

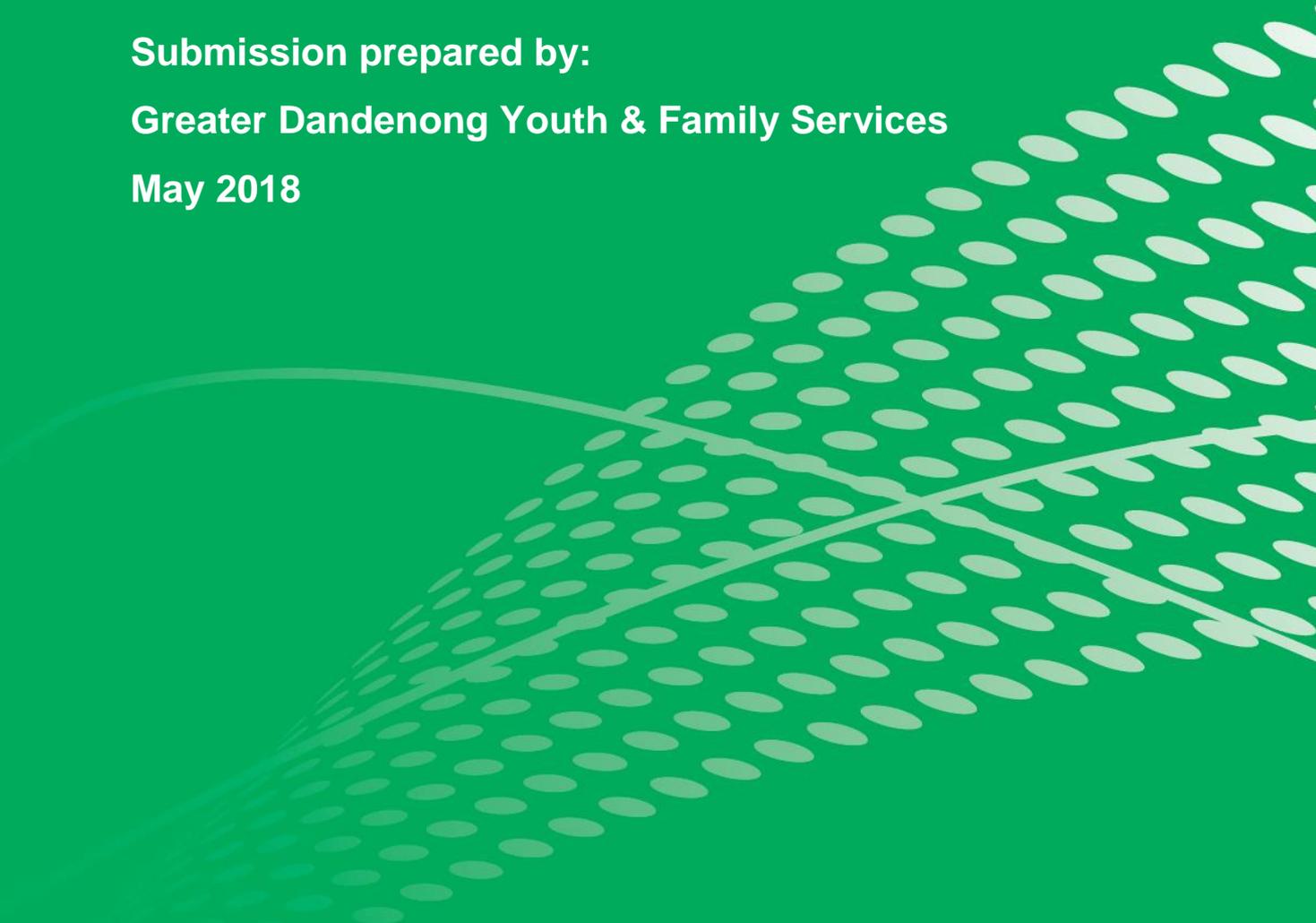
Staying on Track

*Young adults, mental wellbeing and work:
How can we support young adults on
their journey to purposeful work?*

Submission prepared by:

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Context

The City of Greater Dandenong, located in Melbourne's south-east is home to 28,400 young people aged 12-25 years. Now recognised as the most culturally diverse municipality in Australia, more than half of young people in the City of Greater Dandenong were born overseas. It is also an area of high socio-economic disadvantage, ranked as the second most disadvantaged Victorian municipality on the 2016 SEIFA index (Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas).

