Youth Summit: Conquering 2022 and Beyond

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Summary of Consultation Findings

Prepared by Youth and Family Services, September 2022

Contents

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Introduction

The City of Greater Dandenong's Youth Summit is a biennial event which provides young people from across the municipality with the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding a range of contemporary youth issues. This year's theme, 'Conquering 2022 and Beyond' explored topics related to resilience, health and wellbeing, with a focus on supporting young people to 'bounce back' from the impacts of COVID-19.

A total of 120 Year 9 and 10 students, representing six local secondary schools, participated in this year's Youth Summit. Through a complement of structured activities and small group discussions, participants had the chance to shed some light on the needs and challenges experienced by young people in Greater Dandenong, and identify opportunities and solutions to help address these issues and promote the health and wellbeing of young people.

Students were required to reflect on what they believed to be the most pressing and immediate challenges for young people in Greater Dandenong, as we continue further into COVID Recovery. Group discussions explored how young people are faring and what supports they require – providing a further opportunity, 18-months on from the team's initial research into the impacts of the pandemic locally on young people and families to secure a current snapshot of how young people are faring. Students prioritised their key issues of concern, and identified a range of recommendations and strategies that our community can utilise to help young people in addressing these barriers.

The feedback elicited from young people will assist with the development of the Youth and Family Strategy Year 3 Action Plan, highlighting key focus areas and actions to address the priority needs of young people. This report summarises the main findings reported by students throughout the Youth Summit, and identifies opportunities for improvement in our community. Issues brought to the forefront by students at the summit emphasised mental health, stress, and physical health.

Top 3 Issues: Overview

At the commencement of the Youth Summit, young people were asked to reflect on what they believed to be the top three issues of concern for young people in Greater Dandenong. They had the opportunity to use smart devices to vote for their top three issues using Mentimeter – an audience engagement platform that allows participants to provide real-time feedback. A total of 216 responses were collected.

Figure 1 below shows the key issues that emerged during this activity. Mental health was the most frequently identified issue for young people in Greater Dandenong, accounting for 23% of responses. Stress was the next greatest category, accounting for 18% of responses. Physical health was the third largest category, accounting for 12% of responses. Other commonly mentioned issues included education (11%); bullying and discrimination (8%); employment; climate change and environmental sustainability; alcohol, drugs, smoking and vaping (6%); identity and belonging (5%); technology (4%); and community safety (1%).

Figure 1: Top issues of concern reported by young people
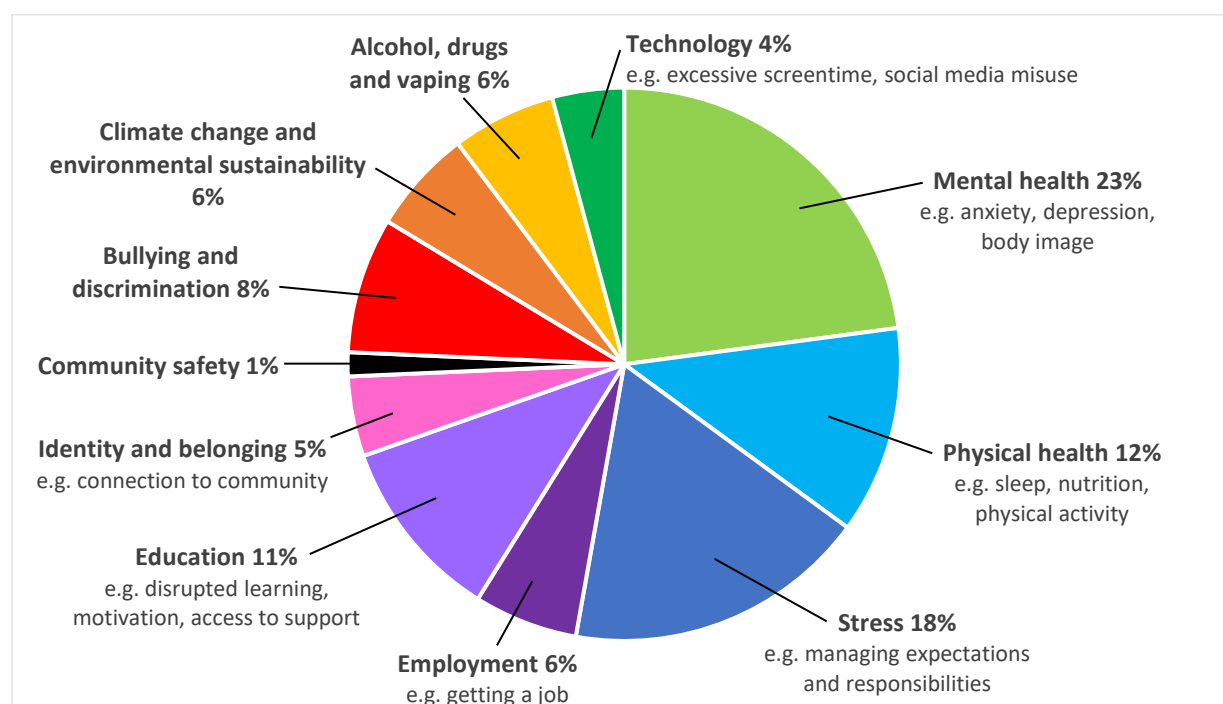
Vox Pop Workshop

