



Merri-bek
City Council

Community Engagement Summary Report

Children, Young People and Families
Strategy
2026-2029



Acknowledgement of traditional custodianship

Merri-bek City Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways in the area known as Merri-bek. We pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging, as well as to all First Nations communities, who significantly contribute to the life of the area.

Version control

Version	Date	Author	Reason	Section
0.1	12.11.2025	A Howard	New Report	All
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Prepared by



The Commentarium was engaged by Merri-bek City Council to support the independent analysis of community and stakeholder feedback for this project, and to prepare this report.

At **The Commentarium** our focus is supporting government with the crucial steps of gathering, organising, analysing, and presenting community feedback. We do this to honour the efforts of everyone involved, and to maximise the influence of feedback on project decisions.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Children, Young People and Families Strategy 2026-2029 will replace the current plan – which was Merri-bek City Council’s first integrated plan looking at children, young people and families. Development of the new Strategy will be guided by two stages of community and stakeholder engagement - to ensure that feedback from children, young people, families, and key stakeholders is central to shaping the Strategy.

Between August and October 2025, the first engagement stage was delivered, with a diverse range of communications and engagement activities. These included a dedicated project page on the ‘Conversations Merri-bek’ website (available in 15 languages), posters and postcards distributed across community spaces, articles in local newsletters, targeted social media campaigns, and direct outreach to existing community groups.

To collect feedback, the Council offered online and printed surveys tailored for different age groups, art activities for children, pop-up events in high-traffic areas, workshops with multicultural families and those living with disability, focus groups with key community and reference groups, and briefings with stakeholders such as the Youth Ambassadors, Council staff, and First Nations representatives.

Participation

By delivering almost 50 engagement events, the engagement process successfully reached a broad cross-section of the Merri-bek community, with nearly 4,100 comments collected from approximately 1,400 participants. Participation statistics highlight the effectiveness of the Council’s multi-channel approach:

- **e-Newsletters:** Over 5,200 subscribers received project updates.
- **Social media:** Regular posts reached 27,144 views; paid campaigns targeted multicultural communities, achieving 8,500 unique views and 455 click-throughs.
- **Project Website:** 2,900 views, 1,797 unique visitors, and 64 contributions.
- **Surveys:** 592 comments collected.
- **Arts Activities:** 1,835 comments, engaging young children.
- **Pop-ups:** 788 comments from community members who might not otherwise participate.
- **Workshops:** 338 comments, fostering in-depth discussion.
- **Focus Groups:** 436 comments, capturing diverse perspectives.
- **Briefings:** 39 comments, providing specialist advice.

Demographic data (where available) showed a strong representation of children and young people (70% under 18), a predominance of female participants (71%), and contributions from a wide range of suburbs, cultural backgrounds, and language groups. The process was intentionally inclusive, targeting groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ communities, migrant and refugee families, and service providers.

Key Findings

Thematic analysis of nearly 4,100 comments revealed the following key insights for children, young people and families in Merri-bek.

Things Merri-bek is doing well:

- **Places & Spaces:** Parks, playgrounds, sporting facilities, community hubs, schools, and libraries were highly valued. Children and families appreciated the natural environment, recreational opportunities, and inclusive community events.
- **Inclusion & Connection:** Strong sense of community, social cohesion, and celebration of diversity were noted. Council's efforts in multicultural and First Nations inclusion were recognised.
- **Health & Wellbeing:** Maternal Child Health services, sports programmes, and mental health support were praised, with safety and emotional wellbeing highlighted by participants.
- **Learning & Participation:** Early years services, playgroups, youth education, and community engagement initiatives were seen as strengths.

Issues and Challenges in Merri-bek:

- **Health & Wellbeing:** Access to services, mental health, support for parents/carers, housing affordability, substance use, and safety were major concerns.
- **Places & Spaces:** Cleanliness, safety, inclusive infrastructure, and availability of parks and playgrounds were recurring issues.
- **Traffic & Transportation:** Road safety, congestion, accessibility, and cycling infrastructure were highlighted as areas needing improvement.
- **Inclusion & Connection:** Barriers for migrant and refugee families, discrimination, bullying, and support for women/girls were identified.
- **Financial Hardship:** Cost of living, programs and services costs impacted families' ability to access services and participate in community life – leading to issues of isolation, and deprivation.
- **Education, Employment & Youth Services:** Access to services, employment pathways, school engagement, and resources were areas of concern.

Most critical issues:

Access to affordable health and mental health services, safe and inclusive public spaces, and support for vulnerable and diverse community groups were the most frequently and urgently raised.

Improvements proposed: Advice & statistics

Places & Spaces

- 602 solution comments (38% of the 1,584 comments) told us that improved places and spaces would enhance the lives of children, young people and families.
- Top requests: more trees, shade, accessible design, cleaner and safer public areas, more community hubs, better connectivity, recreation opportunities.

Inclusion & Connection

- 427 comments (25%) talked about becoming a more tolerant, diverse and cohesive community, through opportunities to bring people together to celebrate, or support each other.
- Calls for more inclusive, culturally safe, and accessible programs and events, emphasis on migrant, refugee, First Nations, and LGBTQIA+ communities, women/girls, and people with disability as well as extra support for parents/carers.

Health & Wellbeing

- 316 comments (20%) focused on health: more affordable health, mental health, and maternal child health services, as well as housing and food security.
- 51% of these (161 comments) specifically requested more, or better access to, sports infrastructure and programming for all ages, abilities and genders.

Education, Employment & Participation

- 6% of solutions (101 comments) sought better education support, job placements, life skills workshops, and affordable childcare/playgroups.
- Requests included ongoing and deeper engagement with the community; more information sharing (promotion of Council services and sharing of more information in different languages about topics such as parenting skills, health and food literacy); and better support for those struggling with school transitions.

Affordability & Access

- Many comments highlighted the need to reduce costs for services and events, and to address long waitlists for health and support services, ensuring equitable access across all suburbs.

Next steps

The feedback collected through this engagement process will be used to help draft the new Strategy. A further round of engagement to test the draft Strategy is planned for early 2026.

Where possible, insights that we have collected that fall outside of the scope of the draft Strategy will be shared with relevant parts of Merri-bek City Council to advocate for these community concerns and ideas.

We thank everyone who contributed to this engagement process.

Introduction

Project Background

The Children, Young People and Families Plan 2021-2025 was Merri-bek City Council's first integrated plan to support local children and young people from birth to adulthood. We are now developing a new 4-year integrated plan.

Merri-bek City Council wants every child to:

- have a strong start
- feel safe
- succeed in education and learning, and
- have opportunities to participate and thrive in the community.

The new **Children, Young People and Families Strategy** will build on what has worked well in the past 4 years. It will also be developed using community and stakeholder feedback – particularly ideas on what Council could do to address new or ongoing challenges for children, young people and families.

What we set out to achieve

There are **two planned stages of community engagement** to help develop this new strategy. The first stage focuses on identifying what is working, and what needs to be done better. The second stage will test a draft strategy with community and stakeholders. The first stage was completed in October 2025 and is the focus of this report.

The purpose of this engagement process was to:

- understand the critical or key issues and challenges facing children, young people and families;
- understand what is working well, and what Council could do better to support these community members;
- reach a diverse mix of local communities, and
- give opportunities for the broader community to provide feedback.

Purpose of this report

This report outlines how Council engaged the community, and summarises who we heard from, and the feedback that was collected through this planned process.

Before reading this report

The following elements should be considered when reading this report:

Privacy

- Feedback from the community is carefully presented to avoid sharing any personal or private information – in accordance with Victorian privacy laws and principles. To know more about how Merri-bek manages and protects your private information you can visit: <https://merri-bek.vic.gov.au/footer/privacy>.

Analysis and presentation

- The information and views presented in this report are a summarised version of participant feedback from across the various engagement activities. Feedback may be paraphrased for clarity but is not amended beyond corrections to spelling and grammar. As such, some information and views may be factually incorrect, unfeasible, or outside of the scope of the project.
- This report summarises feedback from a large data set, it highlights data trends and key insights from many participants but does not preclude the project team from considering the community feedback in its original form.

Inclusion and diversity

- The information in this report is based on qualitative research, focused on those interested in, or affected by, the specific topics of the project. It does not necessarily reflect the views of a statistically representative sample of the broader community.
- Merri-bek City Council strives to include diverse voices in our engagement activities. We acknowledge, however, that some people may have experienced barriers to participating in the activities outlined in this report – including those living with disability, parts of the multicultural community, and others.
- This report summarises the feedback from the planned engagement activities included in Council's engagement plan. It does not include feedback provided to Council through other community activities or channels.

Influencing decisions

- It is important to acknowledge that community feedback is incredibly important, as are many other inputs into a decision-making process. Other inputs (such as budget, time constraints, feasibility and competing priorities) must be balanced as part of delivering a decision. Details on how this report will be included in the decision-making process, are included in the 'Next Steps' section at the end of the report.

How we engaged the community

Between 26 August and 26 October 2025, we delivered a range of communications activities to let the Merri-bek community and stakeholders know about this project. We also delivered a range of community engagement activities to collect community and stakeholder feedback.

Communications activities

To get the word out about the engagement process, we did the following:



'Conversations Merri-bek'

Hosted a project page to share information and collect feedback.

Council's dedicated engagement website '[Conversations Merri-bek](#)' included a page for this project.

The page included information on the engagement process, a timeline, contact details, documents about the previous plan, children's activities to download, as well as an interactive tool for posting ideas and voting or commenting on other peoples' ideas.

Translation of the page is available in 15 languages other than English.



Posters

Displayed in relevant spaces around Merri-bek.

Posters about the project and the opportunity to provide feedback were placed in areas such as:

- Libraries
- Customer Service centres
- Neighbourhood houses
- Maternal Child Health centres
- Immunisation centres
- Playgroups
- Early Learning centres
- Kindergartens
- Community hubs

QR codes directed readers to the 'Conversations' project page. Translations were included on these posters.



Postcards

Distributed to relevant spaces around Merri-bek.

Postcards about the project and the opportunity to provide feedback were placed in the same areas as the project posters.

Postcards included QR codes to direct people to the 'Conversations' project page.

These postcards also included translations.



Newsletter

Article in the Merri-bek Community News.

The **Merri-bek Community News** is printed and delivered to all Merri-bek Houses each quarter.

A short article was included in the August edition (on page 10) describing the project, and inviting readers to participate through Merri-bek's community engagement website 'Conversations Merri-bek'.



e-Newsletters

Were used to inform the local community.

Council-owned and other community newsletters were used to share project information with the Merri-bek community, and invite feedback. Newsletters include:

- My Merri-bek
- Local Primary and Secondary School newsletters
- Northern Families Newsletter

The **My Merri-bek e-newsletter** is sent out to subscribers every two weeks and includes information about projects, initiatives and events. Information about this project was included in the newsletter on:

- 4 September 2025
- 16 October 2025.



15 Posts

And 1 campaign on Merri-bek City Council's social media channels.

We used a mix of paid advertising and regular posts through Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

15 social media posts were published between 27 August and 21 October.

The paid campaign ran from 22 September to 8 October. Paid posts were available in 7 languages other than English, based on the user. Languages included Arabic, Greek, Italian, Nepali, Simplified Chinese, Turkish and Urdu.



Existing Groups

Were directly communicated with about this engagement opportunity.

Utilising programs and networks run by Council, we used email and messaging to reach out to existing reference and advisory groups including:

- CALD (Culturally and linguistically diverse) Community Connectors
- Youth Connectors, and
- Community Family Group (via Whatsapp).

Engagement activities

To hear from the community and collect feedback we did the following:



Surveys

For different groups and ages, available online and in printed form.

Surveys were available in different forms to engage children, young people, parents and families, as well as Service Providers and Merri-bek community members. The surveys all focused on asking key questions, such as:

- **What are the big issues/challenges for children, young people and families?**
- **What is Merri-bek doing well to support these groups?**
- **What could Merri-bek do better or focus on improving for these groups?**



Art Activities

For children to provide feedback for this project.

Two different art-based workbooks were available at a range of different events (and online) for children. The questions varied slightly, based on the age group, but focused on what children like about Merri-bek, and what would make Merri-bek a place better for children. There were two activity options:

- [Early Years \(Children aged 2 to 8 years\)](#)
- [Children aged 9 to 12 years.](#)



7x Pop-ups

At local community spaces around Merri-bek.

Through August and October, seven pop-ups were delivered at areas with high foot traffic around Merri-bek. These were designed to increase public awareness of the engagement process, and to collect feedback from local community members using corflute posters. Pop-ups were held at:

- LGBTQIA+ Families (23 August 2025)
- Coburg Farmers Market (20 September 2025)
- Glenroy Library (24 September 2025)
- Fawkner Leisure Centre (27 September 2025)
- Glenroy Hub (2 October 2025)
- Brunswick Baths (4 October 2025)
- Welcome Baby to Country event (22 October 2025)



3x Workshops

Focused on multicultural families, and those living with disability.

Workshops were held in September with targeted community groups – to make it easier for these groups to provide feedback.

