



# Mapping youth policy, participation mechanisms and services across Local Councils in Victoria



Youth Affairs  
Council Victoria



**Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading advocate for young people aged 12–25 and the youth sector in Victoria.**

Our vision is that the rights of young people in Victoria are respected, and they are active, visible and valued in their communities.

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**To cite this report:** Youth Affairs Council Victoria (2021). *Mapping youth policy, participation mechanisms and services across Local Councils*, Youth Affairs Council Victoria.



YACVic respectfully acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this continent. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria.

# Acknowledgements

YACVic is thankful for the support and expertise of everyone who contributed to this work.

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We would like to acknowledge the support and assistance provided by the following students who worked on this project as part of their university placement:

- Bonnie Little
- Dylan Bermingham
- Erica Quach
- Johara Youssouf
- Isabel Fisher
- Nicholas Carroll
- Nurlina Hasan.

YACVic is thankful to the following Local Government Areas (LGAs) for participating in the project:

Alpine, Ballarat, Banyule, Bass Coast, Bayside, Benalla, Brimbank, Buloke, Campaspe, Cardinia, Casey, Colac Otway, Corangamite, Darebin, East Gippsland, Gannawarra, Glen Eira, Glenelg, Golden Plains, Greater Bendigo, Greater Geelong, Greater Shepparton, Hobsons Bay, Horsham, Hume, Kingston, Knox, Latrobe, Macedon Ranges, Mansfield, Melbourne, Mildura, Mitchell, Moira, Monash, Moonee Valley, Moorabool, Moreland, Mornington Peninsula, Mount Alexander, Moyne, Murrindindi, Nillumbik, Northern Grampians, Port Phillip, Pyrenees, South Gippsland, Southern Grampians, Stonnington, Strathbogie, Surf Coast, Swan Hill, Wangaratta, Warrnambool, Wellington, West Wimmera, Whitehorse, Whittlesea, Wyndham, Yarra, Yarra Ranges.

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# Executive Summary

There are over a million young people living in Victoria aged 12-25, representing approximately 18% of the Victorian community (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Infrastructure Victoria (2016) has projected that Victoria's population is expected to rise by 58% by 2046.

As a result, services and supports for young people need to develop at the same rate, as **not all young people have the support and assistance that they need**. It is also important for these youth services and supports to effectively reach young people.

Young people who do not have access to assistance and support are more likely than their peers to disengage from school, face unemployment, experience mental health difficulties at some stage of their lives, and involvement in the justice system (YACVic, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted young people in Victoria and further exacerbated the issues young people face. Young Victorians are facing rising unemployment, declining mental health and wellbeing, and disruption to education (YACVic, 2020).

**Local governments are one of the main providers of services for young people in their communities.** To map the extent of youth policy, youth participation mechanisms, and youth services and supports for young Victorians across Local Government Councils, we conducted two surveys with 61 (youth) service coordinators of Victoria's 79 Councils (77%). We also explored how Councils' youth service delivery has been impacted by COVID-19.

The surveys with Council (youth)<sup>1</sup> service coordinators found that most Councils surveyed were employing youth focused professionals. However, there were significant differences in the number of youth focused professionals employed by

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that not all of Victoria's Councils had youth services / youth service coordinators.

Councils across Victoria. Indeed, **an average metropolitan Council was found to hire two to six times more youth focused professionals compared to an average regional Council.** Even in LGAs with comparable populations, metropolitan Councils tended to hire more youth focused professionals than their regional counterparts; this difference was more pronounced in LGAs with smaller populations, and therefore disproportionately affected rural and regional Councils. At the same time, regional Councils also tend to operate in geographically larger areas, but generally hired fewer youth focused professionals than much smaller Greater Melbourne Councils. Overall, we found that **regional Councils were under-resourced compared to metropolitan Councils—even more so after taking population and geographical size into account.**

**Most Councils across the state that participated in the study had a youth strategy or a youth policy** in some form. However, metropolitan Councils were more likely than regional Councils to have a youth strategy. **The majority of Councils consulted young people when developing a youth strategy or policy, but only a small number of Councils mentioned using some element of co-design** in developing their youth strategy. Greater uptake of co-design techniques, which would afford young people more agency and decision-making power in policymaking, would be beneficial. Overall, we found a **need to increase the involvement of young people in the design, development, delivery of the engagement process.** Over a third of Councils surveyed did not have a youth council or youth advisory group, which is an important avenue for young people to be represented in local government. LGAs with a greater proportion of young people were more likely to have a youth council, though it remains an important mechanism for youth representation regardless of the proportion of young people in a given area.

We also found that **the majority of Councils that participated in the survey were providing some form of youth services.** However, the level of support varied across the state. Most Councils were delivering youth employment and education related services (whether in-house or through referral to other non-council organisations or agencies), while drop-in spaces were provided by only 52% of

Councils. Councils were also very likely to refer young people who required mental health support to a non-council organisation (e.g., Headspace, Live Health, Enrich and Mind Australia) or a neighbouring Council. They were also likely to refer young people experiencing homelessness or family violence, as well as First Nations young people and disabled young people, to external services.

**Mental health was identified as a key service gap by 42% of the Councils that participated in the survey.** The survey also revealed a significant absence of support for young people with prior involvement in the justice system, and considerable demand for more resources to support disabled young people. Other issue-specific gaps included employment, recreation, sexual health, and substance use. Councils noted that service gaps could stem from lack of capacity, transport, and accessibility.

**Councils also suggested the need to increase the youth services provided to several priority groups,** including disabled young people, young survivors of family violence, young First Nations people, young people experiencing homelessness, young women, LGBTQIA+ young people, young parents, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), migrant and refugee young people, and young people involved in the justice system. It is important to note that this need varied across the state.

We found that **COVID-19 increased the demand on some services,** including mental health, education, and employment, adding pressure onto services that were already facing significant challenges. In addition, social and recreational youth services experienced a decrease in demand, probably due to screen fatigue. **Though COVID-19 presented many challenges to the youth sector, some Councils found ways to navigate these challenges** with innovative efforts to deliver services for young people.

**More broadly, our findings confirm that greater resourcing is required to meet the needs of young people. Further, greater thought is needed to ensure youth services are meeting local demand across the state.**



# Main Findings

## Context

- 25% of Australia’s young people live in Victoria, with the vast majority living in Greater Melbourne
- The percentage of young people in each LGA’s overall population is around 18% on average. Metropolitan LGAs had a slightly higher average, but also much greater variation, suggesting that local requirements and demand for youth services are likely to vary.
- Councils in LGAs with more young people tended to employ more youth focused professionals
- Councils in regional LGAs generally employed fewer youth focused professionals than metropolitan LGAs. Even in those Councils with comparable populations of young people, the lower the youth population the more pronounced this difference became.
- Overall, an average metropolitan Council hired two to six times more youth focused professionals than an average regional Council, depending on the region
- 86% of LGAs that participated in the study were employing youth development workers, but this number drops to 41% for youth outreach workers, 21% for youth counsellors, and 18% for caseworkers
- Only two Councils that participated in the study employed at least one of each type of youth focused professionals, while seven employed none of the four
- In three regions—Gippsland, Hume and Barwon South West—surveyed Councils were employing caseworkers

- Across the state, geographically larger LGAs tended to hire fewer youth focused professionals. This trend largely stemmed from metropolitan LGAs being both smaller and better resourced; there were both less youth focused professionals in regional Victoria and much greater areas to cover.

## **Youth Participation and Policy**

- Most Councils had a policy strategy for young people in some form: 75% had a standalone youth strategy while an additional 3% had a wider Council plan which includes young people.
- A greater proportion of Councils in Greater Melbourne had a youth strategy— 83%, compared to 69% of regional Councils.
- 84% of surveyed Councils had consultation mechanisms for young people, predominantly surveys and focus groups. However, only five Councils mentioned using some element of co-design for their youth strategy.
- Councils varied greatly in how often they updated youth strategies, ranging from every year to every decade.
- 26% of Councils had a youth charter, most in conjunction with their youth strategy.
- Most Councils had established (53%) or were establishing (11%) a youth council or youth advisory group; the average size was 13 young people.
- There is some regional variation in Councils' uptake of youth councils and youth advisory groups, with every Council surveyed in Gippsland having or currently setting up a youth council or youth advisory group, compared to just a third in the Grampians
- LGAs with higher proportions of young people were more likely to have a youth council or youth advisory group. However, youth participation is critical everywhere, and Councils without a formal, long-term mechanism of youth representation should consider the benefits of establishing a youth council or youth advisory group

## Youth Services and Funding Streams

- 77% of Councils were providing some form or forms of youth services, though with some regional variation from 100% in Greater Melbourne to 50% in Gippsland.
- 52% of Councils had some access to drop-in spaces, but they were predominantly in Greater Melbourne; most Councils in most regional areas did not.
- In terms of mental health services, referrals to non-council organisations and other agencies were the dominant avenue with 68% of Councils taking this pathway. However, mental health services were sometimes difficult to reach, particularly for young people in the regions, and needs are not always being met.
- Supports for priority groups, while present, were also needing bolstering: between 70% and 87% of Councils indicated that various priority groups required additional support, with disabled young people topping the list
- Among priority groups, young parents received age-specific Council support from the greatest proportion of Councils, at 61%.
- Among priority groups, LGBTQIA+ young people received some form of support—including by referral—from the greatest proportion of Councils, at 83%.
- Most often referred to external organisations were young people experiencing homelessness or family violence, First Nations young people and disabled young people.
- Only one regional Council was providing age-specific support for CALD young people.
- No Council that participated in the study provided age-specific support for young people who have been involved in the justice system.
- Service gaps stemmed from various factors, including capacity, transport and accessibility, and a lack of youth participation.
- Other issue-specific gaps included employment, recreation, sexual health and substance use.

- 82% of Councils were receiving FReeZA funding, and 59% were receiving Engage funding.

### **Impact of COVID on Local Youth Services**

- Almost every Council had to shift its youth services and programs online due to COVID-19; this was reflected in more interactions with young people through social media.
- Some services (mental health, case management and education and employment) have seen greater demand, putting additional strain onto services that are already facing significant challenges.
- Other services, particularly social and recreational services, experienced a decrease in demand, probably due to screen fatigue.
- Most regions saw a mix of increased and decreased demand. Gippsland had the highest proportion of Councils with increased demand (50%) while Hume had the highest proportion of Councils with decreased demand (also 50%).
- Few Councils saw changes to funding, with 86% finding that it remained the same.
- Though COVID-19 presented many challenges to the youth sector, Councils found ways to navigate these challenges by coming up with innovative ways to deliver youth services with young people empowered and at the helm.

# Project Background and Report Structure

## Project background

The project was led and managed by YACVic, and features contributions from various local government Councils across Victoria. We are grateful for the time and information they have contributed to this project.