Students had the opportunity to further discuss and explore the top-ranking three issues of concern identified in the morning, through a 'Vox Pop' workshop. This workshop was developed and facilitated by young people from Council's 2022 Young Leaders program. Groups of 20 students rotated through the 30-minute session, which comprised of three activities to elicit thoughts and ideas regarding students' collective top-voted issues: mental health, stress, and physical health.

1. **Unpacking key issues**
   Participants unpacked their insights as to why each issue of concern was prioritised by young people. Key discussion questions included:
   - How does the issue affect young people in Greater Dandenong?
   - What are the main issues and contributing factors?
   - Where do these problems occur?
   - What are the impacts on young people?

2. **Quantifying key issues**
   Participants were asked to assign a dot on a 'bullseye' chart to represent/measure their individual weighting of the severity of each issue. Students considered *how much* the issue impacts young people in Greater Dandenong, casting one vote per issue – where a score of ten (in the centre of the bullseye) equalled *highly problematic*, and a score of zero (on the outer edge of the chart) equalled *not problematic*.

3. **Identifying solutions**
   To conclude the workshop, young people brainstormed prospective solutions to address identified issues. Students independently provided responses, which were then gathered and sorted into categories/themes where young people are keen to see action occur.

A summary of findings for each priority issue is outlined below. It is noted that all three priority issues are inextricably linked. Stress or a lack of physical activity can adversely impact on a person's mental health, or conversely good time management and attention to good nutrition and sleep can promote positive mental health and mindset. Students were observed to be able to suggest and recognise the linkages across the themes and regularly affirmed and vocalised the connections as we transitioned discussion through each priority.

Mental health

In the bullseye activity, young people scored the issue of mental health an average of **8** out of 10 (highly problematic). Stand out themes from student discussion on mental health, largely referenced as a consequence of COVID, included disconnecting and withdrawing from family and friends when experiencing low mood or mental health concerns. Students spoke about a general lack of motivation, energy, and low mood, which adversely impacts their learning and relationships. A key theme to emerge was the impacts of COVID on young people's involvement in hobbies and social activities. Some students expressed that they have lost the desire to engage in these activities, and that they now find the prospect of socialising quite stressful and anxiety-producing.

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> *"Withdrawing from hobbies, pushing away friends and isolating yourself."*
>
> *"Not being as connected to community or wanting to communicate with others."*

Students reported that many young people have lost touch with self-care strategies and routines that they maintained prior to COVID, explaining that they're *"not caring for themselves"* in the ways that they used to. In particular, students cited experiencing poor sleep habits, increased screen time, and social isolation. This in turn exacerbates the *"low mood"* experienced by young people, adversely impacting their productivity and academic performance – with participants stating that they are *"not able to think properly"* anymore, and that *"poor mental health impacts your motivation to do everything"*.

