clear for culturally and linguistically diverse audiences, and that more effort should have gone into simplifying the language used when making announcements.

"I don't think what [Dan Andrews] announced is clear. A lot of people, English is not their first language here, so it's hard for people to understand when they speak in a professional way. They need something simple and easy for everyone to understand."

"At the beginning I kept informed through the news, but I keep myself away from it now because I knew it affected me really badly... It feels a bit overwhelming."

A key issue to emerge through our discussions with young people was that they'd noticed a lot of contradicting information and misrepresentation in the media's coverage of the pandemic. Many young people reflected that the media (particularly towards the beginning of the pandemic) emphasised that older people were highly susceptible to the virus and that young people weren't at as high risk. They commented that this "sent the wrong message" and encouraged reckless behaviour, leading young people to disregard the rules.

"There was a lot of misrepresentation on social media that confused people. People didn't know how to tell what was true."

"I found that the whole way through we either had no information, or we had conflicting information that changed every single week. Media often misrepresented things and it became overwhelming not knowing what was going on."

"I saw that young people were less susceptible to COVID and stuff, I thought they probably shouldn't say that because young people can still spread the virus and die from it. It's bad to send that message."

A series of protests in Dandenong gained significant media attention in August *(refer to timeline on page 8)*, and were frequently raised in focus groups conducted in the following weeks. Young people were very concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus amongst large crowds of people gathering each day. They also expressed their disappointment that these actions had further fuelled negative media attention for Dandenong, and did not feel is was representative of the majority of people who were 'doing the right thing'.

"The Dandenong protests were close to my house, it was crazy. It's kind of annoying, it doesn't give us any result except a bad result. The more they do the more bad results, and they'll just give us more restrictions. It's better to be quiet and just follow the rules for the better."

Exiting lockdown

When asked how they feel about restrictions easing and resuming more activity outside of their home, almost all young people expressed excitement and relief. While some had very little apprehension about resuming face-to-face contact, many commented that they would proceed with caution and be quite vigilant with their behaviour (e.g. avoiding public transport and crowded spaces, practicing good hygiene).

Young people who were consulted during November-December, when restrictions had lifted, reflected that even though their usual freedoms are back, things "still don't feel the same" and will probably take quite a while to return to normal. A key concern shared by young people was that they were going to have trouble readjusting to their normal routines. These challenges are discussed in detail later in the report *(see Community Response)*.

Parents and carers expressed a lot more apprehension and caution regarding restrictions lifting and returning to their usual routines. Participants indicated that they would be maintaining many of their habits developed during lockdown to limit contact with the community and avoid crowded spaces. Some reflected that they now feel "claustrophobic" entering shopping centres and will be continuing to shop online and buy groceries in bulk, to minimise risk.

With increased contact with others comes the worry that the virus will spread again. Many participants expressed concerns about a third wave occurring and had concerns that the public would not act responsibly or take reasonable precautions. Participants expressed significant frustration towards the non-compliance of community members following the first lockdown, and were worried that this may happen again. Some did, however, reflect that the second wave was managed a lot more effectively - with the intention to "eliminate the virus rather than flatten the curve", and that this has eased their worries moving forwards.

"I feel happy [about the prospect of restrictions easing] but at the same time quite concerned. Especially because it didn't end well after Stage 3, with the case numbers increasing again. People need to listen for once in their life and obey the laws!"

"I'm reluctant to make any big plans because there's this fear that it's going to happen all over again. You see people crowding in the supermarkets and just think 'jeez, double zeros* might not last forever'."

* 'Double zeros' refers to a day where there are zero new cases and zero deaths reported

FUTURE PLANS AND GOALS

Having gained a thorough understanding of the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the consultation then sought to explore perceptions around the long-term impacts and what key issues may present during COVID-recovery. Young people were asked whether they felt the pandemic would have an impact on their future plans and goals; and if so, how? Parents were also asked if they felt the pandemic would impact their children's plans and goals.

Likelihood of achieving future plans and goals

Young people shared mixed feedback regarding the likelihood of being able to achieve their future plans and goals following the pandemic.

During focus group discussions, many young people shared a sense of optimism and felt that COVID-19 had not changed their plans. Young people were largely undeterred from their chosen pathway, although at times they did express frustration about being delayed. For a young person eager to embark on their chosen study or career path, a year felt like a long time to be 'on hold'.