The aim of the project was to:

- map the extent of local government youth strategies, youth charters and youth councils across Victoria, and explore to what extent young people were consulted and involved in these processes
- examine the youth services delivered and programs offered by Councils in Victoria, and explore the main services and program gaps
- capture the number (i.e., total FTE) of youth development officers, youth outreach workers, and counsellors who work with young people, by Council
- identify the key demographic targets that Councils were aiming to meet
- explore the impact of COVID-19 on the youth services provided by Councils in Victoria, including stories of innovation that illustrate how some Councils positively managed the impacts of COVID-19.

Data was collected via:

- analysis of datasets
- two surveys with Councils' (youth) service coordinators across Victoria
- interviews with Councils.

## **Project structure**

The report begins by outlining the study's methods, which include surveys and interviews with local Councils across Victoria.

**Section One** of the report subsequently provides context around the geographic dispersion of young Victorians, and provides an overview the youth focused professionals who work with them.

**Section Two** examines Councils' policy approach to young people, including the different ways young people participate in shaping this approach.

**Section Three** maps the youth services delivered by Councils across Victoria, the gaps in the services provided, and different types of funding. In addition, we canvass the different approaches taken by Councils and regions at each level.

**Section Four** examines challenges and opportunities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, mapping changes to service demand, the adaptations made, and finally two illustrative case studies.

Finally, our **Conclusion** covers the implications of the report's main findings and the overall picture emerging from our research.

## **Methods**

An analysis of datasets was conducted to provide context of the geographic dispersion of young Victorians.

Two surveys were conducted with (youth)<sup>2</sup> service coordinators of 61 of 79 of Victoria's Councils, representing 77% of all LGAs in Victoria. As shown in Table 1, the participants included service coordinators of Councils located in Greater Melbourne and each of the five regions as defined by Regional Development

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that not all of Victoria's Councils had youth services / youth service coordinators.



Victoria.<sup>3</sup> Please note that more than 60% of LGAs in each regional location participated in the surveys. Table 1 outlines the survey response rate by regional location.

*Table 1: Number of LGAs that participated in the surveys.*

Region	Number of responses	Number of LGAs	Response rate
Barwon South West	8	9	89%
Gippsland	5	6	83%
Grampians	7	11	64%
Greater Melbourne	24	31	77%
Hume	9	12	75%
Mallee	8	10	80%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>77%</b>

The two surveys were conducted over the phone and via Zoom or Teams. The initial survey was conducted by tertiary education students who were undertaking their placement at YACVic between May 2020 and March 2021. A follow up survey was conducted by YACVic staff members between March 2021 and June 2021. The aim of the follow up survey was to collect further information around the type of youth services provided by LGAs and the service gaps. Each survey took between 15 and 30 minutes.

The survey covered the following topics: number and FTE of youth focused professionals, details of youth policy and participation, coverage and reach of youth services, youth services gaps, and the impact of COVID-19 on the local youth services delivered by Councils. The survey questions were not mandatory; therefore, participants were provided the option to skip questions if they did not wish to answer. Finally, follow up interviews were conducted by YACVic employees to develop two case studies.

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<sup>3</sup> Please access the Regional Development Victoria's website through the following link <https://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/victorias-regions#region-listing>

# Section One: Context

The following section analyses the geographic dispersion of young people in Victoria and provides an overview of the youth focused professionals in each LGA council youth service – youth development workers, youth outreach workers, youth counsellors, and caseworkers. It then makes comparisons between the number of youth focused professionals and the number and relative proportion of young people in each LGA surveyed. Please note that the data on the number of youth focused professionals was sourced from the surveys conducted by YACVic with 61 Councils across Victoria.

## **Geographic dispersion**

As of the 2016 Census, the total number of young people (10-24 inclusive) living in Victoria was 1,171,312,<sup>4</sup> representing about 25% of all young Australians; this was Australia's second highest youth population by state (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

While most young Victorians lived in Greater Melbourne the percentage of young people as a proportion of each LGA's whole population was similar across all regions (please see Table 2, overleaf). Greater Melbourne LGAs had a higher percentage of young people on average, but only by a little.

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<sup>4</sup> This figure represents the sum of each region's young population, aged 10-24

Table 2: Young people in LGAs across Victoria by region.

Region	Total youth population (10-24)	Average proportion of young people in LGAs across each region
Greater Melbourne	910,813	19%
Barwon South West	73,582	18%
Gippsland	32,376	16%
Grampians	44,600	18%
Hume	51,579	17%
Mallee	58,362	18%
TOTAL	1,171,312	18.8%

Source: (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

It is worth noting that metropolitan LGAs had both the highest average percentage of young people, but also the greatest variation. The LGAs with the highest and lowest proportion of young people in the population, respectively Melbourne City (with 30%) and Port Phillip (with 13%), are both located in Greater Melbourne. Figure 1 illustrates the greater variation in the proportion of young people in metropolitan LGAs.

Figure 1: Spread in the percentage of young people in regional and metropolitan LGAs across Victoria.



Source: (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

## Youth focused professionals

Just as populations of young people vary across Victorian LGAs, so do the people who work with those young people. Councils hire a diversity of employees, with different titles and roles, who work with and support young people. This study refers to all of them broadly as ‘youth focused professionals’ and proposes the following four categories for ease of analysis:

- Youth development worker: Workers who lead the youth team and/or coordinate youth services within the LGA Council in a high-level or strategic capacity.
- Youth outreach worker: Workers who engage young people in the community directly, doing some form of on-the-ground work with groups of young people
- Youth counsellors: Counselling staff who specialise in working with young people
- Caseworkers: Employees who work with individual young people on a case-by-case basis.

Statewide, a majority of Councils (86%) that participated in the study were employing youth development officers. This remains true within each region except the Mallee, where only three out of the six Councils surveyed had youth development officers.

The presence of other youth focused professionals was far less consistent. For example, 23 of the 56 LGAs, or 41%, employed youth outreach workers. Most of these LGAs, 15 of the 23, were located in Greater Melbourne, meaning that youth outreach workers were less prevalent in the five regions. In Gippsland, none of the five surveyed Councils said that they employed youth outreach workers.

Only 12 Councils (21%) employed youth counsellors. Every region employed at least one, with the exception of Barwon South West. It must be noted that instead of employing counsellors directly, some Councils referred young people to other non-council organisations or agencies in their regional area for mental health

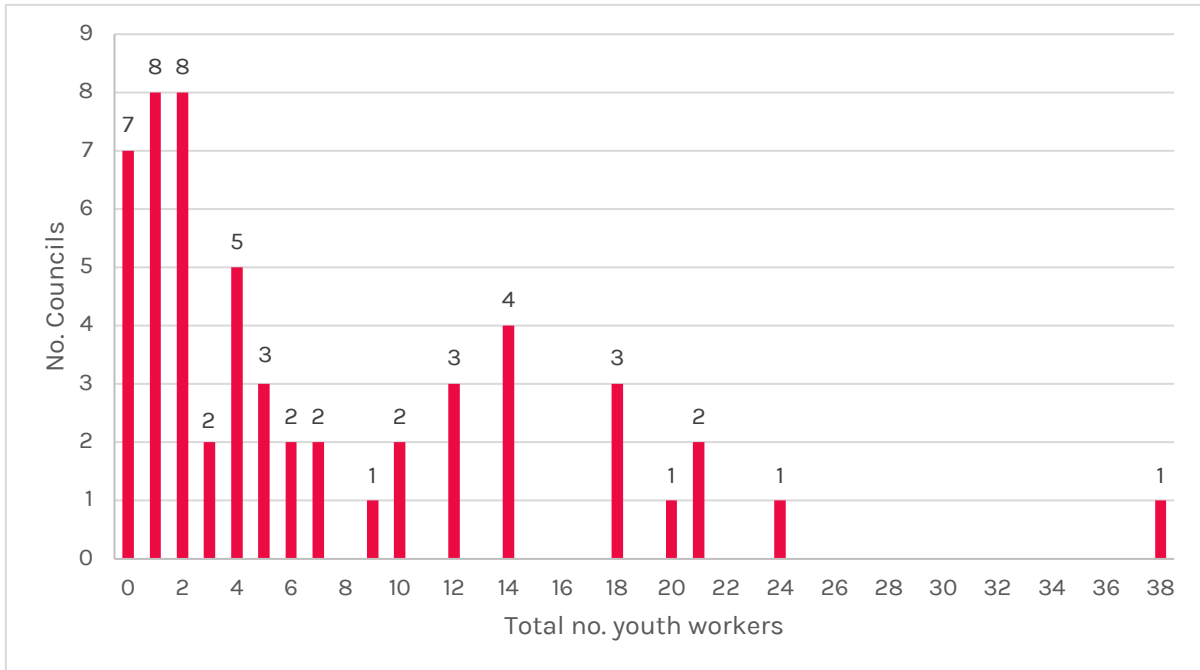
counselling services (e.g., headspace, Youth Live 4 Life). Social and recreational programs provided by Councils can also be considered part of mental health prevention and early intervention.

Most sparsely employed were caseworkers, present in just 10 Councils (18%). Importantly, these 10 Councils only spanned three regions—Greater Melbourne, the Grampians and the Mallee. According to our study, young people across Eastern Victoria (Gippsland and Hume), as well as the Barwon South West, did not have access to local caseworkers from their Council.

There were only two Councils employing all four types of youth worker—development officers, outreach workers, counsellors and caseworkers—one in Greater Melbourne and the other in the Grampians. Conversely, according to the survey responses, there were seven Councils employing none of the four; these are spread across the state.

Overall, as shown in Figures 2 and 3, there was great variation across the state in the number of youth focused professionals employed by each Council, and the hours they worked, captured in their contracted Full-Time Equivalent hours (FTE).

Figure 2: Number of Councils that employed youth focused professionals and number of youth focused professionals employed.



