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Youth service delivery in Melbourne’s interface local government areas:

Gaps, strengths, emerging issues

Discussion paper:

Youth Affairs Council Victoria

June 2018

**About Youth Affairs Council Victoria**

YACVic is the leading advocate for young people aged 12–25 in Victoria. As a peak body, we work closely with young Victorians and the sector that supports them to deliver effective advocacy, events, training, resources and support – so that young people can live their best lives.

Our vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities. As Victoria’s youth peak body, we work across the state in the best interests of young people and the youth sector to:

* lead policy responses to issues affecting young people
* represent the youth sector to government
* resource high quality youth work practice
* research and advocate on youth issues.

We value our members and prioritise their needs.

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**Executive summary**

A fifth of all Victoria’s young people live in just ten local government areas: the “interface” councils of Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Mitchell, Mornington Peninsula, Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Wyndham and Yarra Ranges. These young people are growing up in some of the largest, youngest and fastest-growing communities in the state.

In this paper, we describe the findings of our research and consultations with youth service providers in Melbourne’s interface council areas. We will outline some of the strengths of these communities, their most pressing challenges and emerging issues, and the “gaps” in service provision to be addressed through planning and investment.

Interface council areas are very diverse – culturally, economically, geographically. They have many strengths, including:

* The initiative, enthusiasm and contributions of young people themselves.
* High quality youth services working together in close partnerships and responding flexibly and creatively to local needs.
* Respected local government youth services play a leading role in community planning, brokering service partnerships, fostering young people’s engagement and leadership, and amplifying the voices of young people.
* Strong commitment to student wellbeing in secondary schools.
* Communities which value young people and support their decision-making.

At the same time, it is challenging to provide youth services in interface council areas. These communities have high rates of disadvantage and geographical isolation, and young people’s access to services, opportunities and transport is relatively poor. According to youth services, key concerns for their communities include:

* Severe shortages of affordable housing, safe and appropriate crisis accommodation, and adequate supports for young people “couch surfing”.
* Family violence – also a major cause of youth homelessness.
* Youth mental health – here a heavy “burden of risk” is falling onto schools. Schools must have adequate wellbeing staff, but better local service provision is also needed, from prevention to tertiary intervention.
* Educational disadvantage continues to be a concern, despite the Victorian Government’s welcome investments in schools and TAFE. Students are presenting with more complex problems, at a younger age, and there is a high and growing demand for flexible learning options.
* Barriers of cost, distance, transport and confidence are keeping some young people away from vocational training and especially university.
* Transport disadvantage limits young people’s access to services, training, work and social connections.
* Youth justice is a prominent issue; more local diversion options are needed, along with preventative work, education, and early intervention.

Youth services are also under pressure to address the needs of children aged 8-12, due to a shortage of services for this cohort, a rise in younger children presenting with “adolescent” issues, and families sending their children into service settings that traditionally work with young people. This poses dilemmas for youth workers. There is a strong need for targeted research, planning and funding for this group of children.

To address all these issues, youth services in interface council areas need:

* Current, realistic benchmarks about appropriate minimum standards of youth service provision, with commitments from government to resource these.
* A move away from short-term, competitive tenders, and towards longer-term, partnership-based funding, informed by local expertise.
* Funding models which recognise the real costs of interface service delivery, including outreach to isolated communities, and flexible or after-hours work.
* Stronger resourcing for prevention, particularly in relation to family violence, respectful relationships, crime, housing, employment and community resilience.
* Recognition of the unique role of local government in youth service delivery, including in relation to community planning and strengthening, youth voice, generalist youth engagement, systemic advocacy, and as a trusted broker of partnerships between diverse service providers.

**Recommendations**

**Planning and policy frameworks –**

1. Develop a state-wide, cross-sector strategy to improve outcomes for young people, especially those facing serious disadvantage. This strategy should draw on lessons from *Positive Pathways for Victoria’s Vulnerable Young People: Vulnerable Youth Framework* (2010). It should be designed in collaboration with local governments, health and community services and Victoria Police. There should be meaningful funding attached, for example to employ youth workers in high-need locations. The strategy should have a strong “geographical lens”, ensuring that the planning, delivery and evaluation of interventions is appropriate to the needs of different Victorian communities. The needs of young people in interface council areas should be considered specifically.

* Please note: we anticipate this strategy would address many of the issues raised in this paper, such as housing, mental health, and justice. As such, our recommendations in the sections below are of a preliminary nature.

1. With the Interface Councils, resource a targeted study to develop high-quality benchmarks concerning appropriate levels of youth service delivery in interface council areas. The study should develop a costed ratio of youth support workers (and their relevant infrastructure) to young people, with an undertaking from state and local governments to respond to its recommendations. A previous study, *Staying Connected*,was undertaken for the Interface Councils in 2007 and was embraced by the youth sector, but its findings are no longer current.
2. Support a regular mechanism to enable youth services coordinators from interface councils to meet several times a year, to undertake collaborative planning, professional development and systemic advice to state government.

**Safe homes for young people –**

1. Prioritise ending youth homelessness in interface council areas. Initiatives should focus on stopping young people from becoming homeless and intervening early when young people experience homelessness. Service models should coordinate safe, secure housing with continued access to education and supports in mental health, family functioning and life skills. Interventions should draw on local expertise, with adequate “backbone” resourcing and strong ownership by local stakeholders. Key approaches should include:

* Invest in specialist youth homelessness services and short and long-term supported housing for young people in interface council areas. There should be a particular focus on supportive housing options for young people escaping family violence, in line with Recommendation 24 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.
* Resource interventions designed for young people who are “couch surfing” in interface council areas. There should be a focus on keeping these young people connected to school, providing appropriate supports to the community members who are housing them, and ensuring young people have holistic, youth-friendly support to deal with issues like family violence, Centrelink, legal concerns, and transport. Keep in mind these young people may not consider themselves “homeless” and may be wary of formal services.
* Ensure specialist family violence services and youth homelessness services can engage effectively with schools, so that vulnerable young people can be connected quickly to support.