Knowing where and who to turn to and trust when you need to express and share personal mental health concerns was also shared. Participants highlighted the need to talk about mental health more in the public domain to destigmatise and normalise these topics, particularly amongst young people and their families – thereby making it easier for young people to reach out for support. Students expressed that they would like to receive more information on self-care strategies and resources to support mental health, such as mindfulness and meditation apps.

Stress

In the bullseye activity, stress received the highest average score of **8.3** out of 10 (highly problematic). This suggests that within the overarching theme of 'mental health', young people's experience of stress is likely their most pressing current concern. Students highlighted stress in relation to two key stressors – school and family expectations. Participants described how the *"disruption to school has made it difficult to focus and learn"*. Since online learning, many students feel as though their workload is *"piling up and over"* and they feel an immense pressure to perform to a higher standard. Participants expressed that these stressors are exacerbated by family demands, with parents and carers expecting young people to excel academically. Students spoke of the conflict they experienced when their schooling was disrupted and they were struggling with remote learning, but their parents continued to expect the same high standards. Family pressures were also reported to extend beyond the realm of school, including balancing familial responsibilities and household chores. Students commented that *"balancing lots of priorities"* was becoming increasingly difficult and has an adverse effect on their mental health and productivity.

> *"My parents expect me to get straight A's for everything, even during remote learning when it was so stressful. When I received a C for a subject during lockdown, my parents got so angry with me."*
>
> *"Stress impacts my emotions and mood. I become anxious and overthink things."*
>
> *"Stress clouds my judgement. Even little things when I am stressed can become very consuming."*

Priorities for action focused primarily on alleviating school-related pressures, including *"addressing the excessive volume of homework"* and providing school-based programs and learning support to assist students to *"catch up"*. Participants expressed a need to build awareness of the experiences and pressures faced by young people, to shift the mindsets of families and school staff to have *"more realistic expectations".*

Physical health

In the bullseye activity, young people scored the issue of physical health an average of **6.8** out of 10 (problematic, but not as pervasive as the top two issues). When distilled further, the biggest themes to emerge were issues relating to technology and screentime, and the negative impacts this can have on their health – including sleep and body image. Students shared how they developed patterns of increased technology use during lockdown and are struggling to shake this habit now that things are 'back to normal'. Some young people described how they've been gaming late at night and using devices for long periods of time, and how this impacts their mood and productivity the next day. Participants also described the harmful impacts of 'toxic comparison' on social media on young people's body image.

> *"We're using devices overnight and waking up the next day exhausted, ruminating over negative things and comments made online."*
>
> *"...a resulting lack of concentration and the associated impact on your grades from limited sleep and too much technology."*
>
> *"Social media shapes our body image. It affects motivation and can lead to poor self-image and feeling shame."*

Students also discussed barriers for healthy eating and physical activity. Young people described how the cancellation of organised sports during COVID had a negative impact on their physical health. Some participants found that it was difficult to motivate themselves to stay active without their usual routine of sports activities, and are now finding it *"hard to get moving again post-lockdown".* There are clear linkages between physical health and the top two issues, with young people reporting how the pressures they experience (e.g. school, work, family responsibilities) limit the amount of time they have to practice healthy habits and care for their bodies.

> *"Too much on our plate and not enough time to do [health-promoting] activities."*
>
> *"Procrastination and eating too much of the wrong foods during COVID due to boredom."*
>
> *"Food and mood – what you eat impacts how you feel, including your mindset."*

When discussing solutions to support physical health, there was a clear call for free and low-cost recreation opportunities to make exercise more accessible for young people. Suggestions included *"free gym sessions for teens"* and creating more infrastructure for outdoor recreation – for example, exercise stations and outdoor gyms in local parks, as well as bike trails and walking paths. Students also suggested that access to free eating plans and nutrition information would assist them in maintaining healthier diets.

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Vox Pop Interview

The Vox Pop workshop also included an interview component where young people were posed a series of questions, recorded by a videographer. Young people were asked to share their thoughts regarding what improvements they would like to see in the community and reflected on the strengths and positive contributions of young people in Greater Dandenong. A snapshot of the results is shared below.