We held two workshops with young people, families, parents and carers with multicultural backgrounds.

A third workshop focused on hearing from parents and carers of children living with disability.



8x Focus Groups

With identified community, stakeholder or reference groups and using existing networks.

Throughout August and September, we held focus group discussions with eight different groups. These groups were identified in our planning process as key to the success of any future strategy. Groups included:

- Merri-bek Youth Ambassadors
- Queer Collective (through Oxygen)
- Fawkner Futures
- School Principals
- Children
- Service Providers, and
- Staff from the Early Years and Youth Branch of Council.



4x Briefings

With key stakeholders.

Discussions were held with identified stakeholders on the engagement process, and to collect feedback and advice. These were delivered to stakeholders who needed to know about the project, may not have had an ability to engage in other activities, or had an important role to play in shaping or promoting the engagement process. Stakeholders included:

- Youth Ambassadors
- First Nations Advisory Committee
- Merri-bek Council staff

A NOTE ON ACTIVITY TIMINGS



Some activities were undertaken outside of the formal engagement period to take advantage of pre-planned community events. Activities outside of the engagement period included:

- Community Vision Activity (12 December 2024)
- Glenroy Festival (4 May 2025)

Project engagement (reach and participation)

Through our different communications and engagement activities we connected with lots of community members and stakeholders. **In total we were able to collect feedback from nearly 1,400 participants.**

The table below provides some details and insights on the activities where we collected statistics.

Activity	Engagement	Insights
e-Newsletters	5,200+ Subscribers to the 'My Merri-bek' e-newsletter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The My Merri-bek e-newsletter is a fortnightly newsletter coordinated by the communications team at Merri-bek City Council.
Social Media Posts (Regular)	27,144 views of the content 246 likes, comments or shares 19,243 unique users saw post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The three posts with the highest number of views were all shared through Instagram. The future effectiveness of this channel may, however, be affected by the Federal Government's upcoming social media ban for children under 16 years.
Social Media Posts (Paid/Campaign)	Around 8,500 unique views 455 click-throughs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The paid campaign targeted multicultural community members in Merri-bek. The Nepali community had the highest reach at 2,134 unique views. Greek and Turkish-speaking community members were the most likely to click through, however in both groups most click-throughs were by people aged 65+.
'Conversations Merri-bek' website	2,900 views 1,797 unique visitors 64 contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The largest proportion (47.7%) of visitors came to the website directly – meaning they acquired the web address via an email, untracked newsletter link, or used a QR code to access the project page. 26.5% of visitors were referred via a social media campaign, and a further 9.2% via organic social media posts. 45 visitors (1.8%) made at least one contribution on the project page. The 'Gather' tool was used to collect community feedback and allowed community members to interact with each other's ideas.

Activity	Engagement	Insights
Surveys	592 comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surveys were effective in collecting individual feedback and demographic information in a private way (i.e., without other participants hearing or reading their feedback).
Arts Activities	1,835 comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The two arts activities were very successful tools for engaging with young children. Sometimes, however, it wasn't clear if the comments were from the parent or the child.
Pop-ups	788 comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pop-ups were useful in collecting insights from 'non-self-selecting' community members. In other words, those who may not otherwise hear about the engagement process or contribute. Pop-up locations, and the audience at those locations may sometimes show a natural bias, so locations must always be carefully selected. For example, people who attend pop-up at a festival may be more likely to tell us to have more festivals.
Workshops	338 comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our workshops worked well in generating more in-depth discussion and sharing more project-specific information. Workshops also provide an opportunity for networking and collaboration as a secondary benefit.
Focus Groups	436 comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus groups provided a great opportunity to hear in-depth feedback from community members or stakeholders. Focus groups also allow others to hear different perspectives and points of view.
Briefings	39 comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Briefings are an excellent way to gather highly specialist advice. Comments on Asylum Seekers and First Nations were greatly appreciated in this process, adding a layer of depth to the intersections of diversity, health, and wellbeing that may otherwise have been missed.

Who we heard from

Targeted groups of the Merri-Bek community

This engagement process was heavily focused on hearing from children, young people and their families. As such, the communications and engagement activities were planned with several specific groups, stakeholders and segments in mind.

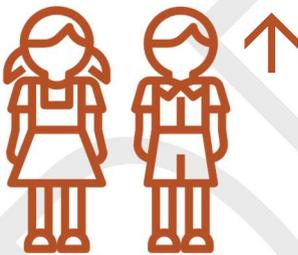
Examples include:

- Children and young people
- Parents and families
- Service Providers
- Young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
- People with disability
- LGBTQIA+ communities
- Migrant, refugee and faith communities
- Women, girls and gender diverse communities
- Council staff and decision-makers.

Participant demographics

Across the different activities we delivered for this project, we collected demographic data about our participants where possible. We were able to collect some specific demographic data from some of the 1,383 participants we heard from. These demographics are explored below.

Age



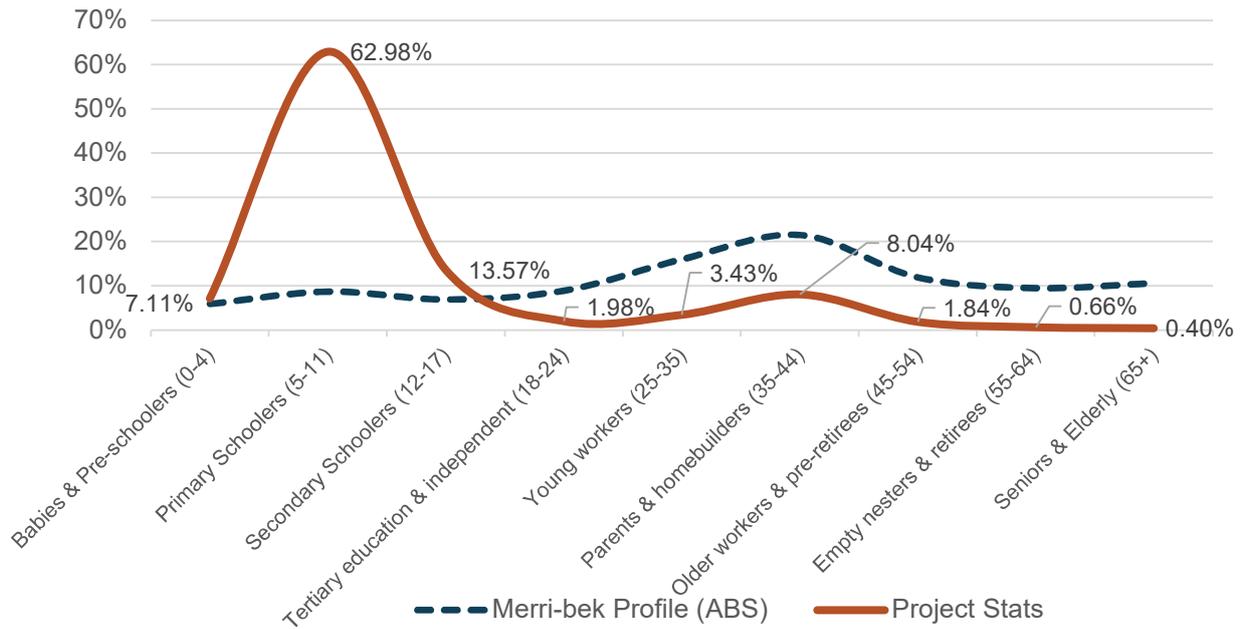
Participants tended to be younger, with available data skewed towards under 18-year-olds.

We were able to collect age data from 479 specific participants. For some activities, we simply recorded the age range of a group of participants against the captured comments, bringing the number of data points to 759. The age-related data was brought together and compared with 2021 Census data on the age profile of Merri-bek.

More than two-thirds (70.1%) of ages were 0 to 11 years old, particularly ages 5 to 11 (63%). The graph below shows the high proportion of the ages from members of the community aged under 18 years. This was an overrepresentation compared with the age ranges in the broader community of Merri-bek – where under 18-year-olds make up about 21.5%.

This is, however, appropriate and consistent with the planning and approach we undertook – focusing in on the voices of children and young people to inform the new strategy.

Age Profile of Participants v. Merri-bek Age Profile (n=759)



Gender



In total, we collected gender data from 120 specific participants. This was compared with the gender balance in Merri-bek from the 2021 Census. **In the available data, 70.8% was ‘Woman/Girl’, 25% was ‘Man/Boy’ and a further 1.4% was ‘Gender Diverse’.**

While not much gender data was available, the data was heavily weighted toward female participants.

Across Merri-bek, the Census data shows females make up 51.3% of the population, and males represent 48.7% – making the participants in this project heavily biased towards local women.

Although the volume of data is low, the bias towards female participants is a common feature in engagement on child, families, and maternal health.



Image: Participants at the Children’s Forum

Residential suburb

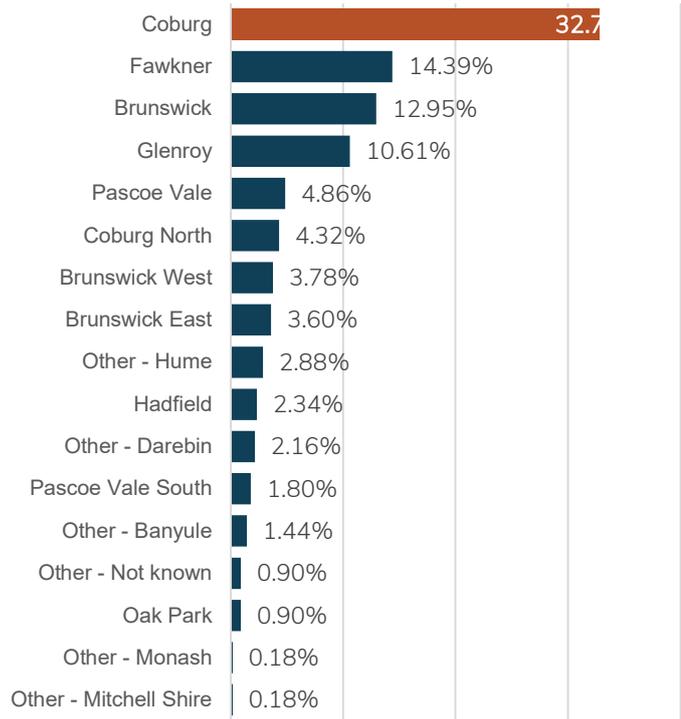


Most contributions (92%) were from people living in Merri-bek, and commonly from Coburg (32.8%).

We had 556 suburb data points, the most common suburbs were Coburg, Fawkner, Brunswick and Glenroy.

‘Other’ suburbs are grouped into local government areas. The highest number of ‘other’ comments were from the Hume area, making up nearly 3% of the data.

Residential Suburb (n=556)



Country of birth

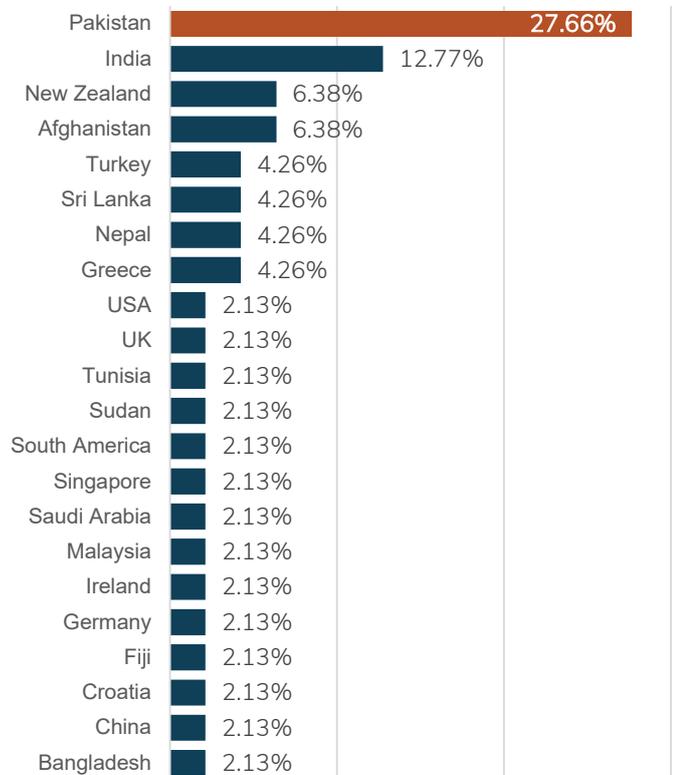


Of the 47 participants who shared this information with us, the highest proportion were born in Pakistan (27.8%), followed by India (12.8%).

Participants born in Pakistan were more likely to be aged 25 to 35, and female. Indian participants were more likely to be slightly older 25 to 44, and split male/female evenly.

Please note: Children were not asked about country of birth.

