

# Youth Leadership Forum Key recommendations

Youth and Family Services | March 2021

# Background

The Youth Leadership Forum was a community project developed by the City of Greater Dandenong's [Young Leaders \(2020-21\)](#). Recognising a need to amplify the voices of young people, the Young Leaders planned and delivered the forum to create a platform for young people to come together and discuss important youth issues.

50 student leaders, representing eight local secondary schools participated in the forum, sharing their views on three key topic areas: 1) mental health; 2) youth employment; and 3) equity and discrimination. These topics were selected after conducting an extensive needs analysis - with both nationwide and localised research indicating that these were pressing issues impacting the lives of young people, and required further attention and action from community stakeholders.

Through facilitated, round-table discussion, young people explored these key themes and contributed a range of ideas and solutions that they would like to see implemented in their local community. Feedback gathered from student leaders has resulted in the following set of recommendations being developed for both Greater Dandenong City Council and participating secondary schools. A summary outline is provided below.

The Young Leaders 2020-21 hope that these recommendations will assist local decision-makers in understanding and responding to the needs of young people in Greater Dandenong.

## Participating schools

Youth and Family Services acknowledges the support of the following secondary schools, in facilitating their students' participation in the Youth Leadership Forum:

- Carwatha College
- Cornish College
- Dandenong High School
- Emerson School
- Keysborough College
- Killester College
- Lyndale Secondary College
- St John's Regional College

# Recommendations for Greater Dandenong City Council

## Priority 1: Mental Health

- 1. Strengthen linkages between Youth Services, mental health providers and schools, to build familiarity and increase young people's confidence in accessing services**
  - Collaborate with service providers to co-facilitate activities and host information stalls at youth wellbeing events, to build service literacy and increase young people's confidence in accessing formal support.
  - Profile mental health services, highlighting eligibility and access information on Council and Youth Services social media.
- 2. Deliver informal events that create opportunities for young people to come together and indirectly promote mental health (for example, through physical activity and building social connections)**
  - Appeal to a wide range of interests and deliver activities in partnership with sporting clubs and community organisations to help combat the stigma of attending Council events which aren't perceived as "cool".
  - Facilitate more outdoor activities, where young people can practice self-care and relaxation techniques amongst nature.
- 3. Utilise youth voice and storytelling as a tool to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking**
  - Young people share their stories about seeking help, outlining step-by-step the processes involved in accessing support services and the positive outcomes.
  - Utilise a combination of storytelling on social media / online platforms, as well as youth speakers with lived experience at events. *Note: this was a central and recurring theme, but we caution that any approach of this nature needs to be undertaken with solid rigor and support, to be a constructive experience.*
- 4. Advocate for more accessible, youth-friendly mental health services**
  - Waiting lists and intake processes were identified as a barrier to accessing professional mental health support.
  - Young people expressed a preference for face-to-face support, highlighting that there should be offerings for both one-on-one and group support.

## Priority 2: Youth Employment

- 1. Provide information and support for employers to recognise and capitalise on the benefits of hiring young workers**
  - Share positive case studies to help challenge negative stereotypes and misconceptions that young people are unreliable workers.
  - Facilitate training and/or provide resources to support employers to be youth-friendly and create a safe and supportive workplace for young people. Where possible, support young people to act as advisors to employers.
  - Encourage employers to adapt their job criteria to look for skills instead of experience.
- 2. Connect young people into work readiness training in the community, including resume writing workshops and interviewing skills training**
  - Greater promotion of existing employment service offerings on Council and Youth Services social media.
  - Promote services that educate young people about their employment rights.
- 3. Create more opportunities for young people to gain meaningful work experience**
  - Strengthen linkages of young people with volunteer roles across Council departments (outside of Youth Services), to gain more diversified experience in fields of their interest.
  - Explore the prospect of establishing a centralised volunteering directory that promotes volunteer vacancies in Greater Dandenong that are age-appropriate to young people.

## Priority 3: Equity and Discrimination

- 1. Continue to deliver a wide range of events and activities that celebrate multiculturalism and diversity in our community**
  - Create opportunities for young people to learn about different faiths and cultures.
  - Acknowledge awareness days on social media platforms and support young people as digital content creators.
- 2. Build community awareness of inequity and discrimination, and support young people in how to best respond**
  - Raise awareness, through evidence, to highlight the challenges of inequity and discrimination.
  - Promote strategies for victims and bystanders to respond to incidences of discrimination, including educating young people about channels to formally report.
  - Awareness-raising activities should focus on priority areas identified by students, including racism, ageism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and faith-based discrimination.

# Recommendations for Secondary Schools

One of the consistent themes that was cited by young people across all three topic areas was the need for schools to instate youth-led roles that champion youth voice on priority issues. For example, appointing issue-specific student committees and leadership roles like 'Mental Health Captain' or 'Diversity and Inclusion Officer'. This would enable student agency by advocating for their peers and coordinating school-based projects.