If you were Mayor of Greater Dandenong, what changes would you make to improve the lives of young people?

Students had the opportunity to consider what changes they would implement to improve the lives of young people in Greater Dandenong. A common theme to emerge was the need for more free and low-cost opportunities where young people can connect with peers and explore new hobbies and interests. Students reflected that these activities would help to *"uplift"* young people and provide a *"positive outlet to get out of their negative state of mind".* Young people expressed a need for more outdoor recreation and physical activities, suggesting that there was a lack of affordable sporting opportunities within the community.

> *"We need more sports facilities and recreational opportunities to get the community involved and bring up the happiness. Young people can bring their friends and have a good time socialising."*
>
> *"Most young people don't have money to support their passion."*
>
> *"I would introduce government-funded sporting programs to increase affordability of sports clubs and relieve financial stress on families in need."*

Another key theme to emerge was young people's desire to have a voice, participate in decision-making processes, and contribute to the development of their community. Students commented that they would like to see more representation of young people in Council (e.g. elected youth representatives) and want greater access to volunteering opportunities so they can make a positive impact in the community. Other key priorities included access to counselling and mental health support, addressing homelessness, and enhancing perceptions of safety in Greater Dandenong.

> *"Greater Dandenong is often scrutinised as a place that is kind of dangerous, so I would strengthen local laws to make it a safer place and help people to feel comfortable being who they truly are – so they feel safe no matter what, physically and mentally."*
>
> *"I would ask young people what their needs are and listen to them. I think that it's the youngsters opinions that count the most."*

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What are the strengths of young people in Greater Dandenong?

Students were able to reflect and celebrate the strengths of young people in Greater Dandenong. When responding to the above question, young people highlighted the following qualities: diversity, multiculturalism, empathy, understanding, resilience, perseverance, creative thinking and problem-solving, and most commonly referenced – a passion for making a positive difference.

> *"We have a lot of ideas to bring positive change within the community."*
>
> *"We are pretty resilient as a community – I feel like we bounced back from COVID pretty well and are going strong now."*

What are you doing to make our community a better place?

Participants shared what they are currently doing to positively contribute to the Greater Dandenong community – big and small. Students reflected that they feel as if they don't have a lot of power to influence significant change but are trying to create a positive 'ripple effect' by making a difference within their peer group. Students mentioned the following ways they are making our community a better place: donating money and clothes to people in need; mentoring others and teaching skills such as sport or leadership qualities; listening non-judgementally and offering support to friends in need; taking on leadership positions at school; and developing ideas to create a better future.

> *"As a young person, a lot of older people don't take us seriously, which makes it hard to make a difference. So for now, I am starting small, making a positive difference at school by talking to people who look like they need a friend."*
>
> *"I've been brainstorming ideas for mental health programs – I want to create a program where Australian Muslim Hijabi youth can talk about their mental health and how much of a struggle it is to go out and be yourself."*
>
> *"Currently at school, I am working with my House Leader to encourage girls into leadership because there's not much female representation in leadership positions."*

COVID-19 Consultation

The Youth Summit concluded with roundtable discussions about the impacts of COVID-19 on young people in Greater Dandenong. Consultation questions were formulated to align with measures from Youth and Family Services' COVID-19 Research Project (2020). This activity aimed to provide a current snapshot of young people's needs, assessing how they have evolved over the past two years, and what key priorities have emerged for young people. Students were supported to identify strategies and solutions that they would like to see implemented in the community, to support young people in addressing these challenges. A summary of responses is outlined below.

What do you think have been some of the biggest impacts of COVID-19 on young people?

Young people identified a variety of negative impacts across all domains of their lives – from health, wellbeing and relationships, to education, employment and financial security – the impacts of the pandemic are far reaching. Students' responses echoed the findings from the *COVID-19 Research Project*, indicating that while young people's most pressing needs may not have changed, they have likely evolved over this period.