Country of Birth (n=47)



Spoken languages



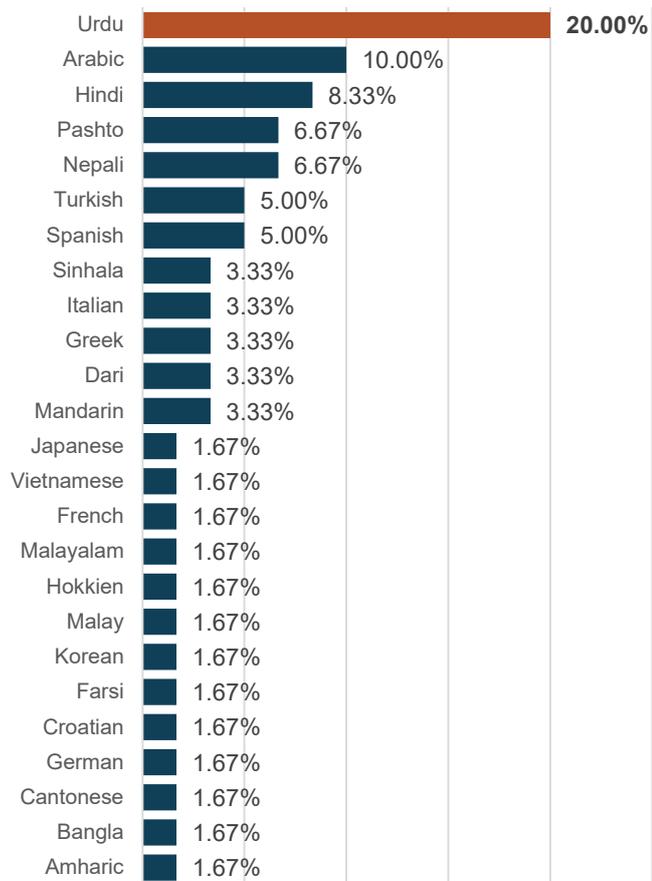
The most common non-English language spoken by participants at home was Urdu (20%), followed by Arabic (10%).

We received 60 data points for this question. Urdu was the most common language, associated with participants who told us they were aged 25 to 44, were born in Pakistan or India, and who now live in Fawkner, Glenroy or Hadfield areas.

Arabic speakers were a similar age (25 to 54). They told us they were born in Pakistan, Sudan or Tunisia, and now live in the areas of Glenroy and Oak Park.

Please note: Children were not asked about language spoken at home.

Non-English Languages Spoken At Home (n=60)



Diversity

'I am a parent/guardians of children' was the most selected statement, followed by 'I am a person living with disability'.

Please note: Children were not asked this question.

We received 91 responses to this question - where participants were invited to selected any of the provided statements that related to them. Out of respect for privacy, this question was only asked in formats such as surveys, so that responses were not visible to other participants.

The most commonly selected statement (making up 73.7%) of responses was 'I am a parent/guardian of children'. The statements and their numbers of responses are shown below.

- 'I am a parent/guardian of children' (73.7%)
- 'I am a person living with disability' (11%)
- 'I am a LGBTQIA+ community member' (8.8%)
- 'I care for a person with disability' (5.5%)
- 'I am experiencing homelessness' (1.1%)

What we heard

In our engagement activities we asked participants to share their thoughts based on three key questions – what's working well in Merri-bek, what are the key issues and challenges, and how can Merri-bek provide better support. In total, we reviewed and themed nearly 4,100 comments.

Responses to the three key questions used across our engagement activities are explored below using thematic analysis.

A NOTE ON THEMATIC ANALYSIS

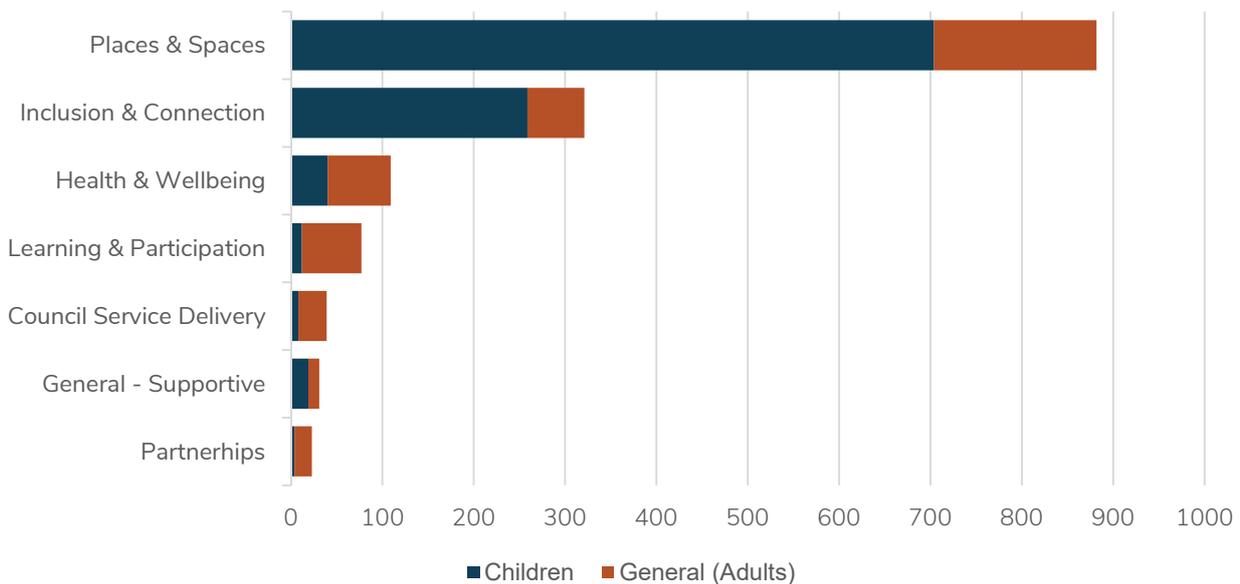


The responses to these key questions are explored below using thematic analysis. This means that comments were categorised into themes, and sub-themes, to help us understand what the most common topics were. Where comments talked about more than one theme they have been counted against each relevant theme. This means that the total number of comments is greater than the total number of participants.

Topic 1: Successes and positives in Merri-bek

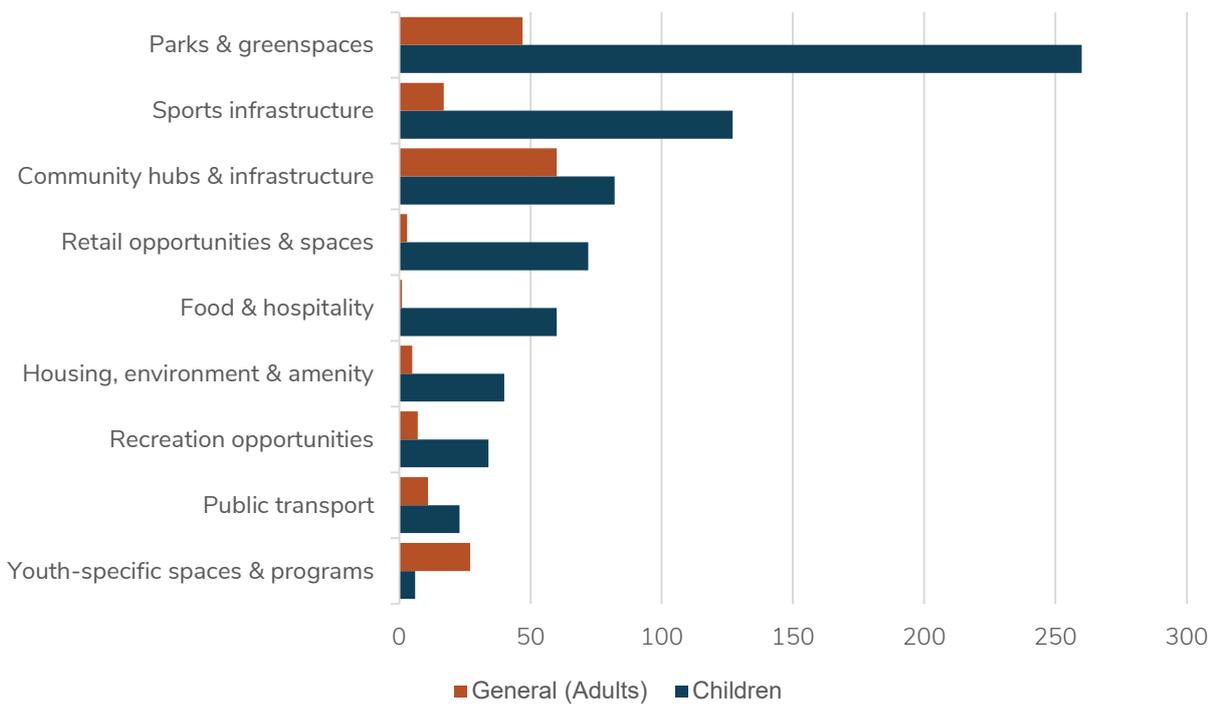
Most children and young participants were asked a simplified question: what they liked about living in Merri-bek. Most adults, Service Providers and the general community were asked a more complex question – what Council is currently doing well to support children, young people and families. **In total, 1,482 comments were analysed for this question. This was made up of 1,046 responses to the simplified question, and 436 responses to the more complex question.** The graph below shows the key themes from these responses, broken down to show the number of comments from the question targeted at children, and adults respectively. Themes are explored below.

Key themes from ALL responses: Success Question (n=1,482)



Theme 1: Places & spaces

Sub-themes in 'Place & Spaces' (n=882)



Although for different reasons, in both versions of this question, most comments (882, or 59.5%) related to the 'places and spaces' of Merri-bek.

Children and young people commonly talked about a love of local plants and animals (particularly around Merri Creek), parks and playgrounds, sporting facilities (particularly pools), options for recreational activities (such as running, walking and cycling), community hubs, schools and libraries.

'Close to everything; so many different schools; good food; nice people; green spaces; close to hospital, sporting grounds and shops; Nice houses; clean pools; great police; lots of carnivals; fun community events and sporting clubs' (11yr old, Pascoe Vale South).

Parents and families agreed that parks, greenspace, community hubs, and infrastructure like libraries were being successfully delivered in Merri-bek.

'I like how progressive Merri-Bek is. Events like First Nations storytelling and LGBTQIA+ library sessions and representation of diversity is important to us' (35-44yr old, Coburg).

Others such as council staff, and education and Service Providers talked more about the youth-specific spaces and programs.

'Free youth programs, workshops, and social activities that allow young people to engage, build skills, make friends, and be part of their community' (Service Provider).

Theme 2: Inclusion & Connection

In total, there were 321 comments (21.7%) about the success of Merri-bek in inclusion and connection. Of these, 259 responses were to the simplified question and 62 were to the general question.

Children talked positively about their school community, their neighbours as well as the broader Merri-bek community (49% of comments).

'[I like] Merri creek, walk[ing] to school, nice people, lots of friends, look after everyone in the community' (7yr old, Coburg).

The idea of social cohesion, diversity and belonging was reflected in the ways children

and young people talked about community behaviours.

'I like how welcoming the community is' (16-18yr old, Queer Collective).

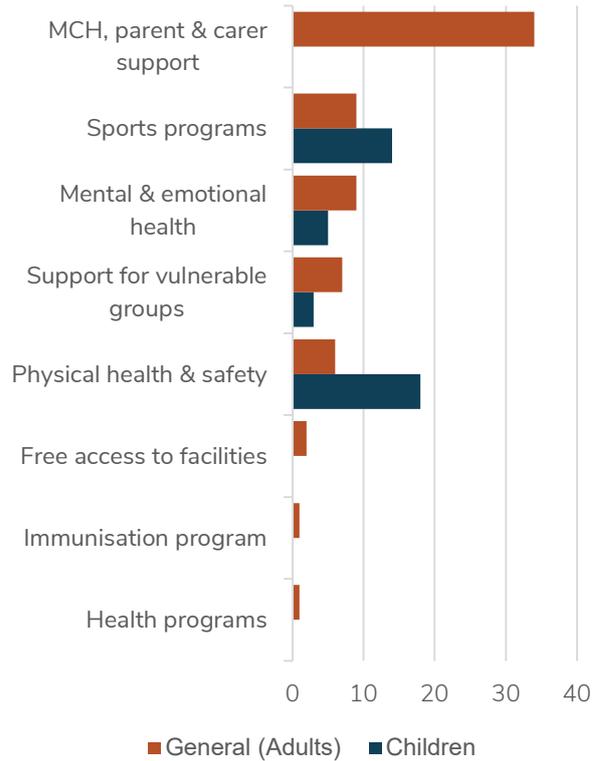
Adults agreed, tying in how we celebrate our diverse communities.

'Multicultural and inclusive programs that acknowledge and celebrate' (Glenroy Library Pop-up)

Service Providers highlighted Council's successful efforts at inclusion, and particularly acknowledgement of Traditional Owners.

'The inclusion of multicultural and First Nations perspectives is so visible. Of course, it can always be improved on, but it's so seen by our community. For example, the flying of the Palestinian flag gave such comfort to our families and children' (Service Provider).

Sub-themes in 'Health & Wellbeing' (n=109)



Theme 3: Health & wellbeing

In total comments about health and wellbeing made up 7.4% of the data set (109 comments). Of these, 40 responses were to the simplified question, and 69 were to the general question.