1. Extend the age of leaving out-of-home care to give young people the option of remaining in care until age 21. There should be adequate supports attached in relation to housing, education, employment, life skills, and mental health.
2. Review and, if necessary, strengthen the supports for older adolescents in the child protection system (e.g. 17-year-olds), in light of concerns raised in some interface areas about these young people “falling through the gaps”.

**Education for all young people –**

1. Expand students’ access to high quality flexible learning in interface council areas. Flexible learning models should operate in mainstream schools and in community settings connected to schools. They should be evidence-based and provide tailored, intensive support to ensure every student can succeed in education.
2. Investigate the rising demand for flexible learning/alternative education models, especially for younger students (e.g. aged 10-14). The findings should be used to strengthen the capacity of mainstream schools to retain these students.
3. Continue to increase investment in appropriately qualified school wellbeing staff and specialist allied health supports connected to schools in interface council areas, to ensure every student who needs help can access it in a timely fashion. Clinical supervision and secondary consultation should be available to all school wellbeing teams, including in isolated and under-serviced communities.

**Safeguarding young people’s mental health and wellbeing –**

1. Invest in initiatives to build resilient communities in interface council areas, with an emphasis on protecting and strengthening young people’s mental health. On the basis of our conversations with interface youth service providers, we suggest there is specific work to be done concerning the impacts of technology, social media and gaming. (These issues were also highlighted in the CSIRO and VicHealth [*Bright Futures*](https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/youth-megatrends-report)research into “megatrends” shaping youth mental health.)
2. Ensure young people can access high-quality mental health care wherever they live, including in isolated parts of interface council areas. Services should be well integrated, ranging from early intervention (supported through models like headspace) to specialist health care for young people with severe and complex mental illness, including through Youth Prevention and Recovery Care services. The cost of distance, travel and outreach should be covered fully in the design and funding of mental health services.
3. Ensure appropriate services are present in interface council areas to respond to young people experiencing family violence and/or sexual violence. These services must be supported to work in partnership with schools and youth services.

**Addressing transport disadvantage –**

1. Ensure timely access to the L2P program for all eligible young people, to help reduce youth unemployment and disengagement. Approaches to strengthen the program might include: increasing per-head funding (e.g. in line with CPI), providing core funding for each L2P site sufficient that host organisations do not face unfeasible costs, and providing new resourcing to help L2P programs develop disability-competent and culturally-competent practice. There is also an argument for increasing the age range of young people eligible for L2P, to include young people aged 21-25 in communities with high levels of unemployment, isolation and car dependence.
2. Continue to strengthen public transport options in all interface council areas.

**Supporting youth engagement –**

1. Commit to a focused consultation process with interface (and other) LGAs to review the funding levels for the Engage! and FReeZA grant programs. These programs are highly valued, but have not necessarily kept pace with the numbers and needs of young people in interface areas. (YACVic would also highlight the importance of ongoing work to ensure these opportunities are accessible to young people with disability and young people from diverse cultural backgrounds.)

**Supporting children in the “middle years” –**

1. Work with services, including in interface council areas, to develop a policy framework for children in the “middle years”, generally defined as 8-12 years old. This framework should include new program development, workforce skills development, and specific funding for services. To inform the framework, new research is required into the needs of this cohort, and partnerships are needed between early years, family services, youth and research sectors. This work must have a strong “geographical lens”, recognising the needs and characteristics of interface communities, which include large young populations, transport barriers, cultural diversity, the arrival of new families, and pressure on services and schools. Mechanisms should also be developed for children in this age group to have a meaningful voice in the development of interventions to support them.

**Youth justice: planning better communities –**

1. Direct young people away from crime early on, by investing in effective, evidence-based diversion programs in interface council areas. These should align with existing youth services and be appropriate to the needs of local young people, including in relation to cultural diversity.
2. Fund local community-led solutions to youth justice, with capacity to build a long-term justice reinvestment approach. Justice reinvestment means directing resources towards local, place-based initiatives which tackle the social and economic causes of crime to prevent and reduce offending. These approaches must have a sound evidence base, strong and diverse local buy-in, and proper staffing and “backbone” resourcing. In interface council areas, key factors to be addressed through justice reinvestment would likely include homelessness, mental health, and isolation. Some communities might also benefit from the kind of interventions developed through the WEstjustice School Lawyer Project, to embed education and early intervention in schools.

**Background**

YACVic undertook to produce this paper following conversations with several local government youth service providers about access issues in interface council areas. This work has relevance to the Interface Council’s “[Liveability Project](https://www.interfacecouncils.com.au/)”, as well as some key priority areas for the Victorian Government. These include the building of the Education State, Roadmap to Reform, and Victorian’s 10 Year Mental Health Plan.

This paper has been informed by the following:

* Four consultation sessions with youth service providers from interface council areas. These sessions were held in Pakenham, Hoppers Crossing, Yarra Ranges, and Melbourne CBD. Approximately 70 youth sector representatives took part, from Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Mitchell, Mornington Peninsula, Whittlesea, Wyndham, and Yarra Ranges.
* 11 recent pieces of research concerning service needs in interface council areas.
* 12 recent youth surveys and youth plans released by interface local governments.
* A historical scoping project (*Staying Connected*, 2007) which assessed young people’s service needs in interface council areas and calculated an adequate ratio of youth support workers to young people.