Consultation with education providers, local agencies and young people indicates that barriers challenging young people's ability to engage in employment include:

- lack of understanding of the Australian work context, and the skills and experience required,
- discrimination (based on age or cultural background),
- limited English language skills,
- lack of available (appropriate) jobs,
- lack of accessible and unbiased career counselling services, and
- limited practical support and assistance from employment agencies.

Compared to young people throughout Melbourne, young people in Greater Dandenong leave school earlier, are less likely to attend university, are more often disengaged from employment and education, and are more likely to be unemployed later in life. Young people already disadvantaged and marginalised face even greater risk of being left behind as the impact of the trends highlighted in the VicHealth *Brighter Futures* report emerge.

Council's Youth and Family Services team is committed to addressing the barriers which prevent young people from successfully transitioning to employment. Our work includes:

- advocating for the government to invest in education and employment initiatives and to address structural barriers,
- working with key stakeholders including employment services, local businesses, community services and government representatives to take a coordinated approach,
- promoting information about career pathways to young people,
- facilitating access, information and know how in engaging with the service system,
- facilitating programs and events focused on youth employment (where a gap is identified as not being addressed by other providers).

Key Themes

Based on engagement with young people and key stakeholders, Youth and Family Services have identified the key themes which will support young people on their journey to purposeful work. These key themes inform the work of Youth and Family Services, and focus on addressing the current issue of youth employment, as well as preparing young people for the changing workforce of the future:

1. A need to connect young people and employers
2. Building the capacity of employers and industry
3. Enhancing young people's employability skills and resilience
4. Earlier intervention to prevent young people from becoming disengaged
5. Making it easier to navigate the service system

Background

Throughout 2017, Youth and Family Services delivered two main employment projects which sought the feedback of community stakeholders including young people. The key themes discussed in this report have been informed by the consultation that took place during these initiatives.

Mayoral Youth Employment Taskforce

The Mayoral Youth Employment Taskforce was established in 2017 in response to high rates of youth disengagement and unemployment in our community. The Taskforce brought together representatives from all levels of government, business and industry, community services and the education sector to advance a collective approach to addressing youth unemployment and disengagement.

Over four meetings held between May and October 2017, Taskforce members worked to prioritise focus areas and identify critical gaps. The resulting Mayoral Youth Employment Taskforce Action Plan was launched in November 2017, and is now being delivered by Youth and Family Services.

Youth in Employment Survey

Youth and Family Services facilitate the annual Young Leaders program, which provides young people (aged 16-25 years) with the opportunity to build their leadership skills and deliver community projects. In 2017, the Young Leaders undertook a community needs analysis which identified youth employment as a key issue.

The Young Leaders developed a survey to further understand the barriers and enablers to youth employment. A total of 186 responses were received. The survey findings highlighted young people's willingness to work, and proposed strategies that local employers could consider to improve their ability to recruit and retain young people in the workforce.

Addressing Youth Employment

Theme 1: A need to connect young people and employers

The first key theme to emerge from Youth and Family Services focus on addressing youth employment is a need to bring together young jobseekers and employers directly, short-circuiting the multiple levels of employment services.

Evidence suggests that young adults (aged 19 to 24 years) who can recall four or more employer contacts (including work experience and career talks) whilst at school are five times less likely to be disengaged from education, training and employment and earn an average of 16% more than those who recall no employer contacts (Mann, 2012). Despite this, feedback from both young people and employers indicates that there is a lack of meaningful engagement between young people, education providers and employers.

Traditional work experience models present limited opportunities for young people to gain meaningful experience in the workplace, and are often burdensome for employers. Careers education in secondary schools is typically under-resourced, leaving many young people with limited understanding of local industries and job opportunities. With a heightened focus on pathways to university study, young people are also often unaware of alternative pathways, including apprenticeships and traineeships.