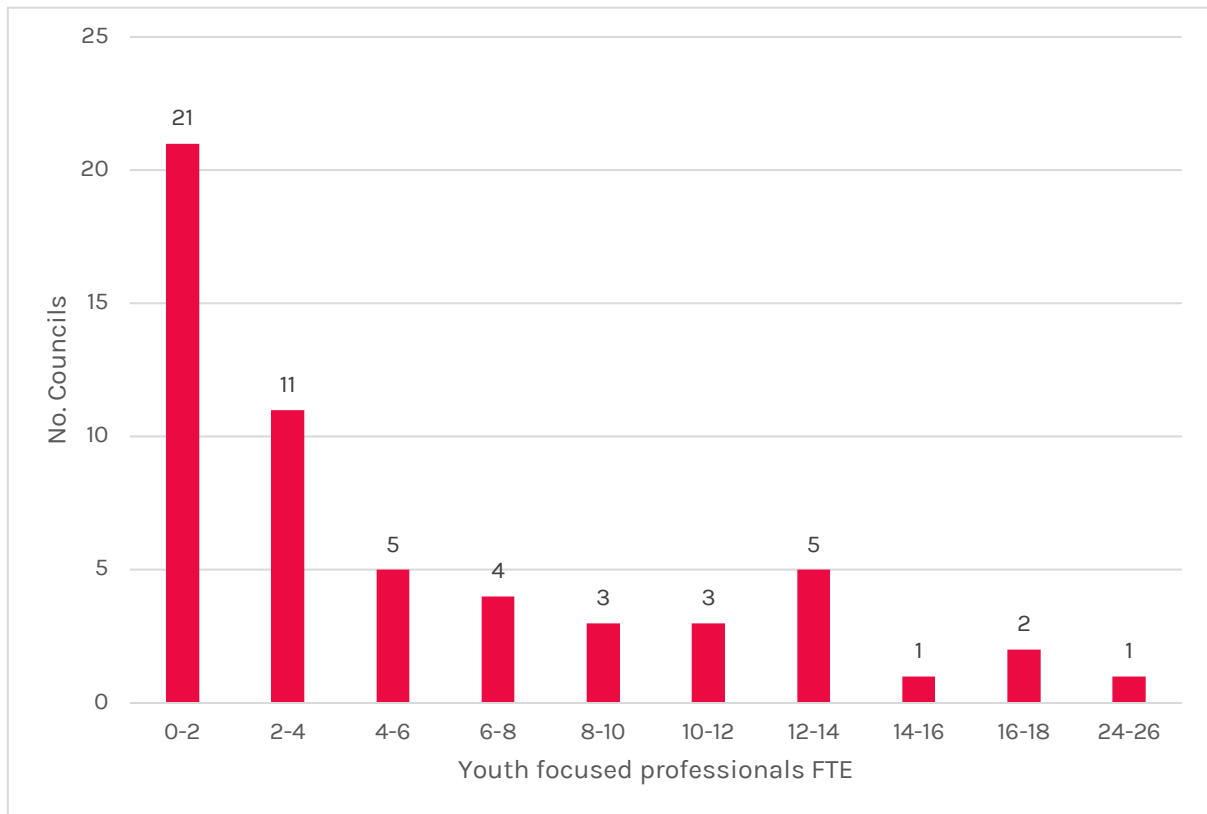
\* Please note that 55 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

While 16 Councils that participated in the study employed just one or two youth focused professionals in total, others were employing much larger teams of workers. The greatest number of youth focused professionals in a single Council was 38, located in Greater Melbourne. The median number of youth focused professionals across all Councils that participated in the study was four, that is half of the Councils had fewer than five youth workers.

Of the 25 Councils (45%) employing more than the median number of youth focused professionals, only five were in regional Victoria. Perhaps unsurprisingly, four of these were regional cities, likely to have a greater number of young people than other regional Councils.



Figure 3: Overall youth focused professionals FTE per number of Councils.



\* Please note that 56 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

As above, the Council with the greatest number of youth focused professionals also had the most FTE staff (25). The median number of FTE staff across the state was three. There were just six regional Councils with FTE staff above the median.

Table 3 illustrates the trend of Councils in Greater Melbourne employing more youth focused professionals than those in regional Victoria. An average Council in Greater Melbourne hired up to six times more youth focused professionals than an average Council in some regions.

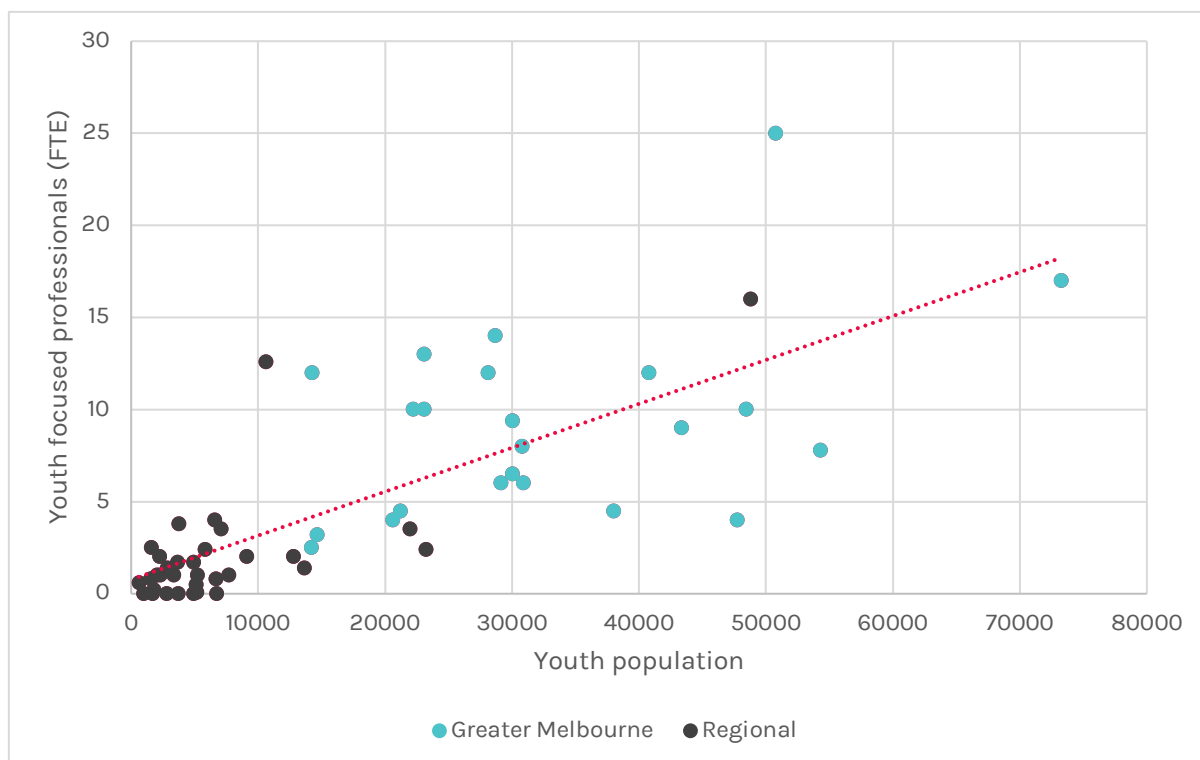
Table 3: Average level of youth focused professional staffing (all categories) by region.

Region	Average total of youth focused professionals per Council	Average total FTE of youth focused professionals per Council
Greater Melbourne	12	9
Barwon South West	4	3
Gippsland	2	1
Grampians	3	2
Hume	2	1
Mallee	6	3

\* Please note that 55 LGAs that participated in the survey provided answered this question.

It could be argued that more youth-focused professionals are likely to be hired in Greater Melbourne, as regional Councils service fewer young people. As Figures 4 and 5 suggest, both metropolitan and regional Councils in areas with more young people tended to hire more FTE staff.

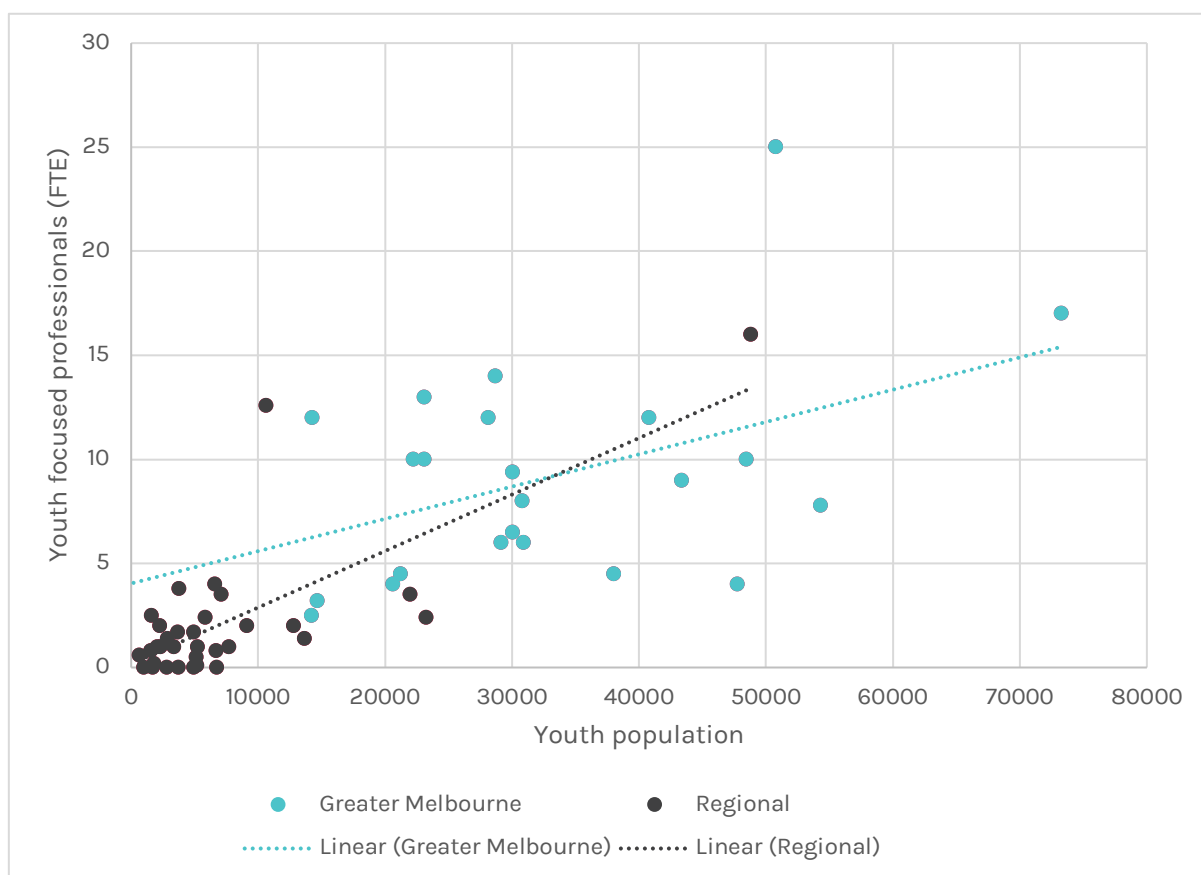
Figure 4: How do Councils' FTE staff compare to the number of young people in their area? (Overall trend)



\* Please note that 56 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

However, as shown in Figure 5, the vast majority of regional Councils fell beneath the metropolitan trend line. That is, regional Councils tended to have less FTE staff even compared to metropolitan Councils with similar populations. Reading from Figure 5, a metropolitan LGA with a youth population of 10,000 for example is likely to employ approximately 6 FTE youth focused professionals, compared to 3 FTE in a regional LGA with the same population. This gap widened for LGAs with fewer than 10,000 young people, which includes most regional LGAs.