The most common feedback was support for the Maternal Child Health (MCH) work of Council (31.2%) and support for parents and carers.

'I was impressed by the maternal & child health service (Sussex Neighbourhood House). They were a valuable resource, easy to book or rearrange and provided a wealth of information...' (35-44yr old, Pascoe Vale South).

Sports programs to support connection, health and wellbeing were highlighted by adults and children.

'The basketball community is very nice and welcoming' (Basketball event survey).

Sports and sports programs that were specifically mentioned included:

- Running programs
- Swimming programs
- Basketball
- Community sports
- Netball
- Football and soccer
- Cricket, and
- Swimming.

Principals and Council staff talked particularly about services that support mental and emotional health.

'Wellbeing teams in schools: multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary (nurse, mental health, social workers, psych) wrap-around support and good links with council and support services' (School Principals workshop).

When children talked about mental and emotional health, it was commonly in the context of finding Merri-bek a peaceful or calming environment.

'I go to school in Merri-Bek, I like how peaceful and calm Fawkner is and the greenery' (11yr old, Mickleham).

Children also talked about safety (18 comments) – about Merri-bek being a safe place to be a child.

'I really like the friendly community, the libraries and the safe areas. I love that I can feel safe walking alone' (9-12yr old, Children's Forum).

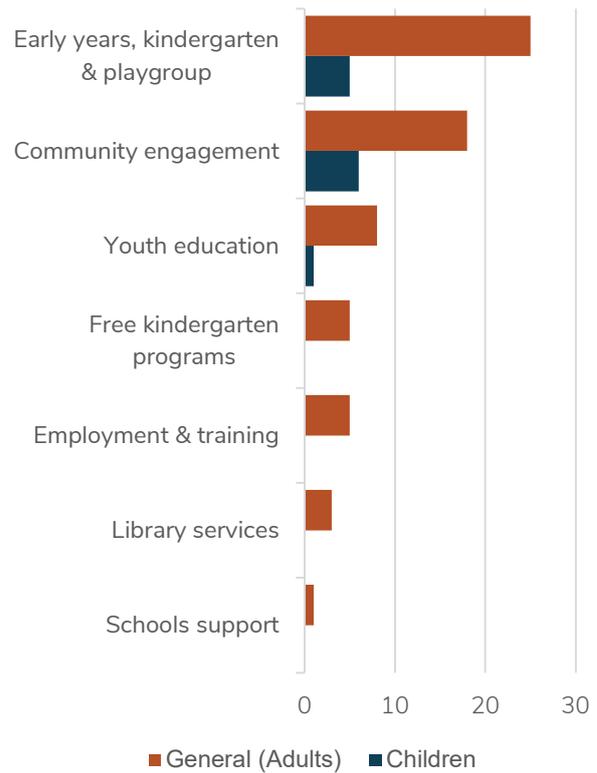
Theme 4: Learning & participation

In total, there were 77 comments (5.2%) about learning and participation. Of these, 65 responses were to the general question and 12 were to the simplified question.

Early years, kindergarten and playgroup services made up more than a third of responses (30 comments, 39%), particularly from adults.

'Council running the playgroups is really appreciated. During school holidays different types of event and activities are very good. Council [is] doing good in terms of providing free kinder and playgroups for everyone' (25-34yr old, Glenroy, Supported Playgroup).

Sub-themes in 'Learning & Participation' (n=77)



Children and adults talked about the community engagement by Merri-bek in a positive light. These comments were 31.2% of the feedback in this theme.

'Children's reference group: children feeling very good to have a voice' (School Principals workshop).

Youth education, employment and training comments were also raised (18.2%) – mainly in the general question asked of adults.

'First of three municipalities to provide a work placement policy for young people, which is offered to those in Merri-bek and inner Northern Regions' (Service Provider).

We also heard that participants appreciate the free kinder programs (6.5%), and library services (3.9%) such as free access to books, media, free spaces and programs such as the 'makers space'.

Themes 5 & 6: Council service delivery & Partnerships

These two themes together represent just 4.2% of responses (62 comments). The majority of these were answered through the general question (by adults).

Within both, related sub-themes emerged. **'Staff capability & quality assurance'** made up 25.6% of responses about Council service delivery, followed closely by **'Coordination of services'** (23.1%).

'Over the last 4 years real increase in cross communicating well across services and promoting to each other across age spans' (Council staff).

Although out of scope for this strategy, children talked about waste management as a positive for Merri-bek.

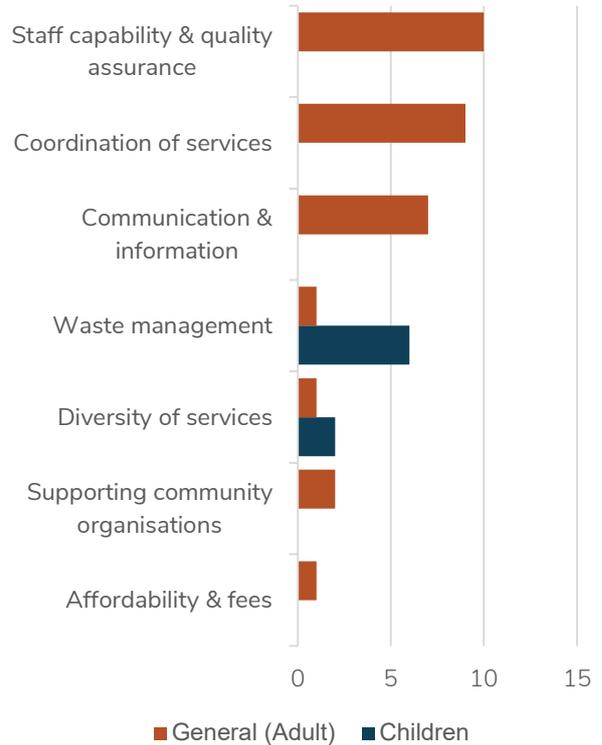
'Merri-bek is recycling really well and this is important to the young people' (13-16yr old, Glenroy College).

Tied closely to the idea of coordinated services, 39.1% of comments in the **'Partnerships'** theme talked about good **'collaboration'** with Merri-bek.

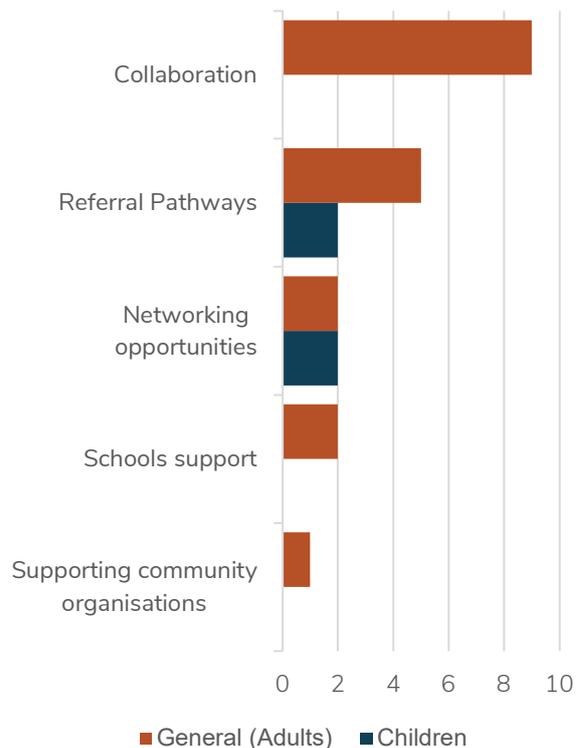
'Kindergarten Outreach Officer's funded by the Department of Education assist families to enrol into kindergarten and school Transition. This program has worked really well for families.'

Attendance at Story time and pop-up play groups assist with capturing families and discussions on enrolments. Increase in enrolments by more than 50% with the Kindergarten Outreach Officer's presence at Libraries, community events, referrals from MCHN external agencies and Preschool Field Officer Program' (Service Provider).

Sub-themes in 'Council Service Delivery' (n=39)



Sub-themes in 'Partnerships' (n=23)



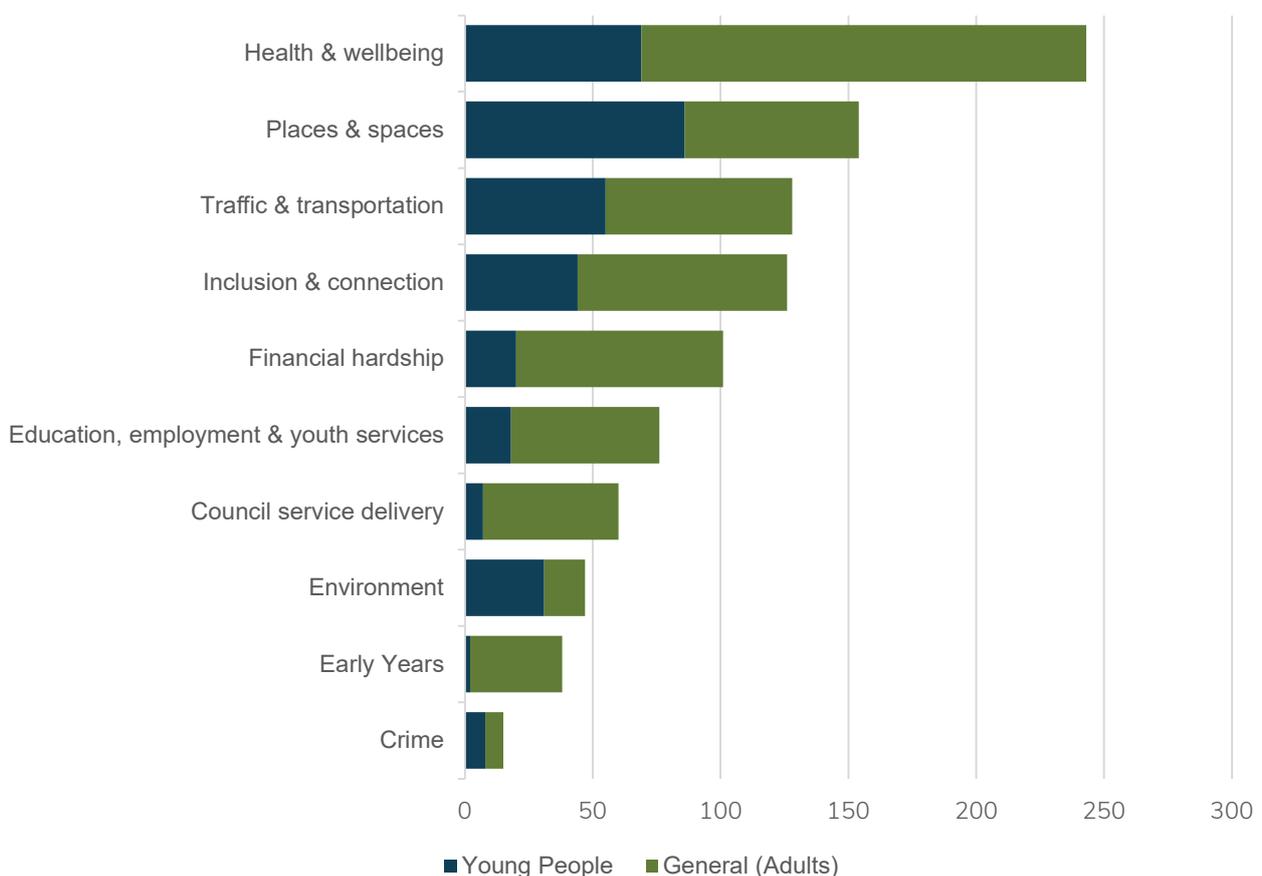
Topic 2: Issues and challenges in Merri-Bek

This topic was explored with young people, adults and the general community – with the question asked in similar variations. Young children (early years) were not asked this question in their activities.

In total, 988 comments were analysed for this question. This included 340 responses to a simplified question, and 648 responses to the more complex question. The graph below shows the key themes from these responses, broken down to show the number of comments from the question targeted at children, and adults respectively.

Although this question was about issues and challenges, many participants automatically talked about solutions to existing problems. Where possible, these responses have been assigned to themes and sub-themes and interpreted to outline the challenge or issues underlying participant solutions. Solutions and advice to Merri-bek are outlined in Topic 3.