> *"It's not like I won't ever be able to do it in the future, it's just been a massive waste of time. Like a whole year has been pulled into the darkness. I'm delayed by an entire year."*

> *"I think it's important to point out, COVID has just slowed things down, it's not taking anything away."*

Other young people felt that COVID-19 would have an overall positive impact on their future, having been able to use the time at home to develop new skills or to reflect on their future pathway and consolidate their career plans. During focus groups held at the height of Stage 4 restrictions, this optimism tended to waiver with young people more likely to voice concerns about the economic recession and high unemployment rate.

> *"I feel like it's positively impacted my future. I've had a lot more time to work on myself, develop new skills and hobbies, and work on my YouTube channel. It's boosted my ability to improve my YouTube channel."*

> *"COVID has changed the way I look at things. I never put a whole lot of thought into my future, I was like "just do it later, you've got so much time!" But this experience has awakened me. It's shown me where I want to go. Before COVID I didn't know what I wanted to do in life. Now I do, and I know what I need to get there. I'm more motivated to work hard – it's only made me more determined and I'm 'on my grind' now."*

> *"We're in a recession so it makes sense that people will hire less. I didn't really think about that or how it would affect me [until now]."*

However, the survey results indicate a different outlook on future plans and goals, with 53% of young people saying that they feel less likely to achieve their goals.

Figure 11: Young people's perceptions on the likelihood of achieving future plans and goals
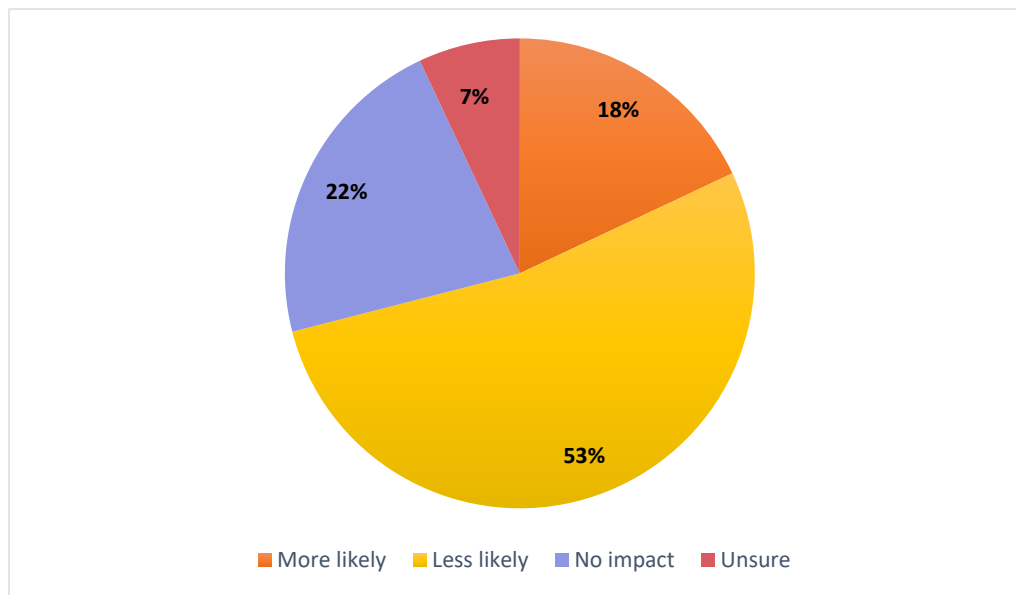
Prior to COVID-19, consultation through the Greater Dandenong Youth Resilience Survey[2] (2019) and the Mission Australia Youth Survey[3] (2019) already demonstrated that young people in CGD are more likely to perceive barriers to achieving post-school goals, and have a low sense of optimism for their future. The survey results highlight that COVID-19 may have further compounded these challenges.

Areas of particular concern for young people's future plans and goals are outlined below.

Future employment prospects

Employment was the most frequently cited long-term concern for young people. Young people expressed worry that there would be increased competition in the job market, and that they would now be competing against more experienced candidates who have lost their job. This was particularly concerning for young people about to graduate and wanting to enter the full-time workforce.

Young people also felt that their inability to undertake work experience (secondary school) or student placement (TAFE or university courses) would further limit the experience they could draw upon for future job opportunities. Similar concerns were shared by students completing courses that traditionally have a strong component of 'hands on' or practical learning, such as science and engineering.