**Large and growing communities**

In the past twelve years, the population in interface council areas has grown by 43%, most notably in Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Mitchell, Wyndham and Whittlesea.[[1]](#endnote-1) Of the ten suburbs with the largest growth in Victoria in 2016-17, eight were in interface council areas. Of the suburbs with the *fastest* growth, nine out of ten were in interface areas.[[2]](#endnote-2) It’s estimated that by 2031, 1.7 million people will live in Melbourne’s interface suburbs, mostly families with children.[[3]](#endnote-3)

We calculate that interface council areas are home to nearly 244,000 young Victorians aged 12-25. A fifth of all Victoria’s young people live in interface areas.[[4]](#endnote-4) The City of Casey has the highest number of young people (57,000),[[5]](#endnote-5) and most areas anticipate significant future growth. For example, City of Melton estimate that their population of 12-25 year olds will grow by 150% by 2041; City of Whittlesea anticipate a rise in their youth population of 70% by 2037, while Hume City Council anticipate that their youth population will double by 2036.[[6]](#endnote-6) Even the relatively small population of Mitchell Shire is experiencing one of the fastest rates of growth in Victoria.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The situation is more complex in Yarra Ranges, where the population of children and young people is predicted to rise in the urban area by 15% by 2036, while declining in the “Hills” and remaining stable in the “Valley”.[[8]](#endnote-8) Interface communities which do *not* experience high growth are in a position comparable to many rural towns: grappling with the challenges of distance, disadvantage and scarce service provision, without attracting much substantial new funding for transport, infrastructure or services.

**Diverse communities**

Many interface council areas (although not all) are very culturally diverse. They also show striking geographical and economic diversity. Interface areas have both rural and urban centres, and within a single council area there may be marked differences in income, local connections, and access to opportunities. For example, in Cardinia and Yarra Ranges there are established, multi-generational rural communities co-existing with new suburban estates, which have several new families arriving each week. Thus, it’s important to invest in services which have a meaningful, long-term presence in an area, understand its unique needs, and work in local partnerships.

For all their diversity, interface council areas tend to have higher than average rates of disadvantage. They generally rank below the state average in relation to housing, food security, transport and access to services,[[9]](#endnote-9) and many areas have above-average involvement by Child Protection.[[10]](#endnote-10) This influences the demands on youth services.

**Many local strengths**

Youth service workers had many positive things to say about supporting young people in Melbourne’s interface council areas. When asked about the strengths of interface communities, the most common positives they named were:

* The privilege of working with young people, nurturing their talents, ideas, initiative and optimism.
* The dedication, flexibility and creativity of local youth services, and their willingness to develop fresh and innovative ways of operating.
* The willingness of most services to work together in respectful partnerships, minimise competition, and communicate effectively. In a competitive tendering environment, this is not necessarily easy. Examples cited by services included:
* A collective impact approach to tackling family violence in Cardinia.
* Collaborative funding applications in Morning Peninsula; “all working together for best outcomes for young people/communities”.
* Development of a Suicide Protocol between services in Yarra Ranges. This community also pioneered the respected “No Wrong Door” model of youth service provision, which ensures a young person will be connected to the right supports no matter where they first go for help. This model needs ongoing resourcing to keep functioning.
* Positive attitudes towards young people in the community, and growing willingness to give young people a voice in decision-making. Several services mentioned “co-design” of programs with young people. Others described the benefits young people got from taking part in local mentoring and leadership programs, volunteering, scouts and sporting clubs – “Communities want to support young people – a lot of good will”.
* The professionalism of local government youth services and their trusted role as partnership brokers and advocates for the needs of young people. Local governments also play a central role in community consultations and data gathering to ensure evidence-based approaches.
* Positive progress in many schools, including a stronger focus on student wellbeing and an increased willingness to work with youth services.
* Good relationships with local media in some communities; for example, improving coverage of family violence and multiculturalism.
* In some communities, notably Wyndham, workers described an increased focus on working with young people within the context of their families. This was felt to be an effective response to local needs.

**Services struggle to meet demand**

In many interface council areas, people’s access to services is relatively poor. Interface areas have fewer mental health services, pharmacies, dental services, allied health services and GP clinics (per head of population) than the rest of Melbourne.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Youth services are also under pressure. Many reported being at capacity, using waiting lists, and feeling that they were expected to do “more with less”. Key concerns raised in our consultations included:

* The Engage and FReeZA programs are very important to interface communities, and connections with the Office for Youth are highly valued. However, a number of services reflected that funding for these grants had not kept pace with their rapidly rising populations.
* There should be much more investment in prevention. Youth services wanted to see a greater focus on prevention in relation to family violence, gender equality, healthy relationships, crime, housing, employment and community resilience.
* There is a rising demand for flexible and after-hours youth service delivery. However, not all services are resourced to undertake this safely and appropriately, and difficulties can arise for local service networks when large external providers are funded to do this work instead.
* Outreach to isolated or rural areas remains a struggle. Some services are technically funded to work across a number of communities, but may not be meeting the extent of the need in more isolated places.
* Due to service shortages in interface areas, it’s common for vulnerable young people to have to travel away from their local community to access support.
* Infrastructure presents a challenge for some communities. For example, several new communities in Melbourne’s south-east reported that it could be hard to find affordable, appropriate service spaces in which to work with young people. Services in other interface areas expressed concerns that their communities had no integrated hub where young people might access coordinated supports. For example, services in Yarra Ranges are currently developing a business case for an integrated youth services hub; such a model must have resourcing in place for both physical infrastructure and collaborative planning.
* Different interface communities are experiencing rising demand in specific areas. For example, some services are focused on ensuring that opportunities are culturally appropriate for young people from refugee and migrant communities – e.g. providing single-sex activities, welcoming spaces and appropriate food. Other services described the need for developmentally appropriate outdoor spaces for young teens, peer support programs for young people, and better use of technology by youth services.
* Other community-based services are also under pressure to work with rising numbers of young people. For example, workers from several interface council areas spoke about the very large numbers of young people (some of them homeless or vulnerable) using local libraries as meeting places. Local youth services have been creative in responding, including co-locating with libraries and supporting librarians to deal with issues arising.

**Building a secure youth services sector**

At all our consultations, services urged that Victoria move away from short-term, competitive tenders, and towards longer-term, partnership-based funding, informed by local expertise and backed by bipartisan support. Making frequent applications for short-term funding was assessed to be a significant drain on time and resourcing, and a reason why services struggle to retain experienced staff. Getting a new program up and running effectively often takes six months; if this process is repeated every two or three years, there is a significant loss of productivity and impact over time.