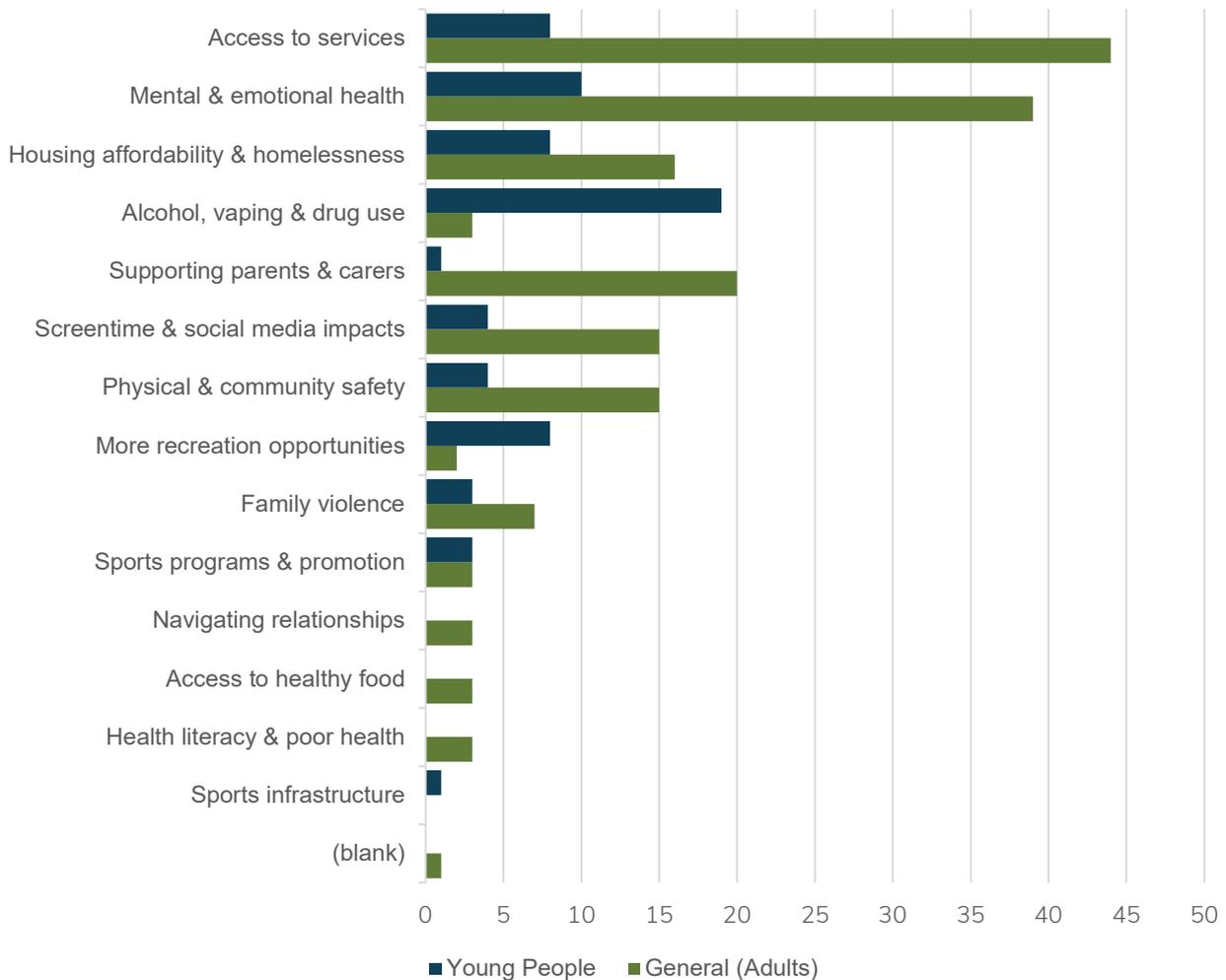
Key themes from ALL responses: Challenges Question (n=988)



Theme 1: Health & wellbeing

In terms of issues and challenges for children, young people and families in Merri-bek, the dominant theme was that of 'health & wellbeing'. **Comments relating to this theme were 24.6% of the collected feedback for this question.** Nearly two thirds of responses were to the general question, with 174 responses. The question asked to young people had 69 responses. Responses from these two questions reflect the different priorities within the wide range of areas covered in this theme. The key sub-themes explored below.

Sub-themes in 'Health & Wellbeing' (n=243)



‘Access to services’ was the most common sub-theme, particularly for adults, making up 21.4% of the theme.

We heard concerns about wait-lists, knowing how to connect to the right services, the costs of services, the quality of services available, and accessibility for people with special needs.

‘Young children in Early Years and Primary school cannot access allied health, paediatricians, waitlists continue to be really long’ (Service Provider).

‘Overall health and access to health services’ (13-16yr old, Glenroy College).

‘Mental & emotional health’ followed closely, making up 20.2% of comments in this theme.

Comments from parents and families talked about isolation, the need for connection, support for managing the stress of parenting, finances, workloads and time management.

‘Cost of living; community connection, loneliness; transphobia growing in society’ (35-44yr old, Rainbow Storytime).

‘Cost of living, work. Childcare/life balance. Raising children to be tolerant, kind and open minded in a society that doesn’t always promote that’ (35-44yr old woman, Coburg).

Other adults and groups in the community raised issues such as access to, and knowledge of, mental health services – particularly to support early intervention.

‘Prevent escalation of mental health issues, early intervention would help’ (School Principals workshop).

‘Access to early allied health services. Merri-bek early childhood services to be more proactive in working with families to identify social and emotional and developmental issues with children. We are finding some children starting school have developmental issues which if identified

earlier could be better supported' (Service Provider).

'Mental health - pressure of balancing school and social life. Also, this topic is not discussed at school or support' (Glenroy Library Pop-up).

Comments about **'Supporting parents & carers'** were closely link to this, making up another 8.6% of responses. Commonly we heard about a lack of support for new parents, parents from vulnerable communities, and parents struggling with work/life balance.

'Young mums' groups: an increase in young mums but they don't want to attend parenting groups, find them intimidating' (Council staff).

'Behaviour of children. Support for parents with children with behaviour needs, children with additional needs' (Coburg Connectors Event).

Some parents and community members talked about the impact of news and global events – such as climate change, wars and politics.

Making up 9.9% of comments was the sub-theme of **'Housing affordability & homelessness'**.

Access to affordable housing options, particularly to support vulnerable communities was raised frequently.

'Employment, mental health, queer acceptance/support, housing crisis, teen homelessness' (16-18yr old, Queer Collective).

'Access to housing for those in need, at affordable rates' (Brunswick Library Pop-up).

Young people talked more broadly about support for those experiencing homelessness.

'I feel sad when seeing homeless people' (9-12yr old, Children's Forum).

9.1% of the comments related to **'Alcohol, vaping & drug use'**. Young people talked more frequently about this sub-theme – primarily about vaping and the impacts of alcohol-affected people on safety.

'Drug usage in marginalised youth groups' (Young People Drop-in).

'There [are] too many drunk people walking around the street' (9-12yr old, Children's Forum).

Safety-related comments were also grouped in the **'Physical & community safety'** sub-theme, which made up 7.8% of comments. The fear of harm from traffic or road use, and crime or other unsocial behaviour (particularly at night), were all raised.

'Rising youth crime, risky behaviour, hooning making parents worried and not letting me go out with friends' (Under 18, outreach event, Glenroy).

'As a local resident, my biggest hope is that this strategy will prioritise making our streets safer for children and enhancing our public play spaces. I often worry about the traffic when walking or cycling with my family' (35-44yr old man, Hadfield).

The challenges of getting out for active recreation and socialising were talked about by young people more than adults. **'More recreation opportunities'** made up 4.1% of the theme. Comments included:

'Not enough accessible things for disabled kids' (12-17yr old, Children's Reference Group).

'More fun things' (9-12yr old, Children's Forum).

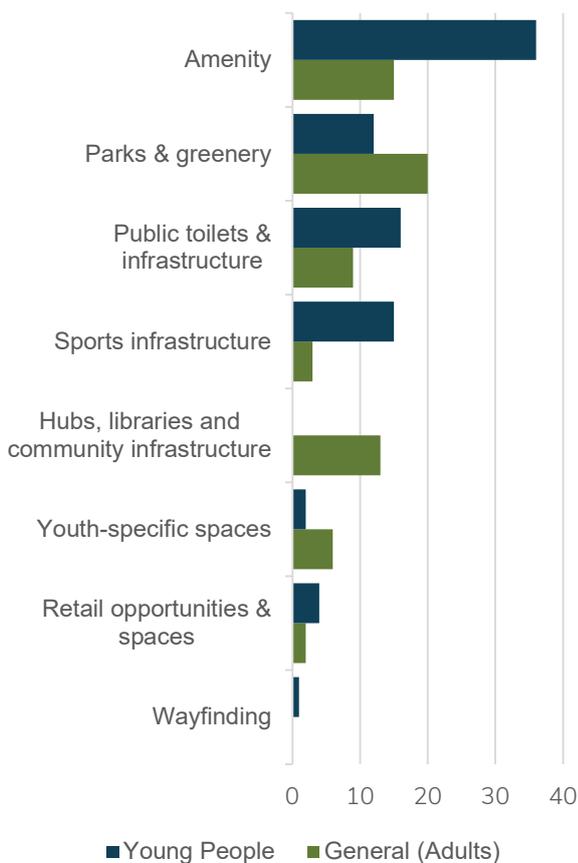
'We need a lot more than just skate parks and basketball courts for our young teens. Leisure centres are getting too expensive. We need to engage our young teens in the community, get them into working bee or community clean up drives, tree planting/nature preservation initiatives, pick up skills at local businesses, bike shops, garages, churches.

We need to pave the way for our next generation through a range of engaging programs and spaces that they can access' (35-44yr old woman, Pascoe Vale, Conversations website)

Theme 2: Places & spaces

In total, 15.6% of comments (154 comments) talked about issues and challenges with local places and spaces. This was broken up into eight sub-themes.

Sub-themes in 'Places & Spaces' (n=154)



The sub-theme **'Amenity'** made up 33.1% of comments about places and spaces. Most of these comments come from the simplified questions directed to young people.

The sub-theme largely related to places and spaces in Merri-bek feeling, safe, clean and comfortable to enjoy.

'Too much graffiti. Smoking and vaping. Dirty public toilets and other public spaces. Unsafe playgrounds. Litter/unsafe rubbish. Things like cigarettes and vapes and beer bottles, glass, bits of metal, in community places such as playgrounds, parks and car parks' (12-17yr old, Children's Reference Group).

The second-most common sub-theme was **'Parks & greenery'** (20.8%). Both young people and adults talked about:

- Upgrading old infrastructure to improve safety of parks and playgrounds.
- Increasing the amount of open space, parks and playgrounds, and improving access to them.

- Providing different activities and parks and playground opportunities for varied ages and abilities – particularly providing spaces for very young children (0-3yrs), and older children.

'[There are] limited inclusive (all abilities) and fenced (safe) children's playgrounds' (LGBTQIA+ Family Pop-up).

Building on conversations about amenity and infrastructure, the third sub-theme was **'Public toilets & infrastructure'**, with 16.2% of responses.

Many comments from children and young people related to public toilet cleanliness, and the number of public toilets available. Drinking taps or fountains also made a mention.

Parents and general community also mentioned the issues of drinking taps and toilets. Additional issues were a lack of nappy change facilities in playgrounds for young children. The ongoing challenge of Melbourne winters and summers meant parents were also seeking more shade and shelters at playgrounds.

'Clean public toilets with nappy change facilities. Pram accessibility around Merri-Bek, lack of ramps' (25-34yr old woman, Uniting Church Playgroup).

Conversations about infrastructure were not limited to public toilets, taps and shading. Comments about **'Sports infrastructure'** (11.7%) and **'Hubs, libraries and community infrastructure'** (8.4%), made up one-fifth (20.1%) of responses.

'Sports infrastructure' responses focused on the lack of sports facilities or the need for upgrades to existing facilities.

'More accessible sport equipment. Activity where schools can participate because some strict schools can't so maybe like a girls only or like whatever match the schools needs' (12-17yr old, Multicultural Workshop).

For **'Hubs, libraries and community infrastructure'**, responses were a little broader.

'[We need] Multiuse multi-generational spaces' (Coburg Farmers Market Pop-up).

'[We] need more spaces to meet (playgrounds, libraries, meet-ups)' (LGBTQIA+ Families Meet-up).

In total, 5.2% of comments were about **'youth-specific spaces'**, focused mainly on the issue of demand for these spaces and programs.

'Need for youth centres/hubs' (14-19yr old, Fawkner Futures).

street, and traffic issues and safety around schools.

'Cars! Especially in Coburg; not enough safe crossings' (35-44yr old woman, Coburg, Kindergarten outreach).

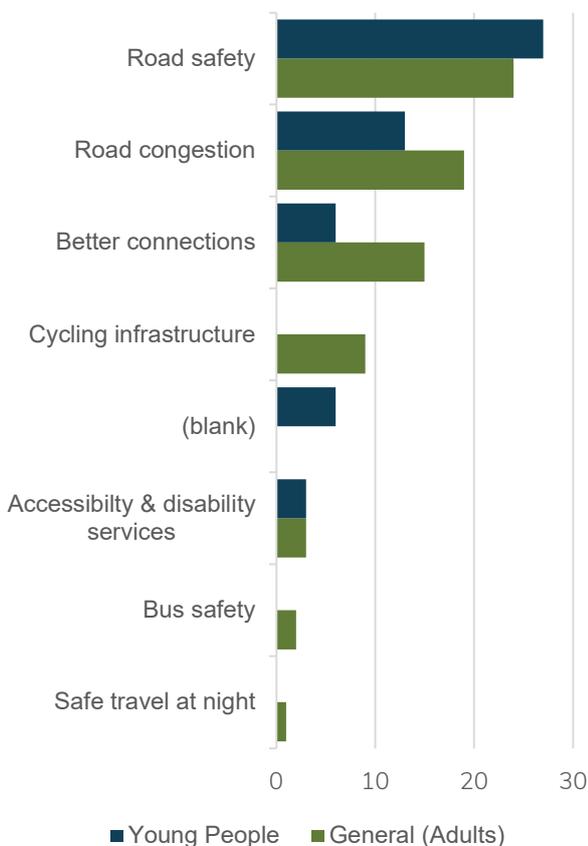
A further 25% of comments related specifically to **'Road congestion'**. This had implications for access to activities and programs, parking and pedestrian safety.