"I was really depending on work experience but since many programs have been stopped – I'm not able to use this for my [job] application."

"I'm about to finish my course at a time with a lot of unemployment. Not sure if I'll be able to get a job. My industry is downsizing, and I'm only entry level without experience."

"I wanted to be a police officer but I had to learn how to swim. I was doing really well until the pools closed. Now it's demotivating seeing how police are treated. I'm not sure if I want to do this anymore."

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[2] City of Greater Dandenong (2019), *Resilience Survey*. Available at:
youth.greaterdandenong.vic.gov.au/networks-and-publications/resilience-program

[3] Mission Australia Youth Survey (2019), *Key and emerging issues - Data breakdown for Greater Dandenong.*

Long-term impact of remote learning

Young people completing the online survey rated education as their third-highest concern relating to COVID-19. Whilst the immediate impact of remote learning has been discussed previously, students also shared their concerns about a longer-term impact. Those about to undertake VCE or university exams, expressed apprehension that their results would be negatively impacted by the extended period of online learning. Students voiced their frustration that due to circumstances beyond their control, they have had to work harder than students in previous years' but weren't confident that their outcomes would reflect this additional effort.

"We hope that in the final exams it doesn't show our stresses, because we've worked hard and done our best."

Parents also shared concerns about a long-term impact from remote learning. Of those responding to the survey:

‣ 53% were concerned that it would impact on their child's academic results
‣ 11% felt that their child was now less likely to complete high school after online learning

Finally, online learning meant that some young people deferred their studies - either through voluntarily withdrawing, or because their course was unable to be delivered in an online environment. These young people mostly expressed their desire to continue with their chosen study pathway once able to do so.

On a positive note, some students stated a preference for remote learning. These tended to be students in the earlier years of high school (Years 7 to 9). A number of those who struggled to adapt to remote learning stated that in future they would not take going to school or university for granted.

Educational transitions

Particular concerns were shared by young people who were about to transition through an educational milestone. These include Grade 6 to Year 7; Year 7 to Year 8; Year 10 to VCE; and secondary school to a tertiary institution. These students expressed concerns about not feeling as prepared as they hoped, or not having been able to consolidate their learnings from the current year in readiness for 'stepping up'. Parents also shared concerns about their children who are about to transition, particularly from primary to secondary school.

"I'm concerned about how it's going to be going into Year 8 because I'm obviously not as experienced going into high school as I should be."

"My younger brother starts high school next year and he's also very concerned about how COVID will affect his transition. Remote learning definitely put him in a hard position and he's worried about how much more difficult it will be for him at high school. We're all concerned about our own education and how we will be learning - are we on the right track right now, or has COVID put us off the right path and we need to catch up?"

"I didn't apply for uni yet [December 2020]. I think we would have had help at school to apply already if there was no COVID. I don't know what study will look like next year. I don't know if the classes will be online. I don't want the classes to be online, I want to experience my first year of uni."

Financial impact

The third most commonly referenced future concern for young people was around financial security. Many young people spoke of either their own or their parent's job loss, and the impact this has had on household finances. Many young people in Greater Dandenong work to contribute to their household budget, and expressed their concern or disappointment at being unable to do this.

"I don't have a job so felt very sad and useless as I couldn't help my parents financially. My dad couldn't work either. My mum's hours were reduced [at one job] and some [at a second job] completely stopped."

"I was an independent person and helping my family out as well. When the payment went down I wasn't able to do this anymore, I started falling behind on rent and stuff because I wasn't getting what I used to get."

"I've overheard a few things at home when it comes to my parents trying to keep a steady income. My mum's job has changed twice during this pandemic, her hours keep shifting over and over."

Delayed testing for drivers' licenses

Gaining a driver's license is a rite of passage and a key milestone in becoming independent for many young people. Learner drivers were unable to accrue practice towards the requisite 120 hours under Stage 3 and 4 'stay at home' restrictions, and license testing was on hold for much of the year. Young people raised this as an issue, feeling that a lack of independent transport limits access to work and study opportunities. This is compounded during a time where many express cautions about the safety of using public transport.

The inability to gain a driver's license was most frequently cited as a concern amongst newly arrived young people.