Moreover, many services agreed they would benefit from realistic benchmarks about appropriate minimum standards of youth service provision. At present, no agreed minimum standards appear to exist across all interface council areas.[[12]](#footnote-1) Detailed, up-to-date research is needed.

The most recent benchmarking for interface youth services was done over a decade ago. In 2006, the Interface Councils commissioned the in-depth *Staying Connected* report. This report estimated the new funding levels needed in order to guarantee adequate standards of youth service provision. Its recommendations included:

* Generalist youth support and counselling services to young people in interface local government areas, on the basis of 1EFT per 3,000 young people aged 10-24. In 2006, this would have meant engaging an additional 30EFT youth workers across the interface councils, at an estimated cost of $2,561,210 p.a.
* One adolescent health and wellbeing team for each interface local government area, consisting of a health nurse, youth worker and social worker, at an estimated cost of $9,447,797 over four years.
* One “improving educational outcomes” team for each interface local government area – each team consisting of one teacher per eight “at risk” students, as well as a social worker and a youth worker – at an estimated cost of $15,331,165 over four years.
* One local, youth-specific mental health service per region, with a crisis team, intake worker, case worker and psychologist, at an estimated cost of $22,905,137 over four years.
* Infrastructure to house youth services and programs, at an estimated cost of $4 million per interface local government area.
* Specific resourcing to meet the needs of Aboriginal young people and young people from refugee backgrounds: three teams to cover three interface local government areas, each with a refugee worker and youth worker, at an estimated cost of $2 million over 4 years.[[13]](#endnote-12)

Benchmarking was also attempted in a 2008 report by Australian Social & Recreation Research, commissioned by City of Casey, Hume City Council, Shire of Melton, City of Whittlesea and Wyndham City Council. This report developed a framework for standards in community infrastructure planning for growth areas. It specified that youth services should be included in development of new communities. Specifically:

* Each neighbourhood (approx. 8,000-10,000 people) should have youth-friendly spaces and outreach support available for young people at multipurpose local community centres. Planning for young people within a community development framework should also be undertaken at this neighbourhood level.
* Each sub-municipal area (approx. 30,000-60,000 people) should have a youth resource centre, providing direct services to young people. This could be planned as part of a multipurpose community centre; it should be accessible by public transport and include specific facilities, such as offices, an interview room, a consulting room, 40 square metres of meeting room space, a dedicated training/classroom space with kitchen facilities, outdoor and recreational spaces, changing facilities and other facilities such as BBQ areas and computer spaces.
* “Youth friendly” spaces should be included in Neighbourhood House programs; with one Neighbourhood House program per catchment of 10,000 people.[[14]](#endnote-13)

These examples of benchmarking have proven useful to youth services in the past, although unfortunately they did not always translate into equivalent funding.

The benchmarks are now out of date, and some preferred models of service delivery have changed. New research is needed to define what adequate youth service delivery would look like in today’s interface council areas – with a commitment from local and state governments to respond to the recommendations.

**Local government youth services**

In interface council areas, the role of local government in youth service provision is vital. Local government youth services lead community planning and community strengthening for young people; they have a strong focus on youth voice and generalist youth engagement, and they undertake systemic advocacy on behalf of young people to local and state governments and NGOs – for example, working to bring specialist youth mental health services and AOD services into their area.

Local government youth services play an unique role in creating decision-making opportunities for young people, enabling young people to build skills, forge connections, and make a positive difference to their communities. Many local governments have youth councils or youth action groups; others support young people to work closely with local councillors, mayors and deputy mayors. Some local government youth services have created paid opportunities for young people – for example, the Yarra Ranges Youth Ambassador program, which employs young people to undertake community engagement with schools, services and council. Other local government youth services work with professional associations to support young people into the workforce – for example, Hume City Council worked with the Victorian Bar Foundation and Victorian Bar to set up an awards and mentoring program to encourage youth diversity in the legal profession.[[15]](#endnote-14)

Interface local governments also take the lead in coordinating networks and partnerships between other services that work with young people. This is expert, sensitive work. It can be challenging to ensure a collaborative, strategic approach between services which have very different sizes, capacities, and connections to the area, in an environment of competitive tendering. For example, if a contract is awarded to a NGO which has not worked in the community before, it can take significant work to build partnerships with existing services, especially if they fear the introduction of a “one size fits all” model or inadequate outreach.

High expectations are placed on local government youth services. As generalist services, they work across a wide range of issues. For example, the 2016 child, youth and family strategy for the Shire of Nillumbik identified that their priority directions would include: planning and delivering universal and targeted services for young people, including arts, sports, skill development and leisure; integrating service delivery across the life stages; leveraging funding for a shire youth worker or counsellor and a youth space; exploring youth team outreach to new sites; planning initiatives for specific population groups, like young carers and refugees; supporting L2P and FReeZA; participating in the headspace partnership; running positive social media campaigns; supporting education for parents about mental health, AOD, body image, healthy eating, and safe partying; supporting AOD education to sporting clubs; promoting respectful relationships in community settings; and increasing young people’s participation in education, training, volunteering, employment and recreation.[[16]](#endnote-15)

In addition, it can be a challenge for local government youth services to manage expectations about what “levels” of service delivery they will provide. Many have adopted a strong focus on community development, systemic advocacy, sector partnerships and acting as a central point for youth referrals. This aligns well with their generalist, whole-of-community remit. However, many other stakeholders continue to assume that local governments will provide youth events, direct services such as mentoring and counselling, and even case management for vulnerable young people. The scarcity of other services in interface areas increases the pressure.

This is further complicated by rate-capping, which has meant that some local government youth services have not grown to keep pace with population and demand. This issue is more evident in some LGAs than others.

Keeping a focus on youth can also be a challenge. The growing trend for local governments to work within a “child and family” structure, while beneficial in many ways, carries the risk that youth services will get lost – especially since they are not “mandated” like Maternal Child Health and Early Years services.

Local government youth services from the interface council areas reflected that they would find it useful if they were supported to meet on a regular basis to share insights and information, and undertake collaborative planning and advocacy.