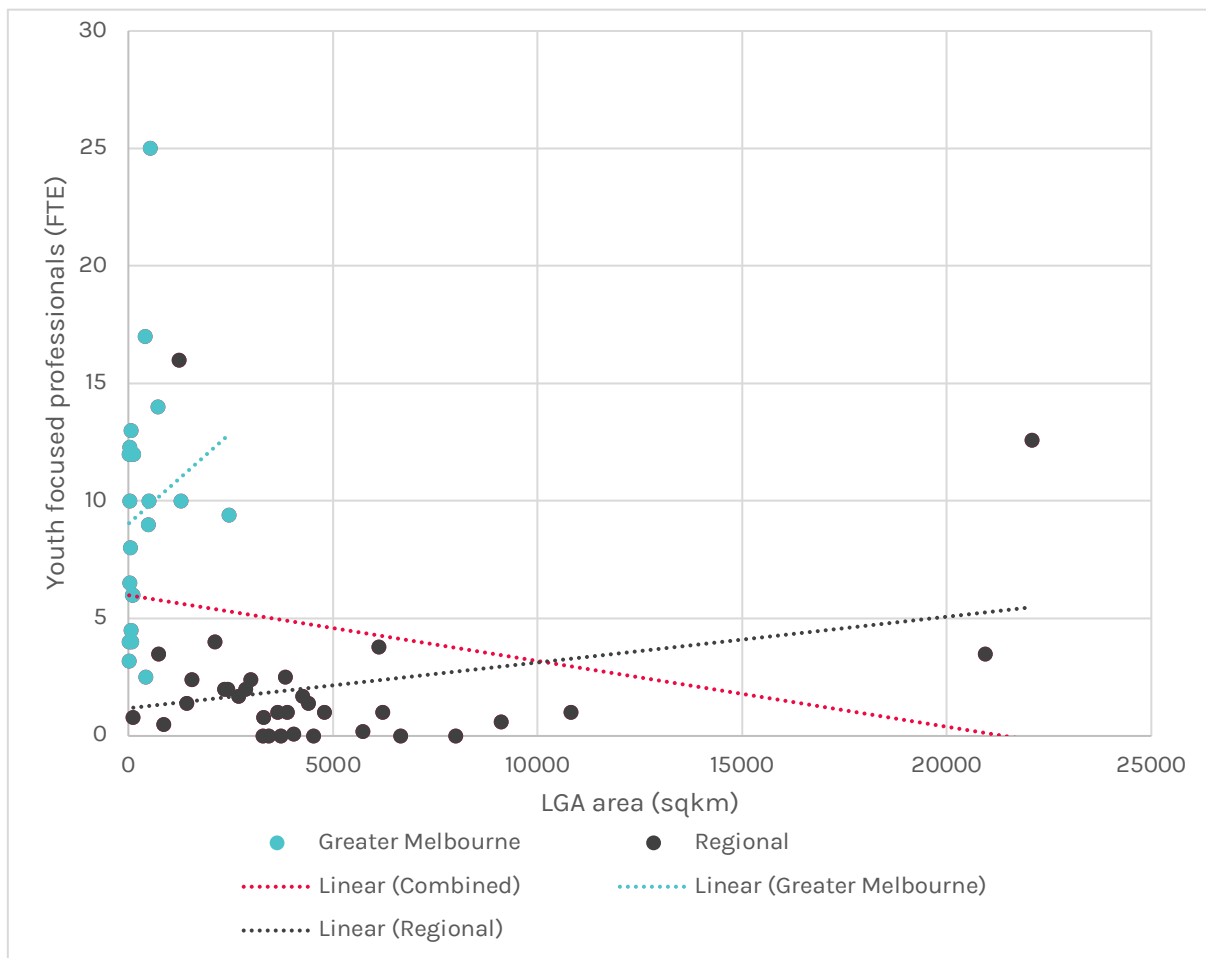
Figure 5: How do Councils' FTE staff compare to the number of young people in their area? (Metro vs regional)



\* Please note that 56 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

A similar comparison can be made with FTE youth focused professionals and the geographical area of each LGA, as in Figure 6. This comparison can be thought of as the geographical area that a single youth team must cover: a smaller number of workers and/or a larger area means each worker has a greater load when it comes to area coverage.

Figure 6: How do Councils' total youth focused professional staff compare to their geographical area? (metro vs regional)



\*Please note that 54 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

As shown in Figure 6, larger LGAs in Greater Melbourne generally had greater capacity in their Council's youth team: for every additional 1,000km<sup>2</sup> in a metro LGA, an average Council would gain 1.5 FTE in their youth team. However, there was considerably less variation in FTE youth focused professionals employed by regional Councils, denoted by a much flatter trendline. For every additional 1,000km<sup>2</sup> in a regional LGA, an average Council would only gain 0.2 FTE in their youth team.

With few exceptions, regional Councils tended to have 5 or fewer FTE youth focused professionals regardless of geographical size. This suggests that Councils in some of Victoria's biggest LGAs have the same youth team capacity as

the smallest LGAs, if not less; this means that each youth focused professional must individually service a far greater area. Young people in geographically larger LGAs are done a disservice if their Councils are not sufficiently resourced to cover those service areas.

## Summary of findings

The main findings of this section are:

- 25% of Australia's young people live in Victoria, with the vast majority living in Greater Melbourne
- The percentage of young people in each LGA's overall population is around 18% on average. Metropolitan LGAs had a slightly higher average, but also much greater variation, suggesting that local requirements and demand for youth services are likely to vary.
- Councils in LGAs with more young people tended to employ more youth focused professionals
- Councils in regional LGAs generally employed fewer youth focused professionals than metropolitan LGAs. Even in those Councils with comparable populations of young people, the lower the youth population the more pronounced this difference became.
- Overall, an average metropolitan Council hired two to six times more youth focused professionals than an average regional Council, depending on the region
- 86% of LGAs that participated in the study were employing youth development workers, but this number drops to 41% for youth outreach workers, 21% for youth counsellors, and 18% for caseworkers
- Only two Councils that participated in the study employed at least one of each type of youth focused professionals, while seven employed none of the four
- In three regions—Gippsland, Hume and Barwon South West—surveyed Councils were employing caseworkers
- Across the state, geographically larger LGAs tended to hire fewer youth focused professionals. This trend largely stemmed from metropolitan LGAs

being both smaller and better resourced; there were both less youth focused professionals in regional Victoria and much greater areas to cover.



# Section Two: Youth Participation and Policy

This section canvasses Councils' policy approach to young people, focusing on several key mechanisms: youth strategies, youth charters and youth councils. Each mechanism represents an opportunity for young people to participate in civic life and contribute their expertise to local government. It also explores to what extent Councils provide these opportunities for young people.

## **Youth strategies and charters**

Most Councils surveyed had a youth strategy or policy in some form. Among 59 respondents, 75% had a standalone strategy for young people, while a further 3% had a youth strategy integrated in a wider Council plan. Youth strategies are important policy documents which articulate the specific needs of young people in a given LGA, and a commitment from Council to addressing them. Conversely, 22% of Councils, or 13, had no youth strategy at all.

As outlined in Figure 7, there was a significant variation between metropolitan and regional Councils in adopting youth strategies. 83% of Councils in Greater Melbourne adopted a youth strategy, compared to 69% of regional Councils.

Figure 7: Councils with youth strategies in regional and metropolitan areas across Victoria.



\*Please note that 59 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

It is also worth noting the extent to which young people were consulted in developing those strategies, or in developing Council policy generally. The vast majority of Councils (47 of 55 respondents, or 84%) did consult with young people, whether in developing a youth strategy or Council's overall policy; four Councils without a youth strategy still consulted young people on overall policy.

The most popular method of consultation was through surveys: of the 47 Councils with known methods of engagement, 83% used surveys (online or face to face). Also popular were focus groups, discussion groups or other forms of group consultation, with 72% of Councils also using these methods. Many Councils adopted multiple methods. In some cases, Councils also utilised individual interviews and collaborations with schools, while more novel approaches included writing activities, postcards and pop-up events.

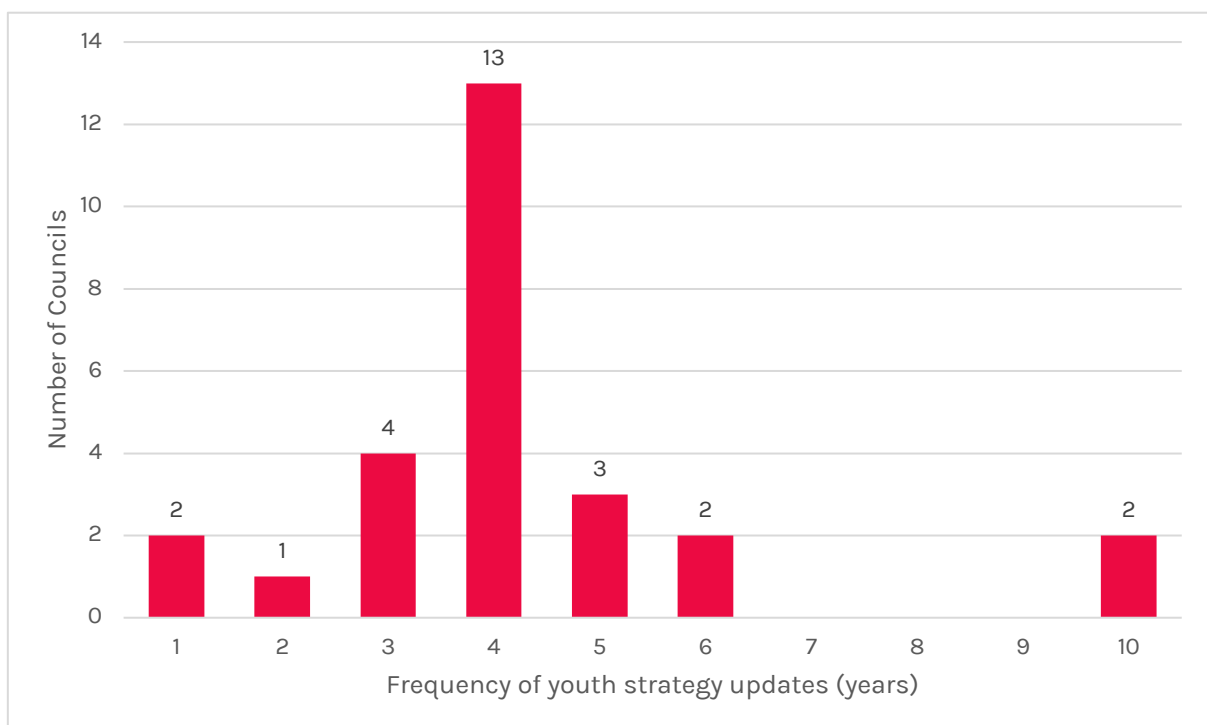
However, only five Councils (11%) utilised some degree of co-design in the development of their youth strategy, that is involving young people themselves in designing, developing, delivering and/or leading the engagement process. Co-design contrasts with simply consulting young people: it is a more involved

process that affords young people agency and decision-making power in every stage of the policy making process, including in how they are consulted. The paucity of co-designed youth strategies in Victoria is an area of concern.