To help clear the testing backlog, the Victorian Government has announced a $27million investment to open temporary testing sites (including Cranbourne in the south-east region) and a potential move to completing written test components online.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE

A key feature of this project was to understand how Council could best support young people and families in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously acknowledged, the recovery process is not linear, and the needs and concerns of young people and families are likely to continue to evolve and shift over time.

At the time of this consultation, young people, parents and carers have identified specific priorities in response to emerging and heightened areas of community need.

Priorities for young people

Three clear priorities have emerged for young people:

1. Employment support

Employment was the most commonly cited priority for young people as part of COVID-recovery. Young people identified a need for more support around looking for work, including resume writing and interview skills. This need was expressed both by young people looking for full-time work, as well as those currently studying and looking for part-time or casual work.

A lack of access to careers counselling was also identified as a key barrier, with support offered through secondary schools seen as limited or lacking knowledge of local job opportunities and industries. High school students also felt that they had missed out on opportunities for careers education during remote learning.

Young people also suggested that Council had a role to play in advocating for more opportunities for young people to gain entry-level employment or to gain work experience. Some young people expressed a view that Council could take a greater role in providing these types of opportunities for young people.

"To be honest, I've heard everyone say they're trying to look for jobs. There needs to be more work opportunities and employment places for young people. It's not OK, we have a family to support and need to get the daily things that we need."

2. Social connection

Young people expressed a strong desire to enhance social connections through opportunities to come together and meet new people as a key tenant of combatting isolation as part of COVID-recovery. Whilst there was no discernible consensus on what sorts of groups or social programs young people would like, they did refer to wanting to "try new things" or "learn new skills".

Many young people also raised concerns about how they would feel readjusting to being in group settings, and asked for support with practicing social skills including how to make friends.

"[I feel] anxious being around people and being close to people. So just getting used to that normal routine of being close to people after social distancing for so long and not being around people."

"Even basic social skills. I feel like I've forgotten how to talk to people now."

3. Mental health support

Young people suggested that as part of COVID-recovery youth agencies and schools could provide more information about how to maintain a positive mindset, as well as self-care. Young people recognised that prolonged disruption to their routine, coupled with limitations on movement, had left them without their usual coping strategies and struggling to remember how they practiced self-care prior to COVID-19.

For those requiring additional support with mental health, many young people recognised that services are available but were unsure of how these could be accessed. They requested that information on referral and eligibility be more widely promoted. The concept of support groups was commonly mentioned in responding to mental health, with young people seeing the benefit of sharing experiences with peers after being isolated for so much of the year.

"Mental health is a big thing now, there's a lot of people feeling really anxious. Workshops and support groups focusing on mental health and helping us move past COVID."

It is worth noting that by-and-large, young people spoke freely and openly about mental health. Several young people shared their personal struggles with anxiety and/or depression during the pandemic, and spoke of positive experiences with reaching out to services for support. This is positive to note given the ongoing focus on destigmatising mental health support. These efforts were further amplified at a local, state and national level during COVID-19.

Concerningly however, some young people did share their personal experience in seeking support from a mental health service, only to find barriers with eligibility criteria, long waiting lists or lack of response from the service provider.
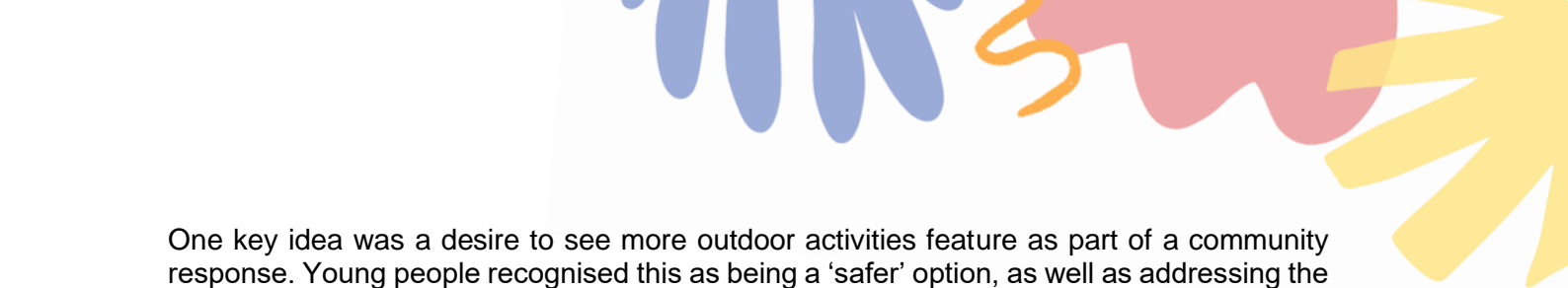
Additional ideas and areas for support identified by young people included:

▸ School and study support, including support for transitioning back to on-site learning, as well as subject-specific study groups or homework clubs to help with 'catching up' on missed learning;

▸ Language practice, for newly arrived young people who felt that their opportunities for informal language practice through day-to-day interactions has been limited;

▸ Community events, with an aim of 'bringing people together'. Specific ideas included movie nights and food carnivals;

▸ Information about budgeting, financial counselling and material aid.

How young people want to be engaged

Many discussions with young people highlighted a need for reassurance about how to safely reengage with community life when lockdown ended. Whilst young people largely spoke of a desire to 'move forward', they identified that some people will struggle with 'going back to normal'. These conversations highlighted a desire to safely bring people together, and an understanding that participation in youth or community activities will look different following the pandemic.

"Spreading the message that COVID is not an on-off switch, it's an ongoing issue. It's not over, but we're nearly there. Provide a glimmer of hope but also telling people that we have a responsibility to each other and ourselves."

One key idea was a desire to see more outdoor activities feature as part of a community response. Young people recognised this as being a 'safer' option, as well as addressing the fatigue of being largely limited to indoors during Stage 4 restrictions.

Young people were also asked how we could best let them know about services and programs. Social media was seen as critical to communicating with young people. Other suggestions included sharing information with schools, universities, workplaces, libraries and sports clubs. Some young people suggested advertising in high profile locations, frequented by young people such as train stations and bus stops.

Priorities for parents and carers

Consultation with parents placed strong emphasis on the importance of local facilities, events and attractions in the future. However, they highlighted concerns around community safety and suggested that this may pose as a barrier to their (and their families') use of local amenities. Specific concerns were raised about the Dandenong Park and Noble Park Skate Park precincts.

"When I go out walking, I realise that there's a lot of litter (around Noble Park) and the landscaping Is a bit unkempt. It doesn't feel like there's people trying to beautify Greater Dandenong. After lockdown, we started going to other parks that have gym / exercising facilities. A lot of families can't afford that equipment - it would be great to have it at more parks across the community so that it's accessible to everyone."

"Investing in local infrastructure, where we feel we are part of the local community, to attract community to stay within the local community and use local amenities – as many people will want to stay local and support local – so there is no need to go further out."

To enhance perceptions of safety, parents mentioned improving the cleanliness of facilities as well as enhanced CCTV and police presence. Parents also stated that they feel more comfortable in public spaces that are well utilised and have lots of people around, which was a challenge during lockdown due to the tight restrictions on movement outside the home.

Parents also cited a lack of employment and volunteering opportunities for their children as additional concerns for Council to address.

PART THREE: CASE STUDIES

In completing this research project, it was identified that particular cohorts of young people faced specific challenges as a result of the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst this is not an exhaustive list, the examples below highlight the nuanced impact on selected cohorts, and prompt further consideration of tailored community responses.

Case study 1: International Students

The international students who participated in this project were in their final year of an engineering degree. They expressed deep concern about the impact of COVID-19 on their studies, their future job prospects and their financial situation. Their concerns are compounded by separation from their families and worry about what is happening with the Coronavirus in their own home countries.

International students have not been eligible for Job Keeper and Job Seeker support payments, meaning that those who have lost work have been without a source of income. Many report that they are unable to receive money from their families at home, due to the global impact of COVID-19. Meanwhile, universities and TAFEs continue to expect payment of course fees - a sore point given that remote learning has restricted access to on-campus amenities and resources.

Remote learning has also limited opportunities for 'hands on' learning which would typically be a key focus in the final year of an engineering degree. Students worried that this could jeopardize their final results, as well as limiting their practical experience when applying for jobs in an increasingly competitive market in 2021. For these students, finding employment is imperative to staying in Australia once their student visa expires.