Young people described how remote learning has impacted their *"school mindset".* Many reported a loss of motivation, concentration and were generally less engaged in learning. Students expressed concerns about a *"lack of help and study support"* during lockdown, and how their grades have since lowered. Young people are worried that remote learning will have lasting negative consequences for their academic performance, stating that their *"study habits are underdeveloped"* due to a disrupted start to secondary schooling.

A clear theme to emerge was the impacts of lockdowns on young people's connections to peers, family, and community. Participants described a lingering sense of loneliness and *"lack of belonging",* stating that they *"don't feel like part of the community anymore".* Young people explained how coming out of lockdown, many of their social patterns remain altered, experiencing a shifting trend towards online interactions in place of face-to-face ones. Participants noted that online interactions are not of the same quality as *"real life"* connections, and that the absence of these may have negative consequences for young people. With regards to family relationships, young people reported increases in household tensions due to *"being stuck in the house with everyone and feeling irritated".* Some participants also experienced grief and worry due to family members being 'stuck' overseas, experiencing health problems, and the loss of loved ones due to COVID.

> *"The way we socialise and communicate has changed. We are more reliant on social media and technology."*

In terms of health and wellbeing, young people identified a few key trends centring around the themes of mental and physical health. Some young people reported developing mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression, while others spoke of heightened levels of stress and worry due to difficulties *"adapting to change".* Young people observed changes in their temperament, describing a *"lost motivation for everything"* and *"laziness"* that continues to impact their habits post-COVID. Students reflected that they now have fewer

positive outlets and hobbies to support their wellbeing, and that some have developed *"bad habits"* such as disrupted sleeping patterns, and an *"increased dependence on technology, gaming and social media"*.

> *"We have developed a reliance on technology. It's hard not to use it now because we used social media so much all through COVID."*

Lastly, young people identified concerns relating to employment and financial security. Participants reported both first- and second-hand experiences of losing work, with some having to close family businesses. Students discussed the long-term implications of this, and the *"financial suffering"* that some families faced with no source of income.

How do you think COVID-19 will impact on young people's future and goals?

When reflecting on the impacts of COVID on their future, young people shared concerns about the widespread uncertainty and obstacles that they face. Students explained how this has impacted their goals and motivation, and that they feel a sense of *"impending doom"* when planning for their future, which is further exacerbated by *"overhyped, negative messages on social media".* Participants also expressed worries that COVID may hinder young people's development – stating that *"the pandemic blocked social, mental and physical progress"* and that young people might *"mature more slowly now".* Students attributed this to having missed key milestones in their lives, for example the transition from primary to secondary school.

> *"COVID has set everyone back a few years. It will slow us down in a lot of ways."*
>
> *"Students coming from Year 6, 7 and 8 didn't have the opportunity to grow in school."*
>
> *"COVID has impacted socialisation – people not knowing how to interact with others and isolating themselves. Many of us feel shy talking to people after lockdown."*
>
> *"The unknown – 'when will it end?' and the impacts of this on confidence and mental health."*

In terms of educational goals, many young people shared concerns that COVID will negatively impact their academic performance, and that they *"will not meet the ATAR requirements to enter the course and get the degree that [they] want".* Some students reflected that COVID has shifted their educational goals completely, with one stating that they are *"not sure about going to university anymore".* Young people described how missed work experience and placement opportunities has limited their exposure to career pathways, leaving them uncertain about future study and career choices.

> *"We have lost exposure to vital experiences, including opportunities to explore skills and interests (e.g. Careers Expos) which leaves us unsure about study and career pathways."*

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Young people were also worried that COVID will negatively impact their job prospects, stating that they may not appear 'work-ready' to employers due to a lack of employability skills and experience. Participants observed a shifting trend towards part-time work, commenting that *"it's difficult to find full time work now"*. However, on a positive note, some students did acknowledge that the pandemic has sparked a growth of opportunities in particular areas – with new careers opening in fields like science, and *"staff shortages bringing new opportunities for job seekers"*.