## Priority 1: Mental Health

- 1. Review processes for promoting and accessing School Wellbeing services, to enhance the safety and inclusion of students**
  - Students prioritise confidentiality and discretion when accessing school wellbeing services, and raised concerns about the visibility of being pulled from class to attend appointments.
  - Build familiarity with wellbeing officers and increase student awareness of the services and supports they can access. This could be done via presentations at school assemblies, as well as smaller *"meet and greets"* where students have the opportunity to ask questions.
- 2. Increase mental health education at school, starting from an early age**
  - Facilitate hands-on activities where students can practice self-care techniques and positive coping strategies.
  - Educate students about the early symptoms of declining mental health, so that they can recognise the signs and receive timely support.
  - Provide students with the option to complete Mental Health First Aid or Gatekeeper training, to build their capacity to support peers.
  - Invite cultural leaders to speak with students about the importance of mental health, to break down cultural barriers and misconceptions.
- 3. Deliver focused, purposeful mental health events and awareness activities**
  - Support student-led, action-based programs and committees, where students can take a lead in planning and delivering initiatives to raise mental health awareness among peers.
  - Establish linkages with local service providers who offer mental health and wellbeing support (e.g. headspace, Greater Dandenong Youth Services) and engage services to have a presence in-person at health and wellbeing events.
  - Recognise mental health awareness days (e.g. RUOK? Day, Mental Health Week) with meaningful, coordinated activities. Students reflected that efforts to recognise these days at school can be tokenistic and aren't taken seriously by their peers. Young people suggested having a combination of structured educational components, as well as fun games and activities, to increase student engagement.

#### 4. Place equal emphasis on student wellbeing and learning

- Young people reflected that they sometimes feel as though school staff prioritise academic performance over student wellbeing. This perceived pressure to perform well, coupled with high parental expectations, can contribute to elevated stress levels, negatively impacting students' mental health.
- Build staff capacity to critically enquire and support student's mental health. Provide mandatory Mental Health First Aid training so that staff are better equipped to recognise and respond to early warning signs.
- Create designated "mental health zones" where students can go to de-stress and have some respite if needed.

## Priority 2: Youth Employment

**Table 1: Key themes from student feedback**

- Students acknowledge that often the demand for careers support outweighs school resources and access to counselling. Student feedback was resounding in that young people need more access to regular and consistent careers counselling, starting earlier in their secondary schooling.
- Young people reflected that one-off careers counselling sessions are insufficient, and that students are reluctant to proactively seek out further advice. Students want assertive engagement from careers staff, as opposed to a "come to us" approach which discourages students from accessing support

#### 1. Enhance careers counselling services, ensuring that your school's careers team is approachable, inclusive and purposeful

- Commence careers counselling in Years 8-9, providing students with the opportunity to meet with staff to review their goals and options each year – increasing in frequency as they near graduation.
- Careers staff should build familiarity by presenting at school assemblies, so that students know what services are on offer and how to access them.
- Careers staff should be encouraging of a myriad of pathways that young people can take to pursue their preferred career choices.

#### 2. Increase student exposure to a range of career and study pathways

- Deliver careers expos that feature a breadth of employment options, as one student described: "Not just your standard 9am to 5pm jobs".
- Host more excursions and workplace visits so that young people can gain real industry exposure and learn first-hand what jobs in different fields might entail.
- Increase promotion and accessibility of traineeships and internships.
- Facilitate more site visits to universities and alternative education institutes such as TAFE, to build familiarity with the future study options available to young people.

### **3. Promote volunteering as a pathway to develop employability skills and gain practical work experience**

- Create more opportunities for students to volunteer – by establishing roles for students to volunteer within school and building partnerships with community organisations to link young people into external volunteering positions.
- Greater promotion of external volunteering opportunities via school noticeboards, intranet and social media.
- Looking within school communities to create volunteering opportunities such as working in the school canteen, gardening or administration.

### **4. Increase opportunities for students to learn and practice work readiness skills**

- Offer resume writing, cover letter and interviewing skills workshops for Years 8-12, so that all students of working age are supported to articulate their skills and experience to prospective employers.
- Deliver regular mock interviews for a wider cohort of students, so that students have more opportunities to practice and improve upon their interviewing skills.
- Educate students about their employment rights (for example, by engaging the Young Workers Centre to facilitate a training session).
- Promote free courses and training opportunities for young people to gain further accreditation and workplace qualifications (e.g. responsible service of alcohol and barista courses)

## **Priority 3: Equity and Discrimination**

### **1. Provision of inclusive practice training for all staff who work with students, including cultural awareness and LGBTIQ+ inclusion**

### **2. Provision of cultural awareness training for students, starting from an early age**

- Educate students about different cultures and faiths, encouraging dialogue among young people to find commonalities and establish cross-cultural connections.
- Foster learning and acceptance through fun cultural activities such as dance lessons and cooking traditional foods.
- Create and promote opportunities for overseas exchange, so that students have the option to visit other countries and learn about different cultures first-hand.

### **3. Establish student leadership roles and committees to promote social inclusion at school**

- Appoint a student working group to identify issues relating to discrimination in school and implement projects to address them.
- Establish social justice groups in school and create opportunities for groups from different schools to interact and collaborate.

### **4. Provision of bystander training for students, equipping young people with the skills to stand up against discrimination in all its forms**

## Conclusion

Youth and Family Services has worked to ensure that the recommendations captured through the Youth Leadership Forum are actioned in the 2021 Youth and Family Services business plan, implementing a range of activities across all key domains. In addition, further consideration has been given to Council's Youth and Family Strategy 2021-26, guiding the work of our service over the next five years.

Youth and Family Services will also be advocating to local services, secondary schools and relevant Council departments to ensure that young people's views are heard, and recommended actions are taken. Any agency or organisation with an interest in working collaboratively to support the implementation of the recommendations is encouraged to contact Youth and Family Services.

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