'There are lots of big intersections that make me feel unsafe' (5-11yr old, Brunswick West, Multicultural Workshop).

Theme 3: Traffic & transportation

There were 128 comments relating to issues of traffic and transportation, representing 13% of comments on this topic.

Sub-themes in 'Traffic & Transportation' (n=128)



Comments on **'Road safety'** (39.8%) reflected concerns about dangerous driving behaviours, pedestrian safety – particularly crossing the

'Better connections' (16.4% of comments) built on this, with young people and adults making the point that programs and services are only effective if the community that needs them can access them easily.

'[There is a] need for equitable access across all areas of the municipality' (LGBTQIA+ Family Pop-up).

Tied closely to this were comments about access for people with disability. **'Accessibility & disability services'** accounted for 4.7% of comments.

'We don't have wheelchair ramps at school' (9-12yr old, Children's Forum).

'Cycling infrastructure' made up 7% of comments, with participants raising the issues of bike cyclist safety and inadequate bike paths.

'Road and bike safety education' (Coburg Farmers Market Pop-up).

Theme 4: Inclusion & connection

We received 126 comments (12.8% of comments in this topic) that talked about issues of inclusion and connection.

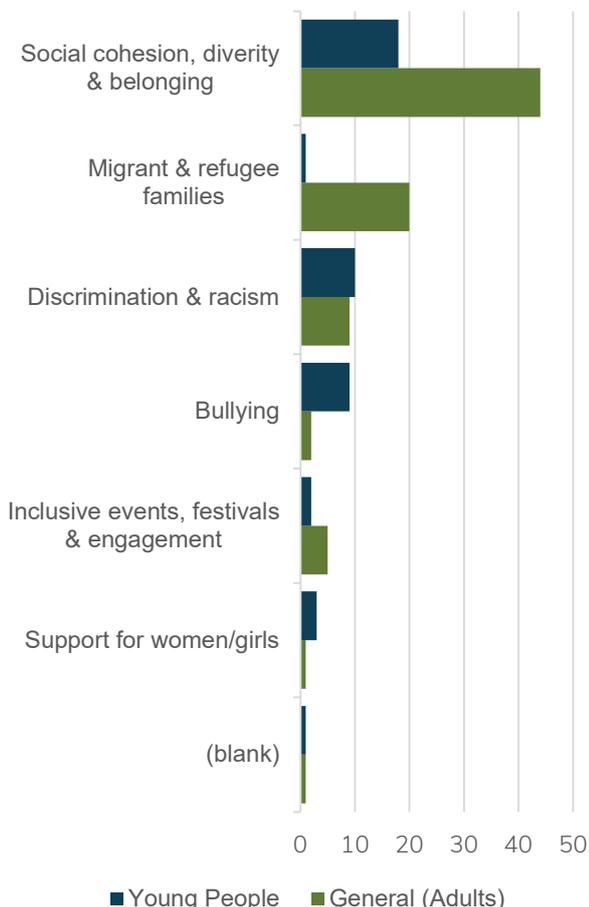
'Social cohesion, diversity & belonging' was an important sub-theme, making nearly half (49.2%) of comments. More than two-thirds of these comments came from adults or the general community.

The sub-theme related to issues of isolation, a lack of neighbourly behaviour and community

building, gender identity issues, and the challenges of integration rather than assimilation.

'I am an immigrant and I know lots of families like me... they are keen to engage your support and services because of their language and cultural barriers. I know you are working on this, but I think it is still a challenge for them' (45-54yr old woman, Coburg, Growing Together Conference).

Sub-themes in 'Inclusion & Connection' (n=126)



'Discrimination & racism' made up 15.1% of this theme. These themes were raised by members of the LGBTQIA+ and CALD communities. **'Bullying'** closely followed this sub-theme with 8.7% of comments.

'Bullying at school for older child, and my younger daughter faced some racist comments about her lunch from home. [Now she] wants packaged food' (25-34r old woman, Outreach Event, Glenroy).

'Support for women/girls' was specifically mentioned in 3.2% of comments – largely on the need to increase access to health and fitness activities.

'...continue to address access to sports for girls and culturally diverse girls. Continue 'beyond the ball' program given its success and uptake' (Service Providers).

'Heteronormative narrative is running through lots of kids' activities like colouring, books, etc. would be good to have a diverse representation of different families' (Glenroy Hub Pop-up).

'Asylum seekers and refugees struggle with a sense of belonging and dignity within the community' (Service Provider).

'Lack of "village" of support' (Uniting Church Playgroup).

Participants talked specifically about the challenges for **'Migrant & refugee families'** in 16.7% of comments. Comments highlighted the barriers to accessing services such as language or cultural differences, or program availability based on visa status.

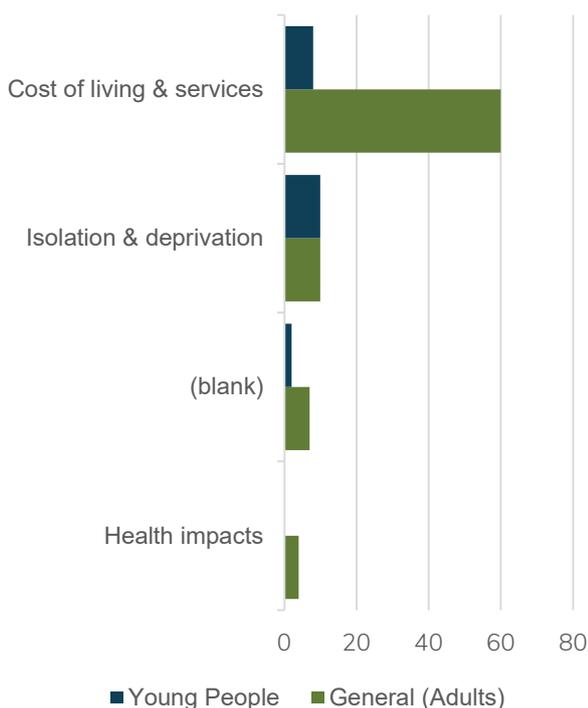
Theme 5: Financial hardship

One in every 10 comments (10.1%) talked about financial challenges.

'Cost of living & services' was by far the most common issue raised in this theme, making up two-thirds of the data (67.3%). Issues included inflation, rising household expenses, rental and mortgage costs, coupled with the costs of children's activities and services.

'Everything costs more and having to do strict budgeting/not able to send kids to extracurricular activities or school camps. This is very hard for me as father' (45-54yr old man, Outreach Event Glenroy).

Sub-themes in 'Financial Hardship' (n=101)



'Isolation & deprivation' (19.8% of comments), talked about the impacts of financial constraints – with families cutting down on social and extracurricular activities to focus on paying for the essentials.

'High rent in Fawkner means that there is no money for children's activities, as we need to pay bills and food first' (Glenroy Hub Pop-up).

The **'Health impacts'** comments (4%) mentioned access to nutrition but primarily talked about the mental and emotional impacts – the added stresses and the increased risk of family violence.

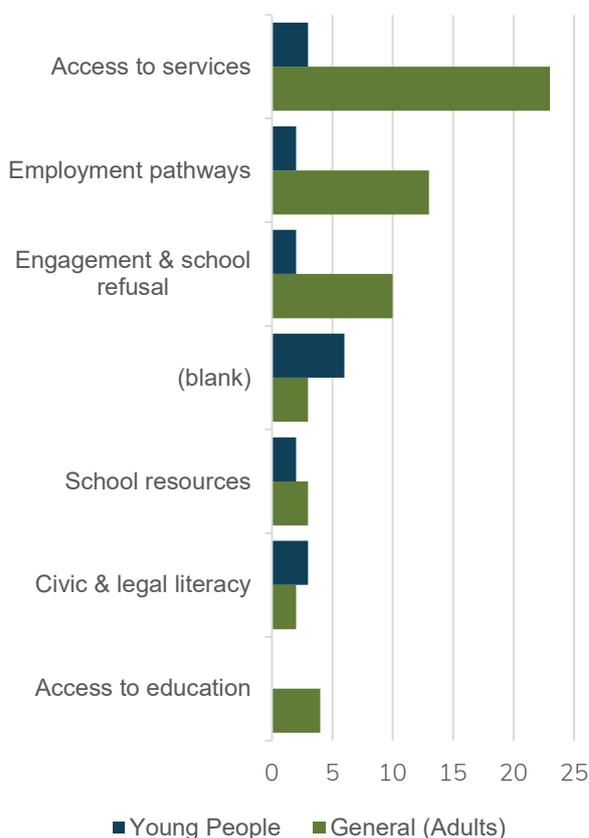
'Shame/stigma of financial issues' (Brunswick Baths Pop-up).

'Family violence, isolation, disconnection, financial pressures, fatigue' (35-44yr old woman, Uniting Church Playgroup).

Theme 6: Education, employment & youth services

In total, 76 comments (7.7% of this topic) were received that related to schools, training and programs for school-aged children.

Sub-themes in 'Education, employment & youth services' (n=76)



'Access to services' was the most common sub-theme. This issue was talked about 34.2% of the time. Services included things like sports and holiday programs for school-age children, local youth clubs, or programs that cater for young people who are legally 18 but have special needs.

'Transition programs needed especially for children with disabilities' (School Principals workshop).

'Fawkner [has] not enough programs for kids 9-15yrs' (Coburg Farmers Market Pop-up).

'Employment pathways' came next, reflecting 19.7% of comments – pointing to concerns about entering the workforce.

'Skill building workshops needed for school leavers (resume building/ career counsellors/ barista license/ white card/

safe food handling/ Working with Children Check)' (12-24yr old, Youth Ambassador).

'Civic & legal literacy' (6.6%) was related to this, with comments about work rights, and educating young people on legal rights and responsibilities.

'Engagement & school refusal' had 15.8% of comments. School Principals were particularly concerned with attendance, and connection between parents, student and the education system.

'Parental expectations and understandings of role of schools. Expectations regarding discipline and learning' (School Principals workshop).

'Over the past seven years, the disengaged young people we've supported have highlighted systemic barriers within the education system that fail to accommodate diverse learning styles and individual needs, often leading to disengagement. Many come from migrant families with limited social networks, resulting in social isolation and a lack of trusted adults beyond their immediate family...' (Service Provider).

With **'School resources'** (6.6%) and **'Access to education'** (5.3%) we heard that some of the barriers to children learning is resources at the schools, as well as the availability of schools in each area.

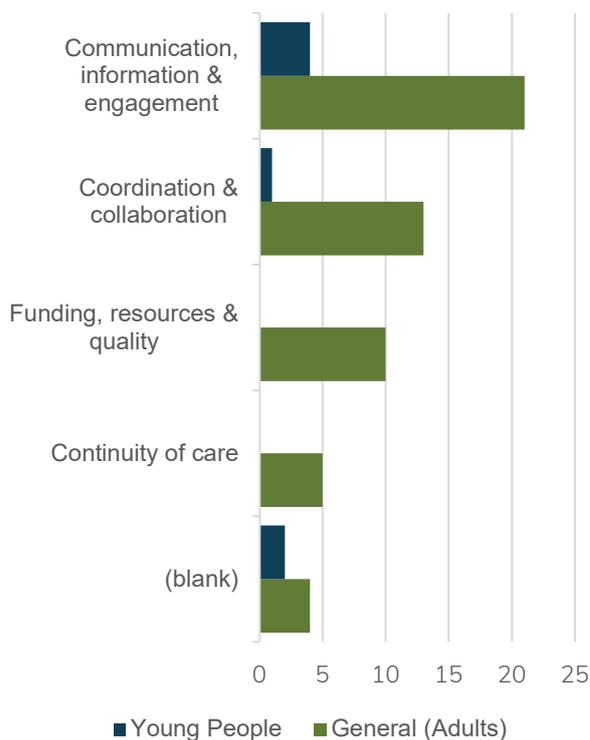
'Very high levels of neurodivergence. School systems not structured to support these YP (young people), teachers experiencing burnout' (Council staff).

Theme 7: Council service delivery

Comments about service delivery by Merri-bek City Council made up 6.2% of the responses to this topic.

Within these 60 comments, Council staff, the general community, Service Providers and Principals were the most likely to respond to this question – representing 88.3% of response.

Sub-themes in 'Council Service Delivery' (n=60)



'Communication, information & engagement' was the most common sub-theme with 41.7% of all responses. These comments related to shortfalls in knowledge sharing, about services and supports, information about raising children and health, and about hearing from the children and the community.