As shown in Figure 8, 25 Councils also indicated how frequently their youth policy is generally updated. There was some variation across responses, with a small number of Councils seeking to update it every year or two, or on the other hand every decade. The remaining 20 responses fell in between, with a majority (13, or 52%) updating it every four years.

Due to the dynamism of youth culture, issues and experiences, regular review and updating of youth strategies is important to ensure they stay current. For example, while the decade-long strategies of two Councils came into effect quite recently (in 2018-9), it is possible they will lose some relevance by the end of the decade.

Figure 8: Frequency of youth strategy updates by Councils across Victoria.



\*Please note that 25 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

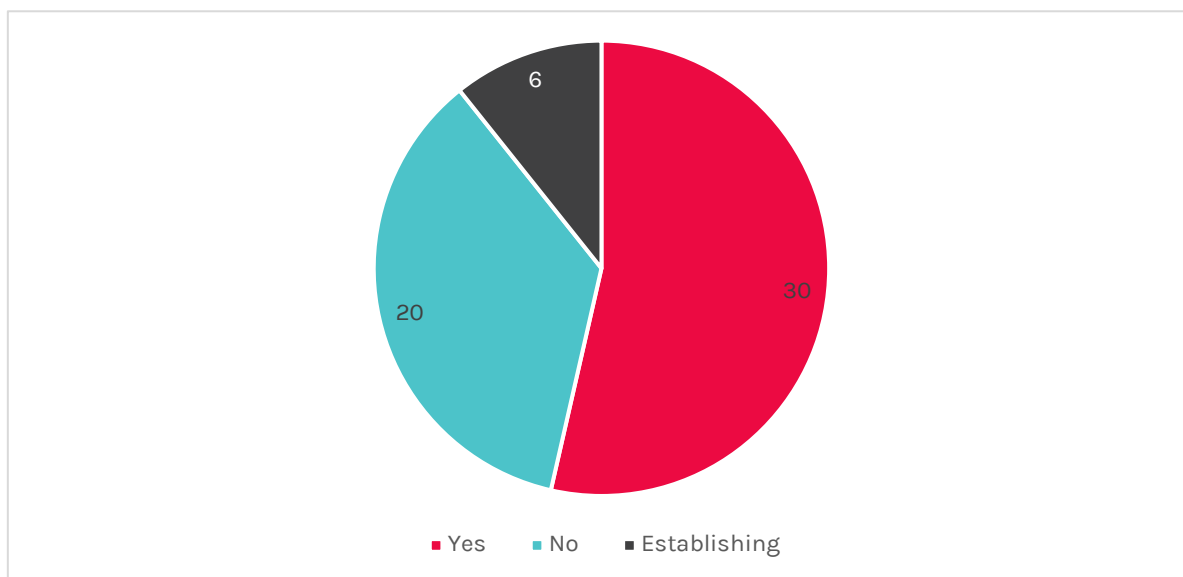
Some Councils also had a youth charter alongside or instead of a youth strategy. A youth charter is a document outlining broad, guiding principles which define a

council’s relationship with its young people. As it sets out principles rather than policies or targets, it is usually less comprehensive than a youth strategy. However, this means Councils can apply it in a range of policy settings. Compared to youth strategies, there were fewer Councils with a youth charter, just 26% of 54 respondents or 14 Councils. All but four of these had a youth charter in addition to a youth strategy; three had a charter but no strategy, while one had a charter alongside an overall council strategy into which young people were integrated.

### Young people’s representation

Youth councils or youth advisory groups are a common way for young people’s perspectives to be represented to local government on a more ongoing basis. Typically, these involve a Council recruiting a number of young people in an advisory capacity, seeking their input and advice on local governance and policy. Most of the Councils surveyed (30 or 53%) had already-established youth councils or youth advisory groups. A further six Councils (11%) were in the process of establishing one, leaving 20 Councils (36%) without.

Figure 9: Extent to which Councils across Victoria have youth councils or youth advisory groups.



\*Please note that 56 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

Table 4 shows some variation in the number of youth councils / youth advisory groups across regions. For example, every surveyed Council in Gippsland either had, or was in the process of setting up, a youth council. On the other hand, most

surveyed Councils in Barwon South West and the Grampians did not have a youth council when the surveys were conducted.

*Table 4: Youth councils in Victorian Councils by region.*

Region	Number of Councils that have a youth council	Number of Councils that do not have a youth council	Number of Councils that are establishing youth councils	Total number of responses (= 56)	Percentage of Councils that have a youth council
Greater Melbourne	12	7	4	23	52%
Barwon South West	3	4		7	43%
Gippsland	4		1	5	80%
Grampians	2	4		6	33%
Hume	6	2	1	9	67%
Mallee	3	3		6	50%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>56</b>	

Youth councils and youth advisory groups also varied in size, with the smallest consisting of a single young person and the largest having 25. Of the 27 Councils with a known youth council / youth advisory group size, the average was 13. This range suggests that there is no ‘correct’ size for a youth council; it is more up to each Council to select a group size that allows for diversity and representation.

It is worth noting that Councils with a greater proportion of young people in their local populations tended to have youth councils or youth advisory groups set up. As outlined in Table 5, in LGAs with a higher proportion of young people than the median of 17.8%, 64% of their respective Councils had established youth councils or youth advisory groups, compared to 43% for those below the median. These findings suggest that youth representation is a higher priority in areas with a greater proportion of young people. However, youth participation is critical everywhere, and Councils without a formal, long-term mechanism of youth

representation should consider the benefits of establishing a youth council or youth advisory group.

*Table 5: Youth councils in Victorian Councils based on percentage of young people in the LGA.*

LGAs	Number of Councils that have a youth council	Number of Councils that do not have a youth council	Number of Councils that are establishing a youth council	Total number	Percentage of Councils that have a youth council
Less than median percentage of young people	12	12	4	28	43%
More than median percentage of young people	18	8	2	28	64%

## Summary of findings

The key findings of this section are:

- Most Councils had a policy strategy for young people in some form: 75% had a standalone youth strategy while an additional 3% had a wider Council plan which includes young people.
- A greater proportion of Councils in Greater Melbourne had a youth strategy—83%, compared to 69% of regional Councils.
- 84% of surveyed Councils had consultation mechanisms for young people, predominantly surveys and focus groups. However, only five Councils mentioned using some element of co-design for their youth strategy.
- Councils varied greatly in how often they updated youth strategies, ranging from every year to every decade.
- 26% of Councils had a youth charter, most in conjunction with their youth strategy.
- Most Councils had established (53%) or were establishing (11%) a youth council or youth advisory group; the average size was 13 young people.



- There is some regional variation in Councils' uptake of youth councils and youth advisory groups, with every Council surveyed in Gippsland having or currently setting up a youth council or youth advisory group, compared to just a third in the Grampians.
- LGAs with higher proportions of young people were more likely to have a youth council or youth advisory group. However, youth participation is critical everywhere, and Councils without a formal, long-term mechanism of youth representation should consider the benefits of establishing a youth council or youth advisory group.

# Section Three: Youth Services and Funding Streams

This section maps the coverage and reach of youth services across Victoria, ranging from recreational, educational or employment-related services to mental health support and targeted programs for priority cohorts of young people. It further explores a number of service gaps that Councils reported experiencing, as well as their funding streams.

## Youth services

Of 53 respondents, 77% of Councils were providing some form or forms of youth services, representing a majority across the state. However, as outlined in Table 6, there was some regional variation: while every respondent in Greater Melbourne was providing youth services, only 50% of respondents in Gippsland were doing the same. Other regions fall somewhere in between. The proportion of Councils providing youth services in each region closely matches the average total FTE of youth focused professionals there as well.

*Table 6: Percentage of Councils providing youth services per region across Victoria.*

Region	Percentage of Councils providing youth services	Average total FTE of youth focused professionals per Council
Greater Melbourne	100%	9
Barwon South West	57%	3
Gippsland	50%	1
Grampians	80%	2
Hume	56%	1
Mallee	67%	3

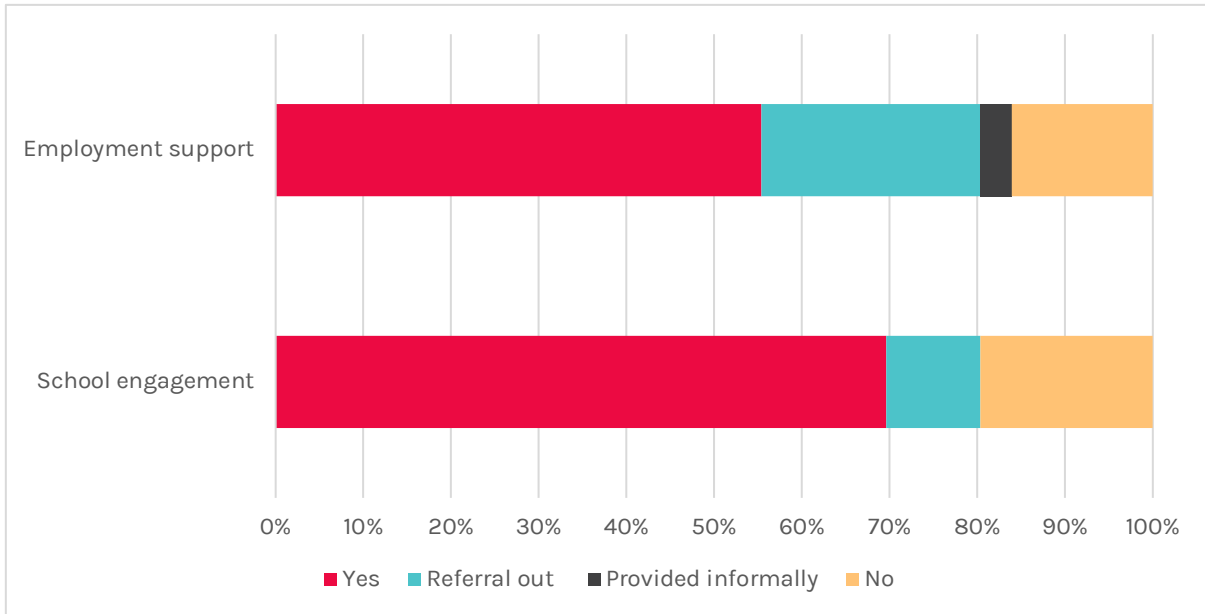
\*Please note that 53 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

Youth services tended to include recreational activities such as after school or holiday programs, arts and music events, sport or gaming; they also included the provision and maintenance of spaces such as skate parks or leisure centres. The majority of surveyed Councils were delivering these in some form, whether in-house or through referral to other non-council organisations or agencies.