Many students were concerned about the future financial impacts of COVID – particularly inflation and the increasing cost of living expenses. Young people felt that such rises would limit their future opportunities, for example, their ability to buy a car and rent or purchase a home. At a more immediate level, young people were concerned about the financial implications for their families, with some having lost jobs or businesses due to the pandemic.

> *"We had to delve into savings because one of my parents couldn't work."*
>
> *"We are less employable because we have had less opportunities to get experience – there'll be some Year 12s finishing school without any work experience."*

What support do you think young people need to help manage the impacts of COVID-19?

When shifting the focus to local solutions, students' suggestions overwhelmingly focused on greater investment in supports at school. Their ideas centred around two key themes – study support and pathway guidance. Young people expressed that schools need to be more flexible in their teaching and assessment approach and provide greater access to resources and learning supports. Following two years of missed careers counselling, students reported that they need more *"guidance and goalsetting"* – providing individualised assistance with subject selection and navigating pathways to further education and employment. *Table 1* below provides an overview of participants' suggestions.

Table 1. Recommended supports in secondary schools

- Tutoring services and learning support
- One on one sessions with teachers
- Provide more resources to support learning (e.g. practice tests)
- Mobilise study groups
- Flexible deadlines and test dates to accommodate student workloads
- Assistance with subject selection and alignment with course entry requirements
- Longer orientation and more support when entering new year levels, including clearer explanations about expectations
- Ensure equal access to technology and learning materials
- Integrate more short breaks in class
- Increase access to school counselling and wellbeing services
- Teach young people study skills and techniques to increase productivity
- Provide more opportunities for work experience
- Parent engagement to help manage family expectations (e.g. academic performance)

"Teachers and authorities need to be more understanding of how COVID has affected our education, adjust their expectations, and take a more supportive approach."

"Teachers need to be flexible in supporting student's needs because the workload is too much."

"We need more time to catch up on missed schoolwork. We can't just slot back into 'normal life' – it's unrealistic to expect students to complete work and be productive."

"The expectation is placed on families to purchase learning resources and devices. More support should be provided by schools."

Outside of school, young people identified a need for greater access to counselling and mental health support *"to get back to normal".* Students expressed a preference for in-person support, stating that *"we want to talk to someone in real life rather than online".* There was a large demand for opportunities to connect with peers and community, to develop relationships and rebuild their confidence and social skills. Suggestions ranged from after-school programs and activities *"to explore hobbies and interests"*, to sports tournaments and community events. Students also expressed a desire for more inter-school activities, for the chance to meet and network with other young people – an aspect of the Youth Summit that was a key highlight for young people.

"Focus on building confidence in social situations – developing basic communication and social skills."

"Having an adult that understands the struggle and will listen non-judgementally, without giving their views."

What have been some positive impacts to come out of COVID-19?

Ending on a positive note, students were able to identify some of the good things to come out of the pandemic. Echoing the findings from the *COVID-19 Research Project,* one of the biggest themes to emerge was young people having more time for self-care and personal development. Students reflected that they had *"more quality alone time"* and opportunities to *"do things for ourselves"* – including exploring new hobbies and interests, personal reflection and goalsetting, catching up on rest, as well as spending more time outdoors and exercising. Young people experienced a profound sense of gratitude, commenting that they *"learned to appreciate things that we took for granted before".* Some students noticed that they've become more resilient and adaptable, and they now feel more prepared to handle challenges in the future.

Some students enjoyed the flexibility of remote learning, and found that this experience improved their independence, time management and organisational skills. Young people also reported strengthened relationships – spending more quality time with their

family / household members and connecting with peers online. For young people who may experience anxiety in social situations, participants reflected that *"it was easier to socialise without the pressure of face to face contact".*

> *"I enjoyed being able to work at my own pace."*
>
> *"Gained an appreciation for being at school and 'learning properly', including having access to resources for hands-on subjects like art and textiles."*
>
> *"I feel like I can take on anything."*

Students also reflected on the positive impacts of COVID at a global level. A key theme to emerge was the positive environmental impact that lockdowns have had, with less traffic and pollution reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Young people commented that this experience has increased compassion and care for others, and that media coverage has *"increased concern for young people and the challenges that we face".* Students also noted that there have been improvements in our medical systems and hygiene practices, resulting in reduced spread of viruses.