'There are great services, but communities don't know how to use them. For example, applying for grants is so complicated and there is no help/support for people to be helped by the same language they speak' (Community Connectors).

'Coordination & collaboration' made up 23.2% of responses – particularly the ongoing challenge of ensuring that referral pathways, partnerships, and collaboration with services remain strong and effective.

'Knowing what else is offered: connected to other organisations and services. Connected to communities to support children and families' (School Principals workshop).

'Continuity of care' (8.3%) related closely to the idea of coordination and collaboration, talking about the issue/challenge of community member falling between the gaps in services.

'Childcare services/kindergarten extra support not continuing into school' (School Principals workshop).

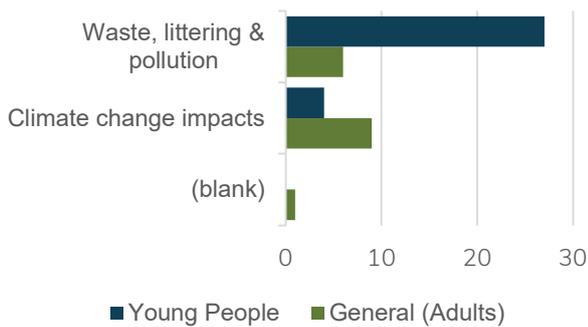
'I am too young for Oxygen and too old for other programs/activities' (Glenroy Library Pop-up).

'Funding, resources & quality' (16.7%) was primarily a concern of Council staff and related to ongoing certainty of funding, and costs of maintaining good facilities for programs.

Theme 8: Environment

In total there were 47 comments about the environment, representing 4.8% of responses.

Sub-themes in 'Environment' (n=47)



Comments commonly talked about the local issues of **'waste, litter and pollution'** (70.2%) and its impact on enjoyment of parks and greenspace in Merri-bek.

'Pollution and rubbish falling into the creek' (Basketball event survey).

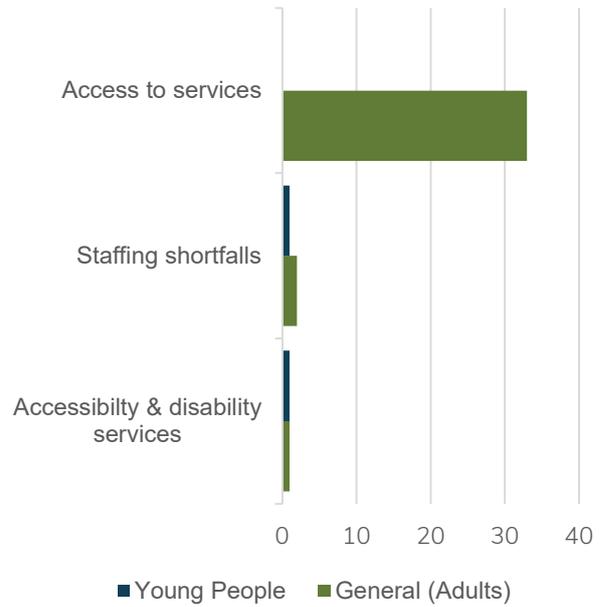
Other participants focused more on the larger picture of **'climate change impacts'** (27.7%).

'Heat, air quality, local liveability issues (green spaces, parks) are important as climate change impacts increase' (Service Provider).

Theme 9: Early years

We received 38 comments (3.8% of all comments) about early years, primarily focused on issues of access.

Sub-themes in 'Early years' (n=38)



'Access to services' made up 86.8% of comments. These comments related to issues with supply of affordable services and availability of services such as kindergarten, playgroups, maternal child health services.

'No peri-natal mental health services in Merri-bek, no support for new mums who are unwell, more mother/baby Unit beds, currently refer to NW Mental Health although this is an acute service, mental health funding has changed' (Council staff).

'Support from MCH nurses' immunisation team and support for enrolling into kinder/school' (Community Connectors).

'Not enough community-based non-profit children's centres. Too many for-profit centres' (Service Provider).

Also on access, some comments talked specifically about a lack of **'accessibility & disability services'** (5.3%). Other comments (7.9%) talked about staffing for these services, particularly **'staffing shortfalls'**.

Theme 10: Crime

We received 15 comments (1.5% of all comments) about crime being an issue or challenge for young people in Merri-bek.

The quote below is an excellent example, threading together various factors, challenges and concerns facing local communities.

recreational programs, rising living costs, and social pressures that can lead to disengagement from school and community life.’ (45-54yr old woman, Conversations website).

‘Children, young people and families in the Merri-bek and Hume areas face growing challenges linked to youth violence, social disconnection and family stress.

[Some] young people in suburbs... experience limited access to safe

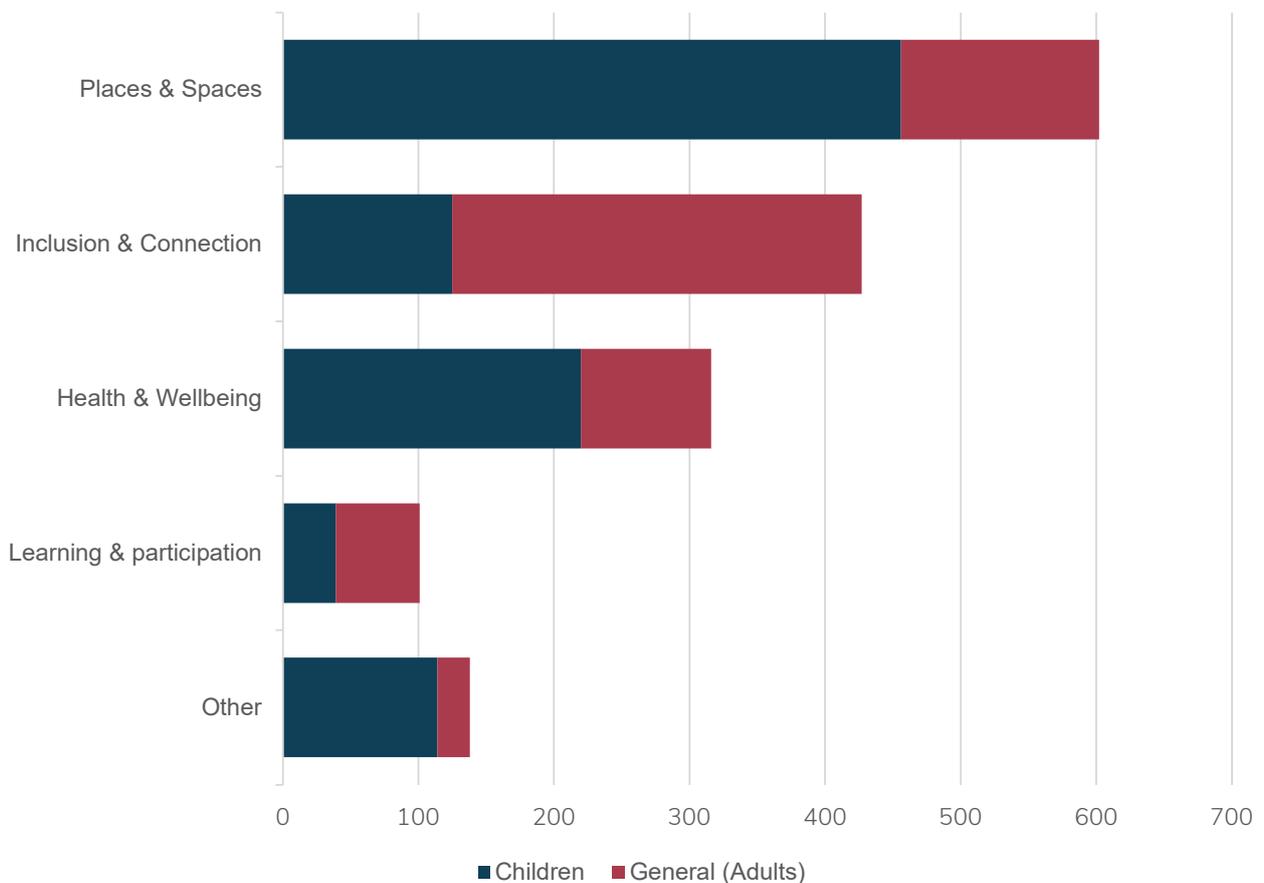
Topic 3: Solutions for Merri-Bek

This topic was explored with children, young people, adults and the general community using two broadly similar question. The simpler question, targeted at children and young people asked, ‘What would make Merri-bek a better place for all children, young people and families?’. For adults and the general community, a slightly more complex question, ‘What could Council do better to support the needs of children, young people and families?’.

In total, 1,584 comments were analysed for this question. This included 954 responses to the simplified question, and 630 responses to the more complex question.

The graph below shows the key themes from these responses, broken down to show the number of comments from the question targeted at children, and adults respectively.

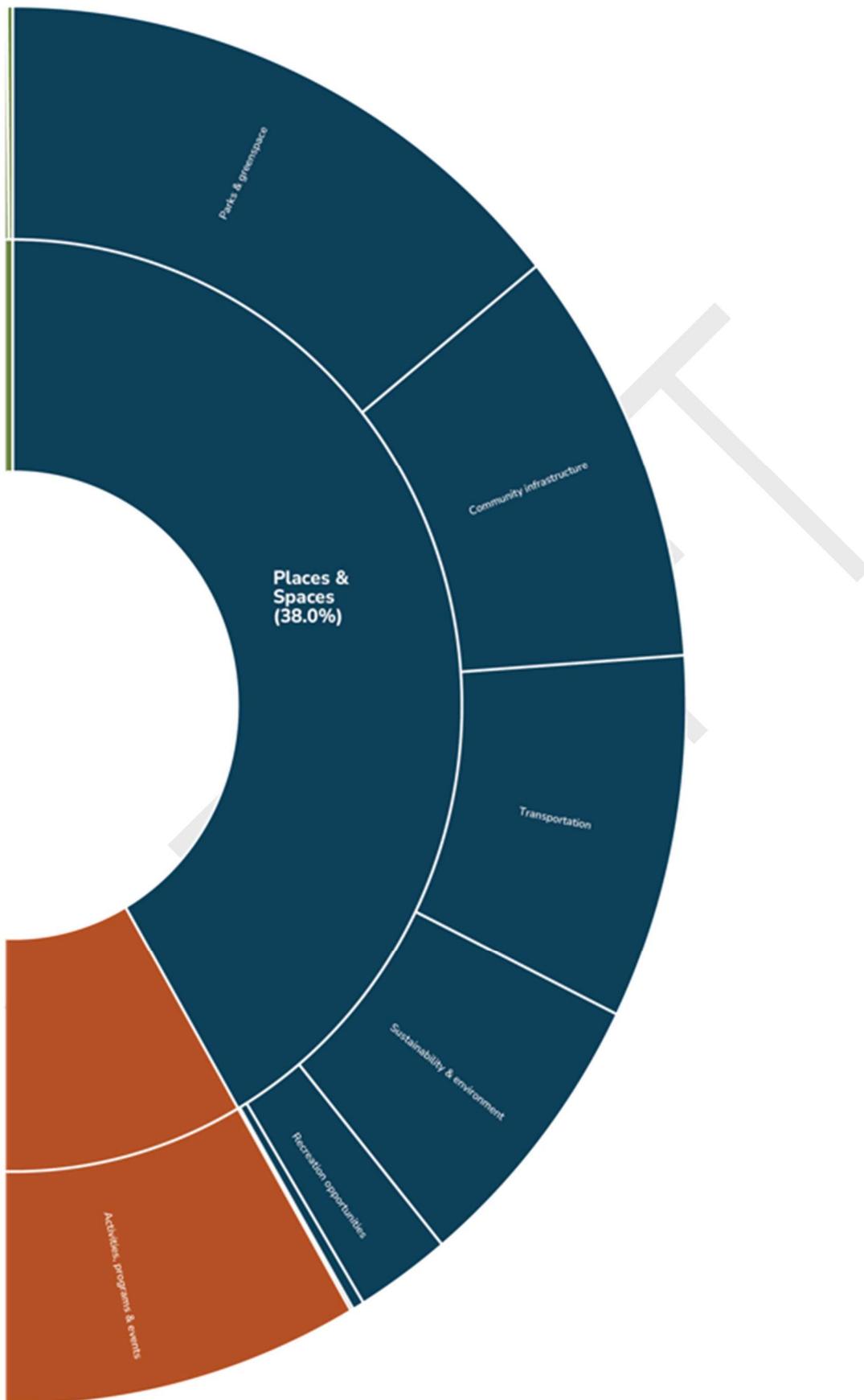
Key themes from ALL responses: Solutions Question (n=1,584)



The following two pages show a type of pie chart, with both the themes and sub-themes shown. This chart shows visually the number and weight of the different themes and sub-themes as they relate to each-other.