Drop-in spaces were often how young people accessed these services. They were provided in some form by 52% of Councils (29 of 56 respondents), including 5% which referred young people to external drop-ins such as at a library or YMCA. However, most Councils that provided drop-in spaces were metropolitan Councils. Indeed, besides Greater Melbourne and the Grampians, a majority of Councils in each region did not have a drop-in space. In Gippsland, four of the five surveyed Councils did not have a drop-in at all, with the remaining one referring to other non-council organisations or agencies. This may be because drop-in spaces are less serviceable in regional Victoria—with limited transport options, young people may not be able to easily get to them—but the variation is worth noting nonetheless.

Council youth services also included employment- or education-related services, though this was less consistent. Figure 10 shows that 80% and 81% of surveyed Councils were providing employment or school support respectively, whether in-house or through referral to other non-council organisations or agencies. Notably, every surveyed Council in Greater Melbourne was providing education-related support, and all but one were providing employment-related support; this means that these services were less consistently provided in the regions. Also captured in Figure 10 are two Councils which provided employment support informally, that is young people can visit a drop-in centre and ask for it.

Figure 10: Percentage of Councils providing employment- or education-related services across Victoria.

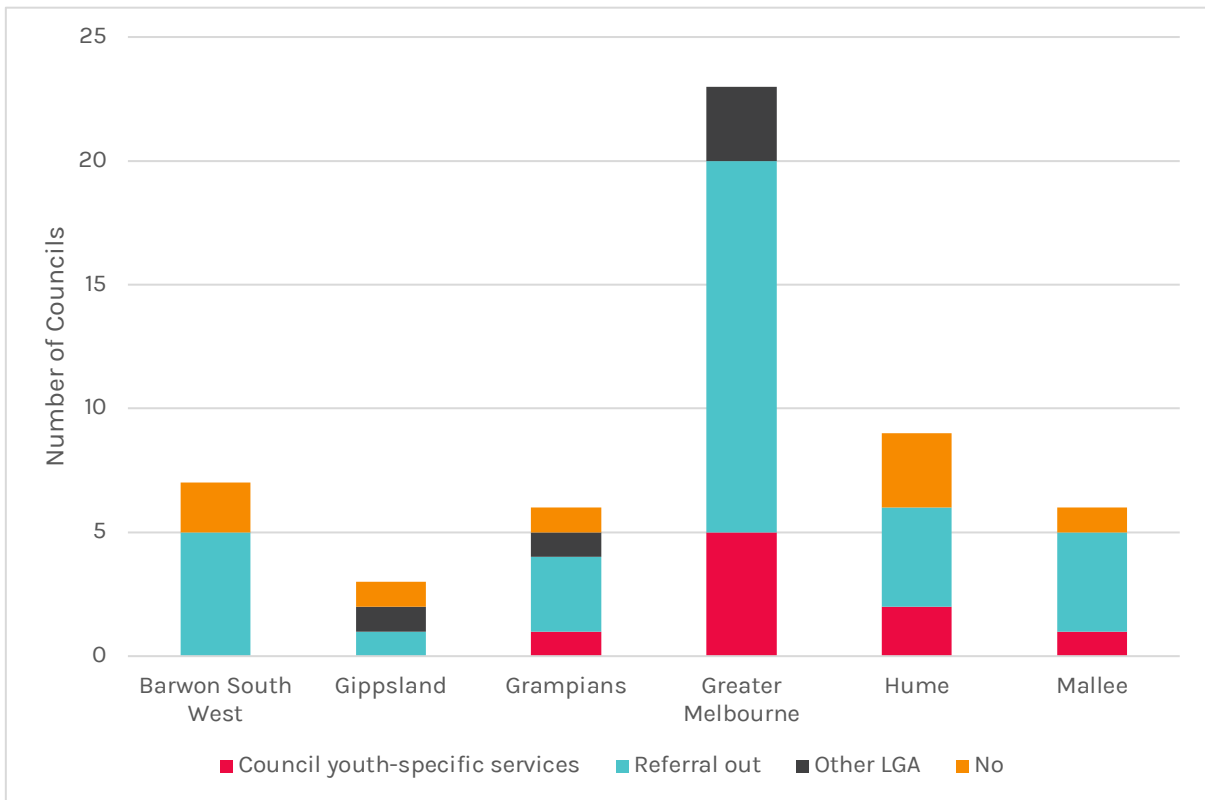


\*Please note that 56 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

One further service Councils may provide is mental health support for young people. This type of support can take a number of forms, from preventative or early intervention programs to specialist and clinical and medical services. Councils tended to provide the former as recreational activities, school engagement or employment support as discussed above, while referring more specialised needs to other services. As shown in Figure 11, 39 of the 56 respondents, or 70%, were referring these needs either to a non-council organisation or a neighbouring Council. A high proportion of Councils in all regions used these avenues.

Of the 39 Councils referring young people to a non-council organisation or a neighbouring Council, 66% were likely to refer young people to local headspace centres, 16% to a headspace in a neighbouring LGA, and 18% to Live Health, Enrich and Mind Australia. One of the most common challenges highlighted by Councils was the long waitlist for young people to access mental health services. It is important to note that 18% of Councils were providing their own youth-specific mental health services, while 14% were not providing any at all.

Figure 11: Mental health services provided by Councils per region.



\*Please note that 56 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

In an open-ended question in the survey about service gaps in their area, 42% of the 53 Councils identified mental health as a key service gap. This applied to both regional and metropolitan Councils, and has been exacerbated by COVID-19 (as Section Four will also show). The following quotes were representative:

*'Mental health services is a gap in the council and it has increased even more in the recent times.'*

- Council in Greater Melbourne

*'Mental health is a big issue currently with young people and the council needs to increase the services for mental health'*

- Council in the Grampians

Further, regional Councils were particularly hampered by access difficulties. Often, mental health services were not strictly available within their local area, meaning

young people are referred to services further afield and therefore more difficult to reach:

*'The council does not have services based in Surf coast, all the services are in Geelong'*

- Council in Barwon South West

*'The council mostly refers out to other non-council organisations, and most of the non-council organisations are not located locally so, [young people] need to travel outside community to access the services'*

- Council in Gippsland

*'The council also accessibility issues as the young people need to travel from the council to other non-council organisations'*

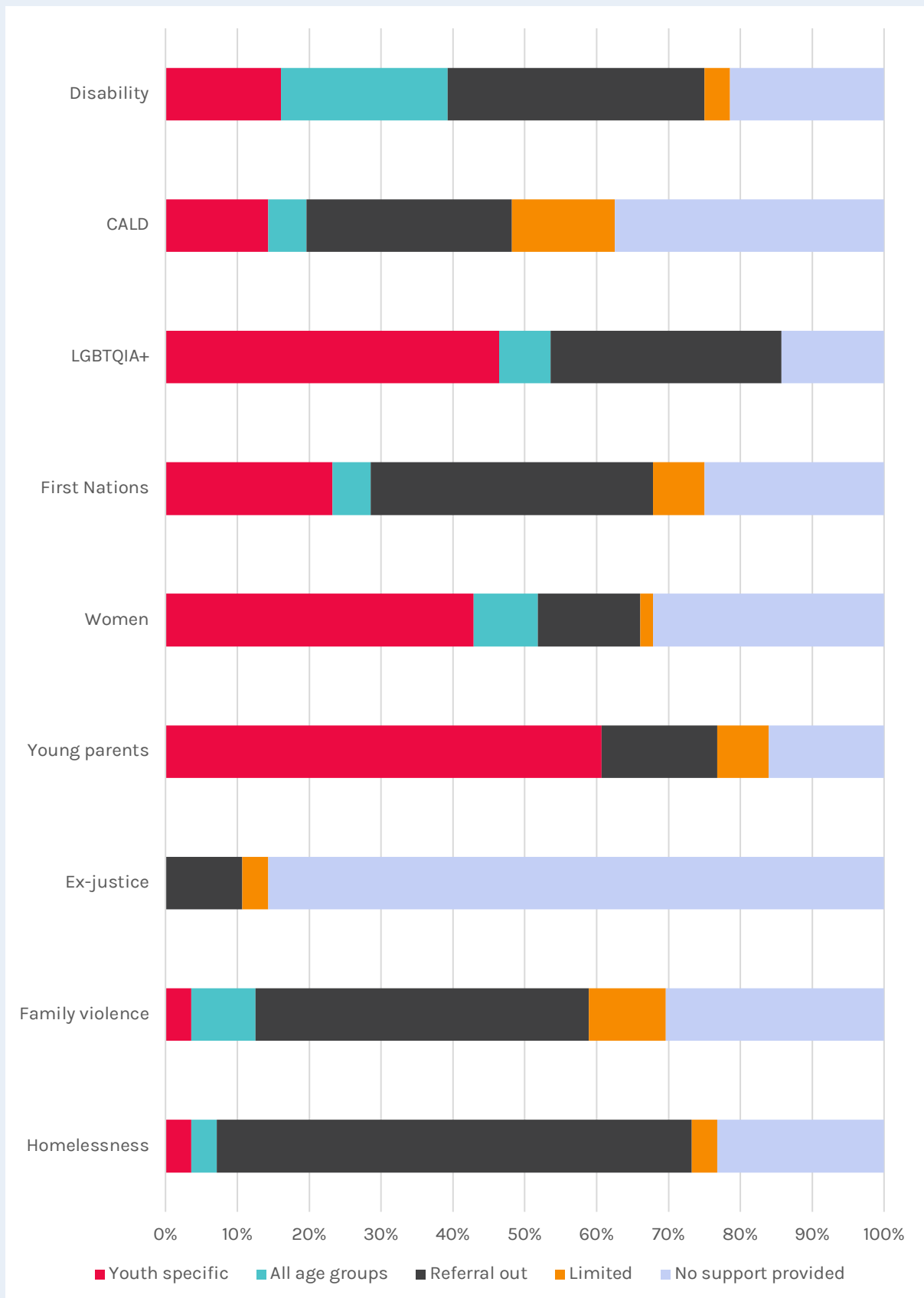
- Council in Hume

While Figure 11 indicated that most Councils could provide some sort of mental health support to young people, Councils suggested that mental health support, though present, might not be easily accessible or meeting current levels of demand. Youth mental health coverage is one issue, but the quality, accessibility and reliability of services is another.

### **Targeted supports**

In addition to services available to all young people across the population, Councils may also provide targeted support for priority groups of young people. Figure 12 summarises the groups referenced in this project and the various approaches taken by Councils to service them. These approaches included providing youth-specific services, services for all age groups, services by referral, limited services or none at all.

Figure 12: Support for priority groups in Victoria.