**Local government and youth voice in interface communities**

Local government youth services play a key role in consulting with young people in interface council areas, promoting youth voice, and highlighting young people’s own views about how to build stronger communities. For example:

* In 2017, City of Whittlesea found that young people’s top three concerns were body image, stress, and school. Stress levels were rising, and connections to peer groups and adults at home were falling. 23% of young women and 12.5% of young men reported experiencing discrimination; the most common reason given was gender, followed by race.[[17]](#endnote-16)
* In 2017, City of Melton reported that young people aged 12-25 nominated their top concerns as substance usage, mental health, education, and employment opportunities. Young people said they thought the following things were most important: feeling socially connected and having opportunities to volunteer; living in a multicultural society; having access to programs that deliver sport, health, arts, gaming and dance; being able to get around via public transport, walking and cycling; feeling and being safe from bullying and violence; having drug and alcohol education and awareness; having access to education and employment; and having access to youth mental health services.[[18]](#endnote-17)
* In 2015, Cardinia Shire Council surveyed 2,320 young people aged 12-17. Their top ten concerns were: school-related or work-related stress, stress (in general), “being unhappy”, anxiety, body image, life changing events, bullying, finances/money, being overweight, and peer pressure. When asked what would improve their communities, their ideas included: social activities like movies, sport and music events; services such as counselling and youth centres; job opportunities and educational programs.[[19]](#endnote-18)
* In 2014, Mitchell Shire Youth Services reported on a survey of 650 young people aged 10-24. Their biggest concerns were drugs, bullying/emotional abuse, stress and study-related pressures. Other common concerns were depression and body image. Their most common suggestions for improving the area were “better shops” and “better entertainment”, followed by “better transport” and “more creative arts and music opportunities”.[[20]](#endnote-19)
* In 2013, Wyndham City Council surveyed 203 young people and consulted another 50. Most young people agreed that their community supported them to make great decisions. Three quarters of young people said their neighbourhood was “youth friendly”, and half agreed their local community accepted and supported diverse young people. Young people wanted more action in the following areas: using technology to reach their goals; healthy self-expression; understanding culturally diverse communities; managing self-esteem, loneliness, and emotional and physical development; bullying, drugs and alcohol; and making school engaging for all young people.[[21]](#endnote-20)

**Safe homes for young people**

Perhaps the most pressing issue raised by the services we consulted was the need for safe, affordable, appropriate homes for young people in interface council areas. This was named as a priority at every consultation session. Action is needed at a national level, but the issue must also shape state government policy making. There has been some progress – for example, the Victorian Government funded new youth housing through the Wyndham H3 Network – but further investment is needed.

Housing tends to be cheaper in interface council areas than the rest of Melbourne, but for families on low incomes, housing costs still represent a major concern. Interface council areas have the highest levels of mortgage stress and rental stress of all Victorian regions. Their proportion of social housing as a percentage of total dwellings is also below the state average – for example, 2.1% of interface housing is social housing, compared to 8.9% of housing in inner metro Melbourne.[[22]](#endnote-21)

Youth services raised strong concerns about the shortage of adequate housing. For example, the 2017 youth plan by City of Whittlesea identified that 54% of local families were under financial stress due to housing costs.[[23]](#endnote-22) Meanwhile, Mitchell Shire Council identified that the rate of homelessness in their local population is 26% higher than the rate in metropolitan Melbourne. Consequently, this community is calling for a $10M investment package in social housing, public housing and specialist crisis workers.[[24]](#endnote-23)

At our consultations, youth services highlighted the shortage of affordable housing for young people and their families in interface council areas. They observed the impacts of poverty, food insecurity, high rental costs, and high costs of living. Tech devices and the costs of education are an extra source of pressure. Meanwhile, Centrelink payments for young people are inadequate and sometimes difficult to access. As one service from the south-east commented “Young people are struggling to survive. How do you expect them to thrive? $420 p.f. is not enough to live.”

While poverty and housing affordability are critical factors in homelessness, so is family violence. This was another major issue raised by youth services during our consultations. For example, Mitchell Shire calculated that the rate of family violence in their population is almost double the state average.[[25]](#endnote-24) Youth services wanted to see far more prevention work, as well as more support for parenting skills.

Homelessness and housing stress are often “invisible” in interface council areas. Some services in Casey, for example, described homelessness as “prevalent & hidden”, with people staying out of sight in cars, parks, campervans and unregistered rooming houses. There is a serious shortage of appropriate local crisis accommodation and appropriate responses to young people’s couch surfing.

Couch surfing was identified by services as the main form of youth homelessness in interface council areas. Studies conducted in Wyndham and Yarra Ranges found that young “couch surfers” tend to fall between the cracks and suffer from a lack of appropriate local supports. Both studies identified family violence as a key driver of youth couch surfing, but noted that many young people did not see themselves as homeless or as victims of family violence, and were often reluctant to seek help from Child Protection or homelessness services. Youth Allowance is not enough to enable independent living. Both reports found that young people struggled to stay engaged in school while couch surfing, but also that school could be a critical source of support. The two reports identified several areas for action, including:

* More short and long-term housing options for young people, and specialist youth homelessness services that combine housing support with supports in relation to health, education, finances and employment.
* Better resourcing for schools to connect with homelessness services, identify young people at risk, and connect them to the right supports at once.
* Accessible, youth-friendly information for “couch surfers” about their rights and the supports available.[[26]](#endnote-25)

The Wyndham report also called for new mechanisms to guarantee free or affordable public transport for young people experiencing homelessness or family violence, and for family violence flexible support packages and an information hotline for “couch providers” who are caring for young people.[[27]](#endnote-26)

When young people from interface suburbs do access housing support services, this usually means traveling to inner metro Melbourne. This raises their risk of becoming disengaged from school and any local supports they might have.

For those young people removed from their families and placed in state care, the struggle for appropriate housing is not over. At our consultations, youth services spoke of the need for more therapeutic foster care placements, better recruitment and retention of carers, stronger supports for older teens (e.g. 17 year olds), and the extension of out-of-home care on a voluntary basis to young people up to the age of 21.