The international students who we spoke to for this project, shared their disappointment that Australia was promoted as a learning destination with support and opportunities for international students. They felt that the lack of practical support extended to international students during this crisis had not fulfilled expectation. They shared their frustration at being unrecognised and unheard in existing State and Federal government COVID-19 response efforts:

> *"I want to hear more about international students… we feel very excluded when it comes to talking about Victorian residents. They talk about students [a lot], but not international students. We are here too you know!"*

Case study 2: Newly arrived young people

A number of newly arrived young people participated in this project; many of whom settled in Greater Dandenong either just before, or during, COVID-19 restrictions. Migrating to a new country, even at the best of times, can be an incredibly challenging adjustment, and so to face this drastic change during lockdown – where one's ability to explore and connect with their new community is very limited – proved extremely difficult for participants.

One of the biggest barriers reported by this cohort of young people was the inability to learn English face-to-face. They expressed significant frustration regarding the transition to remote learning, as completing classes online impeded their ability to effectively practice and develop their English skills. Furthermore, many were unfamiliar with the technology and platforms required for remote learning, and indicated that they had to learn how to use a computer in order to participate. Moving forward, newly arrived young people expressed concerns that their English proficiency was not at the level it would have been had they had the opportunity to learn in-person, and some were worried that this may negatively impact their future learning and employment opportunities.

Young people reflected that they felt as though their plans for settling in Australia had been put 'on hold', and they missed the opportunity to explore their new community, make connections and meet new people. Some described feeling isolated and 'homesick', and that these stresses were exacerbated by their inability to travel and visit family.

Like international students, this cohort experienced difficulties securing and maintaining employment, as well as financial stress due to COVID-19. Many young people identified that they were in insecure, casualised jobs, and that when lockdown affected their workplaces, they lost their positions in favour of those with permanent residency. Although ineligible for most Government financial supports, newly arrived young people commented that, for the most part, their needs were met through the assistance of services such as AMES.

After facing such a disrupted settlement experience, young people identified that after the pandemic they may require further assistance in becoming familiarised with community services and spaces, expanding their social networks, and developing their conversational English skills.

Case study 3: Students transitioning from primary to secondary school

The impact of COVID-19 for students transitioning from primary to secondary school was also explored during interviews for Youth and Family Services' annual 'Happiness Project' to be held in January 2021. The Happiness Project works with students moving from Grade 6 to Year 7, with referrals received from primary school wellbeing coordinators to identify those who are vulnerable during this transition milestone.

This cohort spoke predominately about the social impact of COVID-19. Most young people talked about missing their friends, particularly during remote learning. This concern aligns with an evolving body of middle years research which emphasises the growing importance of peer relations and social influence during this transition. Participants expressed disappointment that they didn't get to spend the whole of Year 6 with their peers – as many were heading separate ways for secondary school, and were worried about the loss of friendships. Young people also commented that they felt more nervous about their transition to Year 7, as they've missed out on the usual transition activities and are therefore less familiar with their new school, teachers and peers.

Young people also spoke about the barriers to learning during remote learning, including lack of access to resources (such as internet access or devices) and having limited access to support from their teacher. In a typical year, primary schools would have had greater exposure to opportunities to consolidate learning amongst Grade 6 students, and have greater focus on supporting the social and emotional transition to secondary school.

The feedback from this cohort suggests that they have already grappled with making significant changes to how they learn during their Grade 6 year, and they will face further changes as they commence Year 7 in 2021. Likewise, strong peer relationships would usually support a student in successfully transitioning to their new school environment. For these vulnerable young people, the social isolation caused by remote learning may result in a further tenuous link in their support network.

PART FOUR: RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Establish a coordinated focus across the youth sector on the three priority areas identified for COVID recovery: employment, social connection and mental health. This may include:**

   ▸ Enhancing young people's work readiness and job seeking skills; advocating for additional entry level employment opportunities; and promoting local industries with tangible job opportunities.

   ▸ Creating opportunities for regular, positive interactions between young people and families to build social and community connection.

   ▸ Supporting young people and families to navigate the ongoing mental health impacts of COVID-19, as well as the challenges associated with COVID recovery.

2. **Develop nuanced initiatives that are targeted to specific cohorts of young people and parents/carers who may be more affected by the impacts of COVID-19.**

   ▸ Review or advocate for changes to eligibility criteria where they may be a barrier to accessing services (particularly those cohorts identified as being most vulnerable, including international students, middle years and newly arrived).

   ▸ Support those who have experienced COVID-related racism through continuing to celebrate multiculturalism and promoting social inclusion.

3. **Ensure services are responsive and flexible whilst COVID-19 continues to impact the community.**

   ▸ Reassure young people and families about what to expect when accessing a program or service, and promote the COVID-Safe measures in place.