\*Please note that 56 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

According to the survey responses, young parents were more likely to receive age-appropriate Council support when compared to other groups, with 61% of Councils providing such services to this population. This was usually in the form of maternal child health services. Other groups who were more likely to receive support when compared to other priority groups were young people who are LGBTQIA+ (46%) and young women (43%).

Across all Council and non-Council services, including services provided by referral or to the general population regardless of age, LGBTQIA+ young people became more likely to receive support when compared to other priority groups, with 86% of Councils providing support in some form. Young parents were also thus supported in 84% of surveyed Councils.

However, when including referrals to other organisations, several other groups saw a sharp increase in coverage: young people experiencing homelessness or family violence, as well as First Nations young people and disabled young people. These other services were diverse and tend to be locally based, including agencies such as Barwon Child Youth and Family, Quantum Support Services Gippsland, Northern District Community Health, as well as various First Nations community groups.

Conversely, young women saw a drop-off in support compared to other groups when including referrals to other organisations, with few Councils working with external services here: even counting referrals, 32% of Councils provided no support to young women, and this rose to 48% among regional Councils.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) young people, including refugees and migrants, were also less well-served, with 38% of Councils not providing any services for this group at all. Only one regional Council (Greater Geelong) provided youth-specific support for the CALD community.

There was also a significant absence of support for young people with prior involvement in the justice system: 86% of Councils surveyed, including Councils



in two entire regions (Barwon South West and Gippsland) were not providing any support in this regard at all. This finding is especially concerning given that involvement in the justice system has such debilitating impacts on young people, often leading to recidivism and continued involvement in the justice system well into adulthood (e.g. Sentencing Advisory Council, 2016).

Regarding targeted supports, Councils were asked whether there was a particular need to increase services to any priority groups of young people of the nine listed in Table 7. Councils were able to select multiple options, and selected seven on average. Most often selected was disabled young people, by 46 or 87% of respondents, though survey responses showed a need to increase services to all the priority groups.

*Table 7: Target populations needing more services according to survey conducted with Councils across Victoria.*

Priority groups	Percentage of Councils indicating need for increased support for young people
Disabled young people	87%
Young survivors of family violence	81%
Young First Nations people	79%
Young people experiencing homelessness	75%
Young women	75%
LGBTQIA+ young people	75%
Young parents	72%
CALD/migrant/refugee young people	72%
Young people involved in the justice system	70%

\*Please note that 53 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

### Other service gaps

While mental health and priority-group-specific services were most frequently identified as gaps, 53 Councils identified several other service gaps in response to another open-ended question. The most common response was generally focused

on resourcing and capacity: the range of services may be adequate, but some Councils found it difficult to meet certain areas of need or projections of future demand. Indeed, 38% of the 53 respondents mentioned insufficient capacity, for example:

*'We have a small youth team as the council is very under resourced. The council just scraping the surface of the services and cannot interact with young people with complex issues'*

- Council in Hume

*'Consistency in funding is the key as the council cannot plan for the future'*

- Council in the Mallee

Another gap was the availability of local service infrastructure: transport and access were identified as issues by 32% of respondents. The need for young people to travel to receive support is a well-known issue across the state. The following comments were representative:

*'Majority of the services that provided are from outside of the Shire and accessibility is a huge issue where young people have to travel for at least an hour to access those services'*

- Council in Hume

*'There is a lack services as lots of young people need to travel [to a different LGA] in order to access the resources'*

- Council in Hume

*'Historically the local area struggled with the development of service system so, they see a role in promoting access outside the municipality community that is the reason they often collaborate with other organisations'*

- Council in Greater Melbourne

As illustrated by the above comment, Councils in metropolitan areas could also face challenges in making services accessible in less built-up areas.

Another challenge noted by respondents was that while youth services may exist, the degree of youth participation in shaping those services was generally inadequate. It should be noted that this can be cyclical: if young people are not empowered to shape services and communications, then their engagement and buy-in are likely to suffer correspondingly. For example:

*'The council does not have a youth advisory, having young people in decision making [...] the main gap is direct engagement with young people'*

- Council in the Mallee

*'Young people usually do not raise their hand for seeking help so it has been a challenge in engaging with young people in this area'*

- Council in the Mallee

Finally, a number of issue-specific gaps were raised. Most prominently raised, by 23% of the 53 respondents, was employment or educational services; substance use, recreation and sexual health were also raised on occasion. One participant said:

*'Sexual Health for young people the schools have started adopting recently. Other gaps would be that elder youth that is 18-25 years providing employment services to them. The other thing would be young people do not have a lot of activities to do the region'*

- Council in the Grampians

## **Funding for youth services**

The survey focused on two funding avenues: FReeZA and Engage, which were a significant source of funding for Council youth services. These funding streams

both exist to improve social connection, participation, engagement and wellbeing for young people.

The most common of these was FReeZA, received by 82% of 55 respondents and with a similar proportion per region. More sparsely received was Engage, with 59% of 56 respondents receiving this stream. Four Councils were receiving neither.

There was a slight tendency for Councils receiving more funding streams to also have a greater percentage of young people in their LGA, on average 19% for Councils receiving two streams compared to 18% for those receiving one.

### **Summary of findings**

The key findings of this section are:

- 77% of Councils were providing some form or forms of youth services, though with some regional variation from 100% in Greater Melbourne to 50% in Gippsland.
- 52% of Councils had some access to drop-in spaces, but they were predominantly in Greater Melbourne; most Councils in most regional areas did not.
- In terms of mental health services, referrals to non-council organisations and other agencies were the dominant avenue with 68% of Councils taking this pathway. However, mental health services were sometimes difficult to reach, particularly for young people in the regions, and needs are not always being met.
- Supports for priority groups, while present, were also needing bolstering: between 70% and 87% of Councils indicated that various priority groups required additional support, with disabled young people topping the list.
- Among priority groups, young parents received age-specific Council support from the greatest proportion of Councils, at 61%.
- Among priority groups, LGBTQIA+ young people received some form of support—including by referral—from the greatest proportion of Councils, at 83%.

- Most often referred to external organisations were young people experiencing homelessness or family violence, First Nations young people and disabled young people.
- Only one regional Council was providing age-specific support for CALD young people.
- No Council that participated in the study provided age-specific support for young people who have been involved in the justice system.
- Service gaps stemmed from various factors, including capacity, transport and accessibility, and a lack of youth participation.
- Other issue-specific gaps included employment, recreation, sexual health and substance use.
- 82% of Councils were receiving FReeZA funding, and 59% were receiving Engage funding.

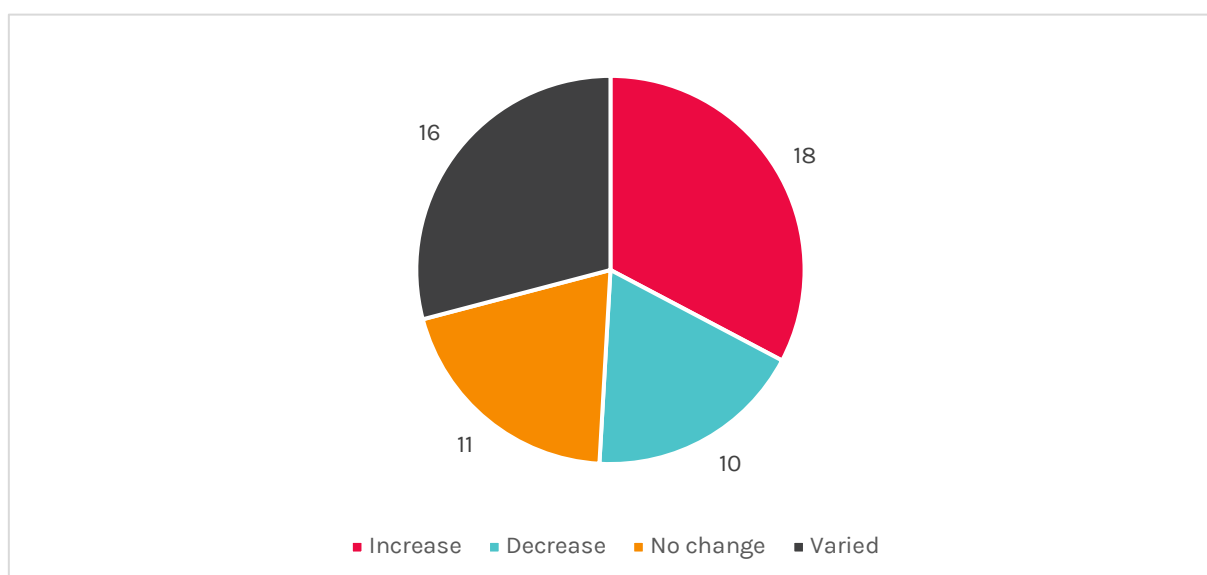
## Section Four: Impacts of COVID-19 on Local Youth Services

This section captures the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth services across Victoria. In particular, it traces the changes to the services and mediums through which Councils engaged with young people, as well as to the funding streams that make this engagement possible. It finishes with two case studies which illustrate how some Councils positively managed the impacts of COVID-19.

### Key impacts

As a result of COVID-19, almost every Council surveyed needed to shift youth programs and services online – 56 of the 57 respondents (98%) saw a shift to online delivery. However, changes in service demand were much more varied. Figure 13 shows the COVID-19 impact on the service demand across Councils. While many Councils noted an increase in demand, just as many felt that there was no change or even a decrease in demand. Other Councils experienced a mix of demand changes, increasing in some areas while decreasing in others.

Figure 13: COVID-19 impacts on service demand across Councils in Victoria.



\*Please note that 55 Councils that participated in the survey provided answered this question.

Councils experienced the most acute increases in demand for education- or employment-related training, mental health services, and case management. While partnerships with Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) allowed Councils to meet some of the education- and employment-related needs of young people, it is worth noting that youth counsellors and caseworkers were the sparsest category of youth worker to begin with; COVID-19 would have therefore introduced additional strain to already-stretched mental health and casework services.

Decreases in service demand experienced by Councils were often due to screen fatigue: because young people also needed to shift their studies online for example, they became hesitant to spend even more time online for social or recreational purposes, or to receive services.

Some Councils noticed increased demand in some services alongside decreased demand in others, hence varied changes in demand. These also stemmed from observed differences between COVID-19 lockdowns: while there was greater engagement in the first lockdown, some Councils noticed a drop-off or plateau during the second.

In addition, there is some regional variation in service demand. The region with the greatest proportion of increased demand was Gippsland, with 50% of surveyed Councils in the region noting an increase; no surveyed Councils in Gippsland noted a decrease, which could be in part to added stresses from bushfires. The reverse was true for Hume, with 50% of its surveyed Councils noting a decrease in demand and none noting an increase.

Figure 14: Changes to service demand by region.



\*Please note that 55 Councils that participated in the survey answered this question.