**Safeguarding young people’s mental health and wellbeing**

Youth services in interface council areas identified youth mental health a key area where more resourcing is needed. Services identified that many problems could be prevented if we could support young people to enjoy good health and wellbeing early in life. As one worker put it, “Take one per cent out of justice and put in mental health!”

Youth services identified a number of positive new developments in this space. For example, services in Wyndham praised the introduction of family-responsive counselling for young people and their relatives, while services in Yarra Ranges praised a local suicide prevention initiative, which includes training secondary school communities in Youth Mental Health First Aid. Moreover, most interface youth services praised their local secondary schools, reflecting that many schools had improved their practice in relation to student wellbeing and showed strong willingness to work in partnership with community external services. Teachers are building a stronger understanding of trauma-informed practice, and students are becoming more willing to disclose issues like mental distress and family violence in school.

However, the need still outstrips the supply. In particular, services identified that a heavy “burden of risk” is falling onto schools. School wellbeing teams are under pressure, dealing with a huge array of issues and supporting some students who are seriously mentally ill. It’s critical that schools have enough appropriately qualified wellbeing staff and access to the right services locally.

Unfortunately, access to youth mental health services tends to be inadequate in many interface council areas, especially for geographically isolated young people. Some youth workers also reflected that headspace centres were being expected to deliver interventions in spaces not originally part of their remit, such as school disengagement, outreach, and serious mental illness.

According to youth services, other “gaps” in mental health service provision included:

* Prevention of mental health problems, and suicide prevention.
* Early intervention with young people at risk. For example, Mitchell Shire Council are advocating for the establishment of a local youth hub, with counselling services for young people and families and services to address the precursors of mental health problems.[[28]](#endnote-27)
* Appropriate, localised support for young people with serious mental illness.
* Dealing with the mental health impacts of social media, including “social contagion” and “panics” over certain issues. For example, services from Mornington Peninsula described supporting young people who experienced great distress due to social media coverage of local suicides and other deaths.
* Mental health impacts of gaming and gambling, including young people isolating themselves from school and interpersonal relationships.

Youth services also identified support gaps in other wellbeing spaces. These include:

* Supports for young people who have been victims of sexual violence. For example, services in Wyndham identified that Western CASA is highly regarded, but that the demand is very high, with a long wait to access support. Interventions are especially needed for young people with disability.
* AOD services for young people. For example, Mitchell Shire Council identified that the drug offence rate in their community is almost double the state average, and called for interventions including a local drug rehabilitation facility and community-based outreach and carer support.[[29]](#endnote-28)
* Action to address young people’s declining engagement in sport.

**Education for all young people**

Youth services in interface council areas recognised that improving young people’s engagement in education is a key priority for the Victorian Government. The Navigator program is well regarded, and services welcomed the Victorian Government’s investment in school wellbeing staff, vocational options for students, and new infrastructure for schools. However, strong ongoing commitments are required.

Interface council areas show relatively high rates of educational disadvantage. For example, young people aged 15-19 in Hume are almost twice as likely to be disengaged from employment and education as the Melbourne average.[[30]](#endnote-29) Meanwhile, in Melton, young people’s rate of university participation is only half the Victorian average.[[31]](#endnote-30)

Many services mentioned the importance of supporting the educational pathways of students from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Key concerns included:

* Some English Language Schools are at capacity and need more venues.
* Some communities want more homework clubs for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.
* Supplements to support the education of refugee students are not high enough, especially given the cost of tech devices.
* Careers education and VCAL pathways should be adjusted to meet the needs of students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, especially those with limited English.

Services also noted that some students are presenting with more complex issues than ever before, and at a younger age. Several services in Wyndham called for more action to prevent school disengagement at a primary school level, and at the point of transition between Years 6 and 7. Meanwhile, services in Yarra Ranges stressed that schools were working hard on student wellbeing issues, but that the numbers of students with high needs was rising; concerns include mental illness, suicide ideation, young carer duties, and student aggression.

To prevent school disengagement, it’s important to work with young people in the context of their families. But several youth services described this as challenging; parents may be highly disengaged themselves; they may be struggling with family violence, mental illness and/or the high needs of their other children. Some have limited parenting skills, and some have high expectations that teachers and youth workers will “fix” their children.

In response to problems of school disengagement, many youth services called for more flexible learning options in interface council areas. They asserted that the demand was very high, and that the average age for referral was getting younger. Several services reported seeing a demand for flexible learning for children as young as eight. We understand Hester Hornbrook Academy (Melbourne City Mission) has plans to expand their work into Melbourne’s outer suburbs over the next five years; we anticipate the demand will be high.

In the related area of disability competence, several youth services observed that schools need more appropriately qualified staff in their classrooms who can recognise learning difficulties early, properly assess learning needs (including for students whose first language is not English), and support teachers to work with all their students.

**Higher education, training and employment**

Youth services recognised and praised the Victorian Government’s strong investment in the TAFE system. At the same time, some services worried that the federal government appeared to be withdrawing support from TAFE.

Services wanted more support for students to understand how the vocational education and training (VET) system works, how to access it, and how to evaluate what different providers have to offer. For example, some young people need much stronger wellbeing support and career guidance than most private registered training organisations will provide. The costs of vocational education and training were also raised as a concern. Some services called for the Student Resource Package to follow school-aged students into TAFE; other services worried that students on low incomes were struggling to cover the costs of VET, even if placed on a payment plan.

Access to university was also raised as a concern, for example by services from Casey, Cardinia, Mornington Peninsula, Hume and Yarra Ranges. For young people in interface council areas, going to university means leaving home or travelling long distances. Hume is trialling a model called “Multiversity” with Victoria University and Federation University, where students will be study for degrees at local service hubs; we will watch this model with interest. Cost is also a significant barrier to university education.