Current work undertaken by Youth and Family Services:	Opportunities to advocate for further change:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delivery of the 'Work Inspirations' program, providing an alternative to traditional work experience models.• Piloting a local 'jobs fair', including speed interviewing, to bring together young people and employers.• Regular engagement in careers talks and pathways expos at local secondary colleges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Department of Education to explore alternative work experience models.• Strengthen links between local industry and secondary schools.• Improved resourcing for careers education in schools.• Work with careers counsellors in schools to enhance their understanding of the local workforce and industries.

Theme 2: Building the capacity of employers and industry

The majority of responses to youth unemployment are focused on the individual, rather than on creating an environment which is conducive to fostering higher levels of youth employment. For example, the imposition of activity tests and penalties seek to target (and change) individual behaviour, but fail to recognise factors such as the decline in entry-level job vacancies.

Employers have provided anecdotal feedback that they often find it difficult to retain young people (millennials) in the workforce due to differing expectations. This struggle may be heightened when employers take on vulnerable young people who face additional barriers such as mental illness or disability. Whilst there are some exceptions, many employment services provide only limited post-placement support to the young person, and provide little consideration to encouraging the employer to implement retention strategies.

Given the cultural diversity of the Greater Dandenong municipality, young people have frequently voiced concerns over discrimination as a barrier to employment. Workplaces that are unable to provide a culturally safe environment are missing an opportunity to embrace this diversity and potential workforce.

The Youth in Employment survey conducted by the Greater Dandenong Young Leaders in 2017 illustrates that young people are eager and willing to work, with 87% agreeing that they would apply for a job to get experience even if it is not their 'dream job'. However the survey results also highlight that there is room for employers to enhance and simplify their recruitment processes to better attract young people.

The survey findings provide a number of suggestions as to how employers could implement an advertising, application and interview process that supports young jobseekers to best present themselves and the value they offer prospective employers. Notably, young people would feel motivated to stay in a job if they had access to workplace mentors, flexible work hours, supportive management and professional development opportunities.

Young people have much to offer employers, including new ideas, an openness to learning and the ability to adapt easily to new technology. Working with employers to create supportive work environments for young people and to bridge the generation gap, offers the opportunity to ensure young people are retained in the workforce, purposefully engaged in work and given the opportunity reach their potential.

Current work undertaken by Youth and Family Services:	Opportunities to advocate for further change:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution of the Youth in Employment survey findings to local employers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotional campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of hiring young people, as well as strategies employers can use to engage and maintain young workers. • Government to increase the onus for funded employment services to work alongside employers in creating positive work environments and maintaining young people in jobs.

Theme 3: Enhancing young people’s employability skills and resilience

As highlighted in the VicHealth *Brighter Futures* research, the meaning of being ‘work ready’ is changing. To adapt and thrive in this new world of work, young people will require high levels of resilience, strong social and emotional skills and enterprise skills.

In contrast to technical skills which are specific to an occupation or industry, enterprise skills refer to a series of transferable skills including problem solving, creativity and teamwork. (These may also be referred to as soft skills or 21st century skills.)

Young people often hold limited understanding of the value of their enterprise skills or are unsure how to articulate these skills. In response to this, Youth and Family Services have been implementing the Youthpass framework in various youth programs since 2016.

Originating from the European Union, Youthpass encourages young people to reflect on the learning that takes place in youth work programs, and provides a framework to document (evidence) the knowledge or skills gained in the form of a certificate. Victoria University are currently leading the implementation of Youthpass in Australia, however only a limited number of organisations have been trained to facilitate the model.

Youth and Family Services have also held a focus on promoting opportunities for young people to undertake volunteering activities to gain experience and develop employability skills. This approach was led by young people who highlighted the difficulties of demonstrating these skills in the absence of paid work experience.

Current work undertaken by Youth and Family Services:	Opportunities to advocate for further change:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delivery of volunteering programs and forums to connect young people with volunteering opportunities in the community.• Implementation of the Youthpass model.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater emphasis on digital literacy and entrepreneurial skills in schools.• More widespread implementation of Youthpass.