COVID-19 restrictions were also reflected in changes to how Councils interacted with young people. 25 Councils that delivered youth services provided information on how these interactions have shifted, largely also due to transitioning online. Among these responses, social media and online interactions dominated, with 72% of these Councils (18 of 25) mentioning an increase to these avenues. These avenues were often facilitated by Facebook groups or pages, Instagram and teleconferencing software such as Zoom, though some Councils also mentioned phone and email.

Overall, these changes had mixed results: some Councils viewed them as a basic necessity given COVID-19 and an impediment to young people’s engagement, while others felt that it opened new avenues for young people to access services, resources and programs. For instance, one Council in Greater Melbourne adopted an online youth forum, which it felt was a successful platform and one to maintain beyond the pandemic.



There were also Councils which tried to use social media more, but did not feel that this increased their interactions with young people: even during 2020, they experienced a decline in young people's response rates to online events and activities.

In general, there is little doubt that COVID-19 has exacerbated any isolation or lack of connection that young people were already experiencing; while most Councils adapted in response to this, there were mixed results across the state.

In terms of funding for youth services, most Councils did not experience a change from previous years. 86% of 52 respondents indicated that their funding remained the same: one of these had no funding or youth services to begin with, and this did not change in light of COVID-19. Some respondents (9%) saw increased funding or found new streams of funding while others experienced a decrease (5%). The two Councils which experienced a decrease were both in metropolitan Melbourne.

### **Stories of innovation**

The following two case studies illustrate how Councils have managed the impacts of COVID-19 on their work with young people.

# City of Ballarat

As part of the Victorian Government's FReeZa program, young people in the City of Ballarat had been planning an array of live gigs and events in early 2020. As COVID-19 restrictions came into place, participants and youth workers alike anticipated that these events were likely to be cancelled and began to plan for online delivery.

The FReeZa committee, called SONIKA, decided on an online event, the 'Fully Sick' Online Music and Arts Festival, which continued to feature young artists and musicians through week after week of restrictions. The committee, particularly those who were involved in the music scene, were able to liaise with artists and book them for gigs throughout. As one volunteer put it:

*'Fully Sick has been a lifeline for young artists trying to make a career during lockdown. It's opened up more opportunities that might not have been available even before lockdown, and has helped showcase up and coming artists.'*

The transition of the Festival online also increased the Council and youth committee's presence and generated new engagement that they mightn't otherwise have received.

Since then, SONIKA has returned to live gigs including their SONIKA Records Volume 2 Album launch which saw an attendance of over 100 young people and allies. The 2021 SONIKA Records program, through which the Volume 2 Album will be recorded, has also signed up a record number of emerging artists.

In terms of working with young people throughout COVID-19, Ballarat's youth team said:

*'...if young people aren't at the front of a project, there is no point in doing it. It is tiresome, drains time and energy. When young people are passionate, leading*

*and invested in their own ideas it is like working WITH the tide. It flows, it's easy, it happens and it is a success that is youth led.'*

This case study shows the importance of Councils working to enable youth leadership and participation: empowering young people means they can continue bringing their perspectives to large-scale social challenges, and drive the changes needed by their peers and in their communities. In this case, young people in arts and entertainment had been facing unprecedented challenges due to COVID-19; not only did 'Fully Sick' empower those on the SONIKA committee, but it also saw young musicians and event staff paid for their time, providing a vital source of income during a volatile time for young people, often employed casually in the events and hospitality industries. It also created new opportunities for engagement in the Council with lasting impact.

# City of Greater Dandenong

An issue that youth focused professionals at the City of Greater Dandenong identified in the wake of COVID-19 was how best to communicate, stay in touch and support the welfare of young people connected with their service. As youth services were moved online, keeping young people connected and engaged became a key priority.

In response, the Council developed a 5-pillared communication plan to enhance communication with young people and provide reliable and reputable information about COVID-19:

1. **Inform:** keeping young people updated about lockdowns and restrictions
2. **Support:** staying up to date with what needs young people might have, with a significant focus on mental health and positive coping strategies
3. **Entertain:** providing light relief, fun and recreational content
4. **Profile:** celebrating stories of young people getting through this time or sharing their skills
5. **Engage:** promoting what opportunities were still available for young people, including online programs or events offered by Youth and Family Services or others.

In addition, a system of routine wellbeing checks was implemented with young people who had a connection to the service. The aim was to establish regular contact with young people to monitor their wellbeing, provide reassurance and make referrals if necessary. To make this happen, the Youth Team identified and triaged young people with whom they had been working into those needing weekly, fortnightly or triweekly calls. This meant that the previously 'programs-focused team' had to pivot their focus to expedite a thorough, and flexible system of assertive engagement, which was a practical and warranted response at the time.

Over time, the content of these calls shifted with need. For example, staff identified that getting reliable information about COVID-19 was a key issue—as such, some one-on-one phone calls focused more closely on what young people were hearing about the virus and from which source. Sometimes, the calls became an opportunity to provide trustworthy information.

On other occasions, young people also expressed concerns about negative media depictions of the Greater Dandenong area and its culturally diverse population: the youth team identified that young people sometimes struggled with the unkind coverage of their cultural or faith group. Young people more broadly also experienced unfavourable media coverage, for example as careless ‘rule-breakers’ who were flouting restrictions. It was the fourth pillar of their communication strategy, ‘*Profile*’, which countered the unfavourable media coverage. One initiative allowed the Council to feature young locals working in essential roles at the height of Melbourne’s ‘second wave’—working in their supermarket, allied health, local pharmacy—putting themselves at risk to provide a service to the community, as young people across the state have done throughout the pandemic.

Between March and December 2020, Greater Dandenong’s Youth Team made more than 1,067 calls to young people. Young people who engaged in this initiative became increasingly forthcoming, thanks to the phone calls and have provided rich feedback to the Council about what they want from government as COVID-19 restrictions eased. As demand for the service has continued into 2021, the challenge has now become ensuring young people continued to be supported post-COVID.

This case study shares with the earlier example a focus on youth participation: in both cases, Councils’ Youth Teams sought to create opportunities for young people to identify their needs and direct the support required. At the same time, this case study also provides an example of flexible and adaptive youth work in a time that demanded nothing less. The communication plan recognised the complex and varied needs of young people in such a challenging time and devoted resources to understanding those needs; this process of active consultation

meant young people received the support they needed at the time. The focus on one-on-one engagement ultimately fostered greater connection between the Council and its youth population, likewise creating ongoing impact through safe and non-judgmental spaces for young people to be heard.

## Summary of findings

The key findings of this section are:

- Almost every Council had to shift its youth services and programs online due to COVID-19; this was reflected in more interactions with young people through social media.
- Some services (mental health, case management and education and employment) have seen greater demand, putting additional strain onto services that are already facing significant challenges.
- Other services, particularly social and recreational services, experienced a decrease in demand, probably due to screen fatigue.
- Most regions saw a mix of increased and decreased demand. Gippsland had the highest proportion of Councils with increased demand (50%) while Hume had the highest proportion of Councils with decreased demand (also 50%).
- Few Councils saw changes to funding, with 86% finding that it remained the same.
- Though COVID-19 presented many challenges to the youth sector, Councils found ways to navigate these challenges by coming up with innovative ways to deliver youth services with young people empowered and at the helm.

# Conclusion

This report mapped the demographics, policies, services and approaches to youth work taken by Councils around the state of Victoria. Through two surveys, 61 of Victoria's 79 Councils (77%) in both metropolitan and regional areas provided insight into their youth work, and explored how the sector had been impacted by COVID-19.

The first section of the report revealed significant differences between metropolitan and regional Councils across Victoria: regional Councils had both **fewer youth focused professionals and less diversity in the types of professionals** they employed. This was particularly true for caseworkers, who according to the surveys of (youth) service coordinators were not directly employed by any Council across three regions (Gippsland, Hume and Barwon South West). Furthermore, there was **no clear increase in Councils' youth focused professionals in geographically larger LGAs**, typically located in regional areas. In fact, moderately larger metropolitan Councils tended to hire many more FTE staff, whereas regional Councils—significantly larger—only had moderately more staff to make up for their size. With few exceptions, **regional Councils tended to employ fewer youth focused professionals than their metropolitan counterparts regardless of geographical size**. This difference also applied when comparing youth populations across Victoria: **even in LGAs with comparable populations, metropolitan Councils had larger youth teams than regional Councils**. The lower the population, the more pronounced this difference became. These findings suggest more youth workers may be required to meet the needs of young people in regional Victoria, and greater thought is generally needed to ensure youth services are meeting local demand across the state. This may take the form of **more consistent or regular research undertaken at the LGA level**.



Analysis of Councils' policy approach to young people, in the second section of the report, showed that while mechanisms like a youth strategy or youth council were adopted in many Councils, it is also important to think about their aims, whether they exist to improve governance in a certain area, empower the young people living there, amplify the voices of marginalised young people, or some combination of the above. Reflecting on these aims points to **a need to implement more participatory models such as co-design**, which were not very well-adopted across the state, being used by just five Victorian Councils. Regionally speaking, the variation in whether Councils were recruiting a youth council or youth advisory group at all, and whether their size would allow for a diversity of voices, may also be of note. In general, youth strategies and councils are important mechanisms, and require ongoing reflection about the types of participation they aim to engender: rather than a tick-box requirement of participation, they should be treated as platforms which can facilitate strong youth agency if used effectively.

The third section, focused on youth services, found that while coverage tends to be mostly positive, **both metropolitan and regional Councils felt strained regarding the accessibility and volume of services and were experiencing a number of other critical gaps**. A range of services were present in most places, but there remain concerns about their availability—particularly whether they could meet the specific needs of each LGA's youth population. The section thus illustrated the **difference between service coverage and accessibility**: services were available, but were often difficult to access, had long waitlists or could not support specific priority populations. **Mental health was of particular concern**, with many young people, particularly in regional Victoria, needing to travel outside their LGA in order to receive help. Many Councils identified mental health as a key service gap. They also indicated that their **vulnerable communities still needed further support**, especially disabled young people who were experiencing considerable service gaps also. With calls for greater resourcing, in addition to pre-existing variations in funding from Council to Council, there may need to

provide more targeted and well-promoted support to best service young people around Victoria.

Finally, the fourth section of the report demonstrated how COVID-19 put these youth services, approaches and principles to the test, introducing a number of challenges to engagement and service demand across the state. Though the sector was already facing considerable challenges, **the impacts of COVID-19 were significant, far from uniform and tested Councils in different ways**: while it drove up demand for youth services in some areas, it likewise saw decreased engagement in others. **Two case studies** illustrated the importance of **maintaining youth voice, agency and participation** even through these challenges: young people have a unique understanding and expertise when it comes to the experiences and aspirations of themselves and their peers, and Councils which were able to harness this found the greatest success during the pandemic. Though different Councils face different conditions and challenges with or without COVID-19, these principles remain important for ensuring that young people feel a sense of ownership and satisfaction in the local government services that are meant for them.

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