Getting help to find work can also be difficult for young people, especially those from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Navigating Centrelink and job service providers can be complex and daunting, especially for young people who have limited support networks and little knowledge of the service system in Australia.

**Transport access**

The Victorian Government has made positive investments in our public transport system recently, including to interface council areas. For example, the announcement of extra services on the Seymour line was welcomed in Mitchell Shire. However, strengthening public transport must remain a priority, as the challenges are great.

Only 57% of people in interface council areas live near public transport. Public transport is made less appealing in some suburbs by infrequent service times, poor connectivity, and inadequate parking and bike storage facilities at stations. Neighbourhoods in interface areas also tend to rank poorly in terms of “walkability”; for example, most residents need a vehicle to access a grocery store. Dependence on cars is very high.[[32]](#endnote-31)

This impacts on young people’s access to services and opportunities. Transport poses particular problems for young people who live in rurally isolated parts of interface council areas. For example, services from Mitchell Shire and Yarra Ranges commented that it would take several hours by public transport to reach a headspace centre from some parts of their municipalities.

Lack of public transport contributes to social isolation, health problems, and limited aspirations. For example, workers in Yarra Ranges commented that for some young people, Lilydale is “the city” and as far from home as they would think of travelling.

Ongoing investment in public transport is needed. Some youth services are also urging that public transport be free for school students and young people on low incomes who are travelling to access apprenticeships, training and job interviews.

Another approach to reducing transport disadvantage is Victoria’s L2P program, which brings young people together with driver-mentors to prepare for their P-plates. L2P has shown good results in reducing transport disadvantage amongst participants and increasing young people’s exposure to employment opportunities and positive social contact. Workers from the interface council areas reported that L2P was strongly valued in their communities, but that the program could not meet the full extent of the need.

**Working with children in the “middle years”**

The needs of children aged 8-12 have been relatively neglected by researchers, funding bodies, and planners in federal and state governments.[[33]](#endnote-32) Traditionally, youth workers have not provided support to this age group, but many are under pressure to do so. At our consultations, the need for age-appropriate supports for children in the “middle years” was raised as a concern for interface council areas.

There are several reasons why youth services are under pressure to address the needs of children aged 8-12. For example:

* Problems traditionally associated with adolescence (e.g. poor mental health, school disengagement) are starting to present amongst younger children.
* Parents are using youth centres as “babysitting” or “after school care” because they trust the youth workers and they can’t easily afford or access other care models. Many of these parents have low incomes and/or long commute times.
* Children aged 8-12 are choosing to present at youth services because they like the service model, which was designed to balance safety and freedom.
* Young people with caring responsibilities (notably from refugee and migrant families) may bring younger siblings with them to youth services.

For interface youth services, this situation raises several dilemmas. These include:

* Age-appropriate supports for 8-12 year olds are very scarce. Many local governments still have no formal commitment to children in the middle years.
* Youth workers do not necessarily feel qualified to work with children under 12; if they are required to do so, targeted professional development is needed.
* There are safety concerns about children under 12 mixing with older teenagers at youth centres. At the same time, there are also safety concerns about refusing entry to these children, if it’s likely they will hang around public spaces instead.

Youth services in interface council areas have tried in various ways to respond to the demand for “middle years” supports. Some have dropped their definition of “young people” down to age 10, and divided their interventions up into older and younger age groups. Others have engaged in interventions focused on the whole family, including in settings where children in the middle years congregate, such as public libraries.

More evidence-based planning is needed. Some local government youth services (e.g. City of Whittlesea) reported that the [Middle Years Development Instrument](http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/mdi/) has been useful in gathering and analysing data about local needs. Similarly, City of Wyndham are looking forward to accessing stronger data about the middle years through their new partnership with Deakin University. Meanwhile, some local governments are developing strategic plans for the middle years, and others are developing Life Stages Strategies to cover all age groups. All these approaches need resourcing to be relevant.

**Youth justice**

There are significant legal needs in interface council areas, in spaces including family law, family violence, criminal law, consumer law, debt, and mortgage stress. Many interface communities need improved access to specialist courts, Legal Aid, and community justice facilities.[[34]](#endnote-33) At our consultations, several youth services called for more appropriate youth justice diversion options in their local area.

Youth services in Wyndham also raised questions about how the youth justice centre at Cherry Creek will be integrated into the local services system. Additional concerns were raised about negative media coverage of young people of African descent, and about young people from Pasifika backgrounds being deported for “crimes/association”. Several youth services from Melbourne’s west spoke highly of the School Lawyer Project piloted by WEstjustice, which engages young people around legal issues in the universal environment of a school, in a preventative and youth-friendly way.

**Case studies: innovative supports for young people in interface council areas**

Many services in interface council areas have developed innovative and effective responses to local needs. We have provided a short selection of examples below.

***Waypa Wuurrk Aboriginal Wellness Foundation (Melton and Wyndham)***

Waypa Wuurrk Aboriginal Wellness Foundation (WWAWF) is a social enterprise run in the Melbourne West Metro area, including Wyndham and Melton. WWAWF run a range of wellness programs focusing on Aboriginal traditional culture, health and justice. Programs are preventative, long-term and community-driven, focusing on holistic wellbeing and cultural strengthening. WWAWF runs the Warran Warran Maar mentoring project, collaborating with the Koorie Youth Council, Youth Affairs Council Victoria and the Victorian Government. Warran Warran Maar is an innovative, early intervention project that steps outside of mainstream frameworks to revitalise traditional community structures that focus on responsibility, accountability and support for Aboriginal male adolescents aged 12 to 15 years. This is a three-year, preventative, intensive mentoring program based on cultural immersion and traditional concepts of taking a boy into the first steps of being a respectful young man. The project has a focus on the participants learning about traditional cultural knowledge including men’s ceremony business. The Foundation works cooperatively with other Aboriginal Community Organisations and local Elders in the West Metro Region including Wangal United, Kirrip and the Wyndham Aboriginal Community Centre (WACC).