Theme 4: Earlier intervention to prevent young people from becoming disengaged

Young people experiencing long periods of unemployment at their first entry to the labour market can experience long-term impacts, which may persist even beyond the time when the individual secures employment. Youth unemployment has been linked to poorer health outcomes, lower education attainment and heightened risk of unemployment when older (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014).

Youth unemployment also has a detrimental impact at a community and national level, including reduced productivity, lost tax income and increased demand for welfare, health, justice and community services (Social Ventures Australia, 2016).

The individual and community cost of youth unemployment strengthens the case for intervention and investment in supporting early access to sustainable employment to break a cycle of disadvantage. This raises questions around the value of State and Federal Government initiatives which may impose restrictions around access to employment services based on the length of time a young person has been unemployed, or which incentivise employers to take on the long-term unemployed. Instead, greater emphasis could be given to preventing a young person from becoming long-term unemployed in the first instance.

In a world where the bar is continually rising (due largely to the impacts of automation and globalisation), educational attainment is critical for young people to successfully transition to work. Schools in the City of Greater Dandenong have high rates of student absenteeism, a risk factor for early school leaving and future unemployment. Education providers need to be better resourced to respond to student absenteeism and to support students who choose to leave school early in securing a pathway to purposeful work or vocational training.

The Victorian Department of Education commissions the annual On Track survey to explore the pathways of school completers and early school leavers. Unfortunately participation rates are low, limiting the accuracy of the survey results. Support is offered to those young people who are identified as not engaging in training or employment through Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), however they do not currently have the resources to work one-to-one with individuals to find and secure a pathway.

Current work undertaken by Youth and Family Services:	Opportunities to advocate for further change:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy to increase funding to the Navigator program to support students with high rates of absenteeism. • Participation in local working groups to pilot new and innovative approaches to address student absenteeism. • Deliver a pilot initiative to provide additional support to young people identified as not engaged in training or employment through the On Track survey. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve capacity of schools to identify and respond to young people at risk of disengagement earlier. • Provide employment services which are accessible to all young people seeking support with employment, not just those who have been disengaged for three or six months. • Improved monitoring and tracking of school leavers (and school completers) to support their successful transition into the workforce.

Theme 5: Making it easier to navigate the service system

In recent years State and Federal Governments have significantly increased funding for employment services. While this investment has been welcomed, it has created a complex system of services available to jobseekers. The City of Greater Dandenong now has more than fifty employment services available, with each program or service holding specific eligibility criteria. This can be difficult for workers/professionals to keep pace with, let alone young people to navigate, creating an additional barrier to accessing support for those who need it most.

Feedback from local employers also indicates that the array of services available causes confusion for them and leads to inefficiency in working with multiple providers who present the same candidates. With such a range of funded initiatives, there is frequently duplication in service offerings, whilst other gaps remain unaddressed.

Current work undertaken by Youth and Family Services:	Opportunities to advocate for further change:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coordinating the Greater Dandenong Youth Network to encourage information sharing and collaboration amongst service providers.• Coordination of the Positive Youth Pathways website, an online directory of service providers in the south-east region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Development of a central directory of services.• State and Federal Governments to explore ways of streamlining funding arrangements as contracts are re-tendered.

Conclusion

Persistently high rates of youth unemployment continue to be an issue facing young people in Greater Dandenong, and many other communities across Australia. This comes at a significant cost to both individuals and the community.

Whilst young people are often willing and eager to work, they need greater support to explore pathways and opportunities to engage with employers from different industries. For those young people who are at risk of disengagement or unemployment, earlier intervention is required to address their individual barriers and to reconnect them with education, training or work. Finding and accessing support services needs to be easier and more accessible, so that asking for help doesn't become an additional barrier.

Finally, working with young people to develop and recognise the value of their enterprise skills supports their transition to the new and rapidly changing world of work. Amongst this workplace change, we also need to ensure that employers have the capacity to create environments that support and understand millennials, and recognise the value they can provide.

Supporting young people's journey to purposeful work requires a holistic approach, with constructive engagement from young people, education providers, government and employers. It is only through creating supportive environments and flexible systems that young people can develop the skills and resilience that will allow them to thrive.

References

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