   ▸ Where possible, offer flexibility in service delivery (for example, a blend of online and face-to-face delivery) to suit differing client needs, as well as enhancing service capacity to respond quickly if restrictions are reinstated.

4. **Continue to strengthen coordination across the youth sector to enhance information sharing and referral pathways.**

   ▸ Young people will have ongoing support needs (that may change over time) and so it is important to ensure that service responses are appropriate to the young person's context and evolving circumstances.

5. **Improve methods of information provision and promoting access to existing services and support for young people and parents/carers.**

   ▸ Impart information in a creative and innovative way, utilising preferred channels where young people like to receive information. Opportunities could include using storytelling and youth voice to highlight positive outcomes from service engagement.

   ▸ Promote and support further utilisation of the Youth Positive Pathways directory.

   ▸ Reinforce self-care and positive coping strategies that may have lapsed during lockdown.

6. **Health promotion messaging for young people needs to be youth-friendly and take into account the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community.**

   ▸ Where possible, young people should be involved in the development and design of messaging.

   ▸ Information should be clear, relevant, and provided in plain English.

   ▸ Information should be provided in a factual way, that supports understanding and doesn't compound anxieties and other mental health concerns.

7. **Celebrate and build on the positives that have been identified by young people and parents/carers – including increased family connection, physical activity and enhanced perceptions of personal resilience.**

   ▸ Encourage whole-of-family activity through promoting local spaces and amenities for young people and families to utilise and enhance community belonging. Continue working to enhance perceptions of safety.

   ▸ Maximise the community's renewed interest in being outdoors and participating in physical activity through facilitating programs and events that promote both structured and unstructured recreation.

8. **Provide youth activities and programs that are structured, purposeful and consistent.**

   ▸ Recognise that after prolonged periods of isolation, regular engagement opportunities will be needed to establish connections with peers and community.

   ▸ Look for new and innovative ways to support young people's skill development and volunteering.

   ▸ Provide a range of opportunities to build young people's capacity in areas of need identified within this report, including financial management, English language and study skills.

9. **Continue to ensure that the voices of young people and families are front and centre of decisions relating to COVID support and recovery.**

CONCLUSION

This report captures a snapshot of the challenges experienced by young people and families in Greater Dandenong across the period of August to November 2020. This provides an insight into the experiences from the height of the COVID-19 lockdown in Victoria, as well as the subsequent easing of restrictions.

The findings highlight that recovery from this pandemic will be a complex and long-term proposition. Through hearing from young people and parents or carers, it is evident that existing community issues within Greater Dandenong (prior to COVID-19) have been further compounded by the pandemic. These include education and employment, mental health, social isolation and the settlement experiences of newly arrived migrants.

COVID-recovery efforts will need to take a multi-layered approach, with a focus on providing holistic 'wrap around' supports for young people. Whilst the report distils community feedback into discrete issues, it must be recognised that there is a strong interplay between each of the identified areas of need. For example, social isolation compounds mental health concerns; and worry about falling behind during online learning may compound concerns about future study and employment pathways.

It is also important to note that recovery will not be a linear pathway. Whilst the easing of restrictions in late 2020 provided some relief for community members, there was still a level of concern about returning to 'normal' life. Future outbreaks or diagnosed cases of COVID-19 have the potential to reignite these concerns. This has already been witnessed with a small number of cases identified during the course of preparing this report (late-December 2020), with a number of locations within Greater Dandenong and surrounding areas identified as possible transmission sites.

Additionally, experiences of COVID-19 vary greatly depending on an individual's life circumstances and pre-existing support networks. This report has identified some of those cohorts who may experience greater levels of vulnerability. Efforts across the youth and community service sectors should seek to ensure that these vulnerable young people and families are not left further behind.

The identified recommendations provide a pathway for local service providers, educators and government agencies to join forces and begin prioritising COVID-recovery efforts. An enhanced level of community response and coordinated, cross-sector efforts will be required to meet future demand for services and address the ongoing fallout. As community needs continue to evolve in the coming months and years, it is important that we continue to ensure that the voices of young people and families are at the centre of ongoing recovery efforts.

Following the release of this report, Greater Dandenong Youth and Family Services will be advocating to local services, youth organisations and relevant Government departments to ensure that the views shared by young people, parents and carers inform COVID-recovery efforts. 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.