***Youth and Teen Mental Health First Aid (Mornington Peninsula)***

A recent report commissioned by the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council found that 25% of Peninsula teenagers suffered from depression; this was 6% higher than the national average. (These issues were identified through the Communities that Care Healthy Neighbourhood School Survey). In response, the council funded a roll-out of Youth and Teen Mental Health First Aid training in the local community.

Youth Mental Health First Aid is for adults working or living with adolescents, such as parents, school staff, sports coaches, and youth workers. The course teaches adults how to assist adolescents who are developing a mental illness, experiencing a worsening mental health problem, or in a mental health crisis, until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves. Course participants learn about adolescent development, the signs of mental health problems in young people, where and how to get help, what sort of help has been shown by research to be effective, and how to provide first aid in a crisis. Teen Mental Health First Aid teaches secondary students how to provide mental health first aid to their friends. This course was developed in response to research indicating that young people prefer to share problems with peers. The curriculum is evidence-based, informed by research into the best actions a young person can take to support a peer with a mental health problem.

Mornington Peninsula Shire Council committed to train six shire officers as Youth Facilitators and eight officers as Teen Facilitators. Training local workers helps to embed expertise in the community and enables future training free of charge.

Since April 2017, this initiative has trained over 200 community members, including the leadership group at Mount Martha Life Saving Club and the executive of the Mornington Peninsula Junior Football League. Mental health is now part of the first aid training at every club in the Mornington Peninsula Junior Football League. Sport is at the heart of the community; it provides opportunities to make sure all young people are supported.

***WEstjustice School Lawyer Program (Wyndham)***

Many young people don’t have a good understanding of the law, or of their own rights and responsibilities. Some young people who need legal assistance don’t access it in time, or at all. WEstjustice developed an innovative response to these problems: the School Lawyer Program. This program embeds a lawyer (employed by a community legal centre or Victoria Legal Aid) in a secondary school’s wellbeing team to provide free, confidential and trusted advice to students. School lawyers provide one-on-one legal advice and legal case management to students; they will also refer students (and sometimes students’ families) to other forms of legal and non-legal support. Additionally, they provide education to students, staff and families on topics such as sexting, bullying, online safety, employment law, and criminal law.

The program was first funded by a group of philanthropic funders in 2015, at the Grange P-12 College. An evaluation found that during the 80 school weeks of the project, the School Lawyer opened case files for 43 students and 16 parents, provided legal advice to 100 students and 37 parents, had informal legal chats with 64 students, 12 parents and 11 staff, and conducted 73 structured legal education sessions and 26 non-structured sessions. The main issues the lawyer assisted students with were infringements, employment matters, criminal law, and family violence. Students reported that the School Lawyer helped them understand their rights and responsibilities, empowered them to make informed choices, and improved their wellbeing. Several key informants described students choosing not to engage in illegal behaviour, due partly to the School Lawyer’s influence. Due to his credibility with students, the School Lawyer also helped to improve student engagement with counselling and other wellbeing services.

To work well, the School Lawyer program must be:

* Embedded in the wellbeing team and supported by the principal, to ensure the lawyer is accessible to students and well connected to the school's priorities.
* Able to build trusting relationships with students and staff. The lawyer must be a good communicator, approachable, respectful and knowledgeable. The confidentiality of the student-lawyer relationship is vital (subject to certain exceptions); it encourages students to seek support for sensitive matters.
* Proper program management to support the relationship between the school and the legal organisation, to manage the performance of the lawyer, and to support their legal and ethical obligations.

Based on the success of the pilot, an ‘Expanded School Lawyer Project’ aims to explore a similar model that could be delivered across a cluster of schools, including alternative education settings and additional needs schools. The project now involves Warringa Park School, Wyndham Community and Education Centre, Djerriwarrh Community and Education Services, Wyndham Central College and Tarneit Senior College.[[35]](#endnote-34)

***Australia Day Study Tour (Casey)***

The Australia Day Study Tour Awards are presented to ten young people in Year 11 or equivalent age who live, work or attend school in City of Casey, who take a particular interest in how the country is governed, and who may wish to pursue a career or further studies in politics or law. These young people have all demonstrated exceptional leadership qualities and are actively involved in their school and local communities.

The students in 2018 came from many different cultural backgrounds, and from different secondary schools. Their study tour had three stages:

* A half day and evening session at Local Government, including a guided tour of the municipality, meeting Council staff, and dinner with the Councillors.
* A full day visit to Parliament of Victoria, including a meeting with half a dozen members of parliament, notably the Hon. Jenny Mikakos, Minister for Youth.
* A four-day trip to Canberra, including a tour of Parliament House, and meeting with the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition.

The tour teaches young people about all levels of government, connects them with elected representatives, and enables them to build valuable new relationships. The young people reflected the experience had built their knowledge and confidence.

***Fresh Start Program (Wyndham)***

Wyndham Youth Services designed and developed this six-week program for young people aged 15-25 from culturally diverse communities, to support them into pathways of employment and alternative education. The pilot program partnered with the Wyndham Community and Education Centre and major retailers from the Pacific Werribee Shopping Centre. It helps young people get re-focused on what is important to them, gain new skills, and become job-ready. The program engages approximately 20 young people at a time; they might be referred to the program by schools, police or community organisations. Once a week, students take part in a two-hour class, learning retail and hospitality skills, including sales and customer service. Afterwards, graduates are invited to group interviews with up to 10 retailers (such as Woolworths, Myer, Rebel Sport, JB HiFi and Coles), and offered interview feedback, work experience, and even employment. Graduates have shown an increase in school attendance, school participation, leadership qualities, full-time employment and job-ready confidence. Outcomes from the program include participants being offered full-time employment and engaging in alternative education pathways. In Term 3, Fresh Start will be delivered in two secondary schools and one community-based module. The secondary school programs focus on education re-engagement; the community groups focus on pathways to employment. Local businesses have shown strong willingness to support the program, to build better outcomes for young people in Wyndham.

YACVic will continue to advocate on the policy and service priorities of Melbourne’s interface council areas, notably in our policy platform, which is being compiled at present.

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