Recommendations for Council, Schools, and Community Services

1. **Support young people to rebuild healthy habits – focusing on sleep, technology use, nutrition, and physical activity.**
    *   Educate young people about recommended guidelines and strategies to promote their health and wellbeing – including 'hands-on' opportunities for young people to explore self-care techniques (e.g. workshops and events)
    *   Share tips and health-promoting messages on social media, highlighting self-care strategies and resources.

2. **Promote resources and support services to support young people's mental health.**
    *   Share information on social media to educate young people about the early warning signs, stress-management and selfcare techniques.
    *   Promote strategies and resources to help young people alleviate school-related stressors, such as time management and study techniques, tutoring and learning support services.
    *   Provide information about mental health support services, with a focus on access to face-to-face supports.

3. **Continue to deliver free and low-cost activities for young people, catering to a variety of interests.**
    *   Promote programs and opportunities where young people can connect with peers and the wider community, to strengthen social engagement and belonging.
    *   Facilitate inter-school events and activities where young people can network with students from other secondary schools.

4. **Increase access to affordable sports and recreational activities.**
    *   Deliver free sports activities and tournaments for young people.
    *   Promote opportunities at local clubs and facilities through social media.
    *   Advocate for affordable sports clubs and recreational facilities, including discounted rates for families experiencing financial hardship.

5. **Continue to support young people's active participation in the community.**
    *   Facilitate volunteering programs for young people, providing exposure to a variety of fields and industries (e.g. community services, environment and sustainability).
    *   Promote local volunteering opportunities through social media.
    *   Continue to promote and strengthen youth participation in Council's consultation activities and decision making processes.

6. **Support young people's learning and employment pathways.**
    *   Promote work readiness information and training, such as cover letter and resume writing, interviewing techniques, and job searching skills.
    *   Increase awareness of alternative education pathways by promoting entry-level courses, traineeships and apprenticeship opportunities through social media.
    *   Facilitate work experience opportunities for young people.

7. **Support young people to adapt to the financial impacts of COVID-19.**
    *   Promote financial literacy training opportunities and share tips through social media.
    *   Promote financial counselling services, scholarships and assistance schemes.

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Conclusion

Through a variety of consultation activities, valuable insights were provided as to the challenges and opportunities for young people in our community. Mental health, stress, and physical health emerged as the most prominent issues identified by young people. Students' experiences of these issues were diverse and complex, and hence require a versatile response. Young people suggested holistic solutions comprising of educational, social and systemic changes.

Findings from the COVID-19 consultation confirmed that young people are still experiencing similar challenges to those expressed in Youth and Family Services' previous local COVID-19 Research Project (2020), including negative impacts on mental health, physical wellbeing, relationships, education, employment and financial security. Students also openly shared their concerns relating to how they feel COVID-19 will impact their future plans and goals, noting how ongoing uncertainty, lack of goals and motivation may negatively contribute to bleak future outcomes. Many contemplated a sense of lost opportunities, and questioned how their development may have been hindered due to COVID-19.

Young people focused heavily on school-based solutions with key themes centred on study support and career pathway guidance. This included tutoring services, learning support, assistance with subject selection, more opportunities for work experience and more. Increased access to school counselling and wellbeing services, as well as parent engagement to help manage family expectations, was also noted by young people. Solutions outside of school included greater access to counselling and mental health support, and opportunities to connect with peers and community.

Youth and Family Services have recommended a range of solutions in response to the students' needs. Continuing to deliver activities, programs and services that support young people to rebuild healthy habits, access mental health resources and support services, strengthen connection to peers and community, and support pathways to learn and work – are all priorities for action.

The insights gained from this year's Youth Summit will assist Council to develop local policies, programs and services that are both reflective and responsive to the needs of young people in our community. Findings will assist to inform the development of the Youth and Family Strategy Year 3 Action Plan. Following the release of this report, Youth and Family Services will be advocating to local services and secondary schools to ensure that the views shared by young people are heard and actioned.

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