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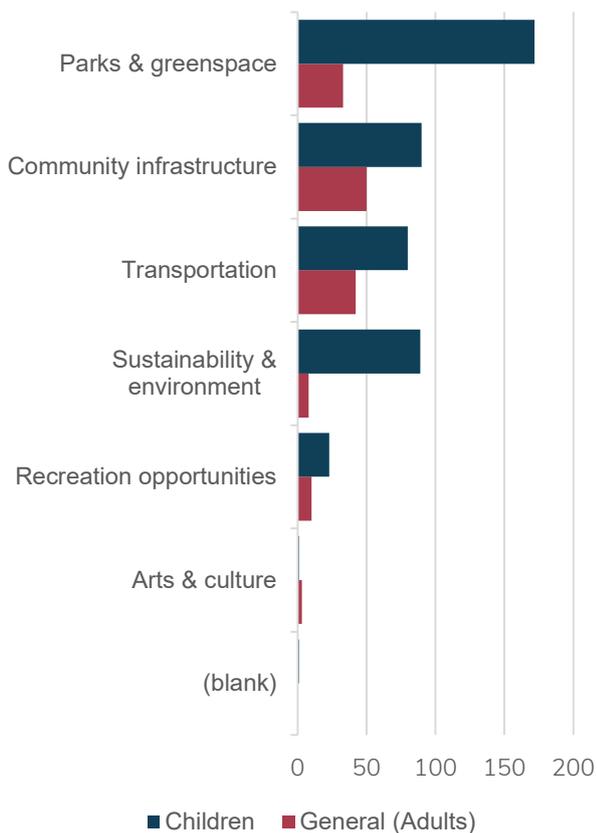


Theme 1: Places & spaces

We received 602 comments telling us improved places and spaces would

enhance the lives of children, young people and families. This represented 38% of all responses to this question. The majority of comments (75.7%) were via the children’s activities, answering the simpler version of the question.

Sub-themes in 'Places & spaces' (n=602)



205 comments (34.1%) related to ‘Parks & greenspace’, where participants talked about increasing or improving parkland, open space, children’s parks and playgrounds, and the natural areas of Merri-bek such as Merri Creek.

Participants told us they wanted more. More parks, more trees, more playgrounds, more diversity in the offering at different parks and playgrounds: catering for different ages and abilities.

‘The biggest playgrounds ever’ (0-4yr old, Coburg, Early Years service).

‘More parks with good shade, wooden equipment not metal. Playgrounds that suit all ages. More baby change facilities. More support for neurodivergent children’ (35-

44yr old man, Coburg North, Uniting Church Playgroup).

‘Add more green trees and more nature, also more parks...’ (5-11yr old, Glenroy, Primary Schools activity).

‘Community infrastructure’ was a broad sub-theme, talking about the different elements that are needed in Merri-bek. This included 140 comments, or 23.3% of the response to this theme. In summary, changes to community infrastructure included:

- more (and cleaner) public toilets
- more baby change facilities
- more drink taps
- more rubbish bins
- better lighting in streets and parks
- better shade and shelter at parks
- improved play equipment
- greening footpaths
- more ‘Street libraries’
- more Art galleries and cultural spaces
- more museums
- better disability-friendly facilities (ramps)
- hoops for bicycle parking
- more community gardens
- more community hubs
- increased operating hours for libraries
- improved early years facilities, and
- flexible and affordable community venues/spaces.

‘More diverse hubs – forward planning – where there are many young families. Parks need to adapt to older teens’ (Service Provider).



Image: Young people drawing at community engagement event.

‘Overall, the group really wanted to see more spaces particularly outdoor spaces for recreation with adequate shade, more free social activities with sport and dance the main suggestions’(Glenroy College event).

‘Transportation’ included 122 comments, or 20.3% of the responses in this theme.

While much of the feedback falls outside of the scope of the strategy, the point remains that community want to be able to get around Merri-bek in accessible, affordable and stress-free ways. This may become an advocacy opportunity for Merri-bek City Council.

‘Transport accessibility to events to be made more readily available’ (Service Provider).

‘Sustainability & environment’ grouped 97 comments, or 16.1% of the responses, in this theme. A clean or cleaner environment was the primary message in these comments. Many focused on tidying up local areas, while others focused on environmental sustainability and climate change impacts.

‘Having kind people and no littering’ (Basketball event survey).

‘Education on sustainability, water literacy and the cost of things’ (Glenroy Hub Pop-up).

‘Empowering young people to take action on Climate’ (Coburg Farmers Market Pop-up).

‘Recreation opportunities’ made up 33 comments, 5.5% of responses in this theme. This sub-theme built on the intersections of parks, transportation and infrastructure – particularly opportunities for active recreation in Merri-bek.

Participants suggested more opportunities to spend time outside, walk, ride or skate. This was for fun, to connect with family and others, and to stay healthy.

‘Safe and fun outside areas’ (12-17yr old, Fawkner Futures)

‘More places to ride and skate. And be safe’ (5-11yr old, Multicultural Workshop).

‘Arts & culture’ was the least common sub-theme, with 0.7% of responses (4 comments). Arts and craft spaces and programs, creative spaces and murals were the key points.

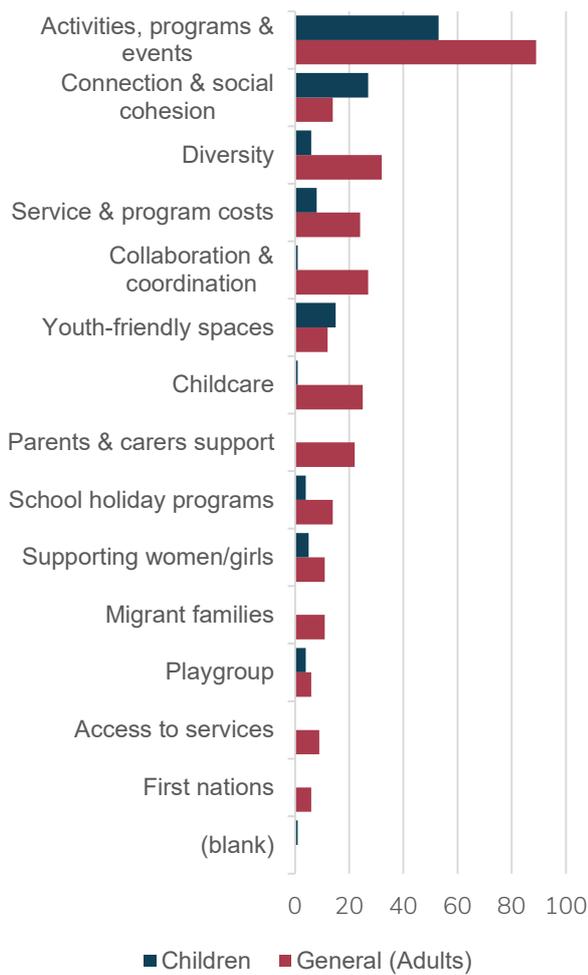
‘Making artwork - free holiday program’ (Basketball event survey).

Theme 2: Inclusion & connection

There were 427 comments that talked about becoming a more tolerant, diverse and cohesive community. This made up 27% of all responses to this question.

More than two-thirds of comments were answering the more complex question designed for adults and the general public.

Sub-themes in 'Inclusion & connection' (n=427)



- Mentoring & life skills programs
- Primary/Secondary school transition programs
- Cultural events and festivals
- Parenting support programs
- Intergenerational programs
- School support programs
- LGBTQIA+ events
- Language learning programs
- Rhymetime/toddler sessions
- Free or cheap events for young people
- Programs for children with sensory issues
- Youth crime prevention programs
- Programs and events about inclusivity (tackling racism, sexism, queer identities and diversity)

'Continue creating opportunities for community members to connect with others who may be facing similar challenges in silence.'

The need for extra and accessible **'School holiday programs'** was highlighted in 18 comments (4.2% of responses).

'Free school holiday program would be particularly helpful for families who might work whilst their children are at primary school. The cost of using the program is very prohibitive' ((Asylum Seeker Resource Centre Briefing).

'Activities, programs and events' was a large proportion, with 142 comments or 33.3% of the responses in this theme. This grouping included a range of suggestions for programming to support children, young people and families. Suggestions included:

- Health & wellbeing programs
- Cooking programs
- Movies & games nights
- Meet & greets
- Family events
- Festivals
- Carnivals
- Events at skateparks
- Night markets
- Kids clubs
- Smaller local events
- Free social activities
- Programs for middle years children

Additionally, **'Parents & carers support'** made up 5.2% of the responses (22 comments). Education on parenting, mental and emotional health support, connection, and networking were all features of these conversations.

'Forums in schools on parenting (e.g. on-line safety – parents are not empowered and don't want to upset children), offer a road-map on parenting. Address the stigma that parents might feel and focus on prevention approach to avoid stigma. Hosting at the school and online as a good option' (School Principals workshop)

'Parenting education programs like Circle of Security' (Brunswick Library Pop-up).

'Connection & social cohesion' was the second-most common sub-theme, with 41 comments (9.6% of responses in this theme). Participants talked about building a sense of community and belonging – to tackle isolation, unsociable and discriminatory behaviour.

'Better ways to connect with others' (12-17yr old, Queer Collective).

'[Tackling] racism' (Basketball event survey).

'Diversity' followed, with 38 comments (8.9%). Participants talked specifically in these comments about inclusion, queer identities, multicultural communities and people living with disability.

'Privileging youth voices from the asylum seeker community and offering leadership programs for young people seeking asylum. Access can be an issue though as other priorities and home commitments often take priority to 'extracurricular' activities' (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre Briefing).

'We need more education on LGBTQIA+ Lots of kids think it's a joke- its not!' (5-11yr old, Children's Forum).

'Special needs: Hire professionals to help design a program to be accessible and inclusive; Also, co-design programs with special needs kids and their parents' (Glenroy Hub Pop-up).

Building on comments about diversity, **'Supporting women/girls'** was specifically talked about in 16 comments (3.7% of responses). These related to connection, access to sports opportunities, tackling gender-discrimination and toxic masculinity, and safe spaces for women and girls such as women only fitness areas or clubs.

'Look at opportunities particularly for multicultural girls Looking at ways to engage boys in conversations around gender equality and healthy masculinities' (Service Provider).

'Make community sport safer (for girls and gender diverse young people), more accessible, financially affordable – reduces screen time, improves mental health etc.' (Council staff).

'More girls in sport' (Basketball event survey).

Building further on comments about diversity, **'Migrant families'** were another important group mentioned in 2.6% of responses (11 comments). These comments talked about addressing the additional and specific barriers that these families experience in accessing services or connecting with community.

'Further breakdown the CALD - this banner is too vague and does not accurately 'see' or support each person and YP with their specific cultural or identity needs' (Service Provider)

'Offer culturally safe parenting and early years programs, co-designed with CALD and Aboriginal communities. Continue promoting inclusive communication, translation services, and representation in Council planning and events' (Service Provider).

'Service & program costs' included 32 comments (7.5%) focused on community need for free or subsidised programs, event and services – to provide for greater access and inclusion of vulnerable communities.

'More affordable health services - GP and dental for young people including young people with children who are on Centrelink incomes, experiencing entrenched poverty and disadvantage' (Service Provider).

'Council could best support children, young people, and families in Merri-bek by increasing access to affordable, quality childcare and early education, providing programs that support mental health and wellbeing, offering opportunities for social inclusion, and ensuring services are inclusive and accessible to culturally and linguistically diverse communities' (Service Provider).

There were also 6 comments (1.4%) that talked specifically about **'First Nations'**. Comments focused on celebrating First Nations culture and knowledge.

'Local early childhood services could provide an acknowledgement of Country with the children every day, embed First Nations culture all year round, not just for a single day or event, culturally safe curriculum' (First Nations Advisory Briefing).

'Collaboration & coordination' made up 6.6% of comments (28 responses). This sub-theme focused on how Council works with others, plans and funds our partnerships and services.

'Co-ordination of like-minded programs. Compliment and work together to meet needs of different people' (Service Provider).

'I hate to say money, but I think targeted funding for overarching support for children

and young people. I think programs that support educators and other services to be more inclusive of First Nations perspectives without burdening that community' (Service Provider).

'Youth-friendly spaces' included 27 comments (6.3% of responses in this theme). Comments talked to the need to third-spaces or places where young people can feel safe to connect, relax or seek support.

'Extending drop-in places to provide safe space especially for young people, and to allow for access to supports when people 'want/ need' (Service Provider).

'More creative outlets for youth (e.g. jam room at oxygen)' (12-24yr old, Youth Ambassadors).

'Childcare' was mentioned in 26 comments (6.1% of responses). Comments largely focused on providing more childcare options, at affordable rates.

Due to...development in these areas they have attracted a huge rate of couples and young families, but families [are] at the mercy of private long day care facilities which continue to raise their exorbitant fees.

I'd like to see the family strategy engage more with the planning strategy to be ahead of these growth challenges, rather than behind' (35-44yr old woman, Pascoe Vale South, Conversations website).

'Playgroup' made up 2.3% of response in this theme (10 comments). Like the discussion about childcare, participants want to see more available playgroup options.

'Focus(ed) playgroups for families to catch up on kids development/social skills for families in/post domestic violence situation' (Parent, Welcome Baby to Country event).

'Access to services' was mentioned in 9 comments (2.1% of comments). Participants talked about a focus on equitable access and reduction in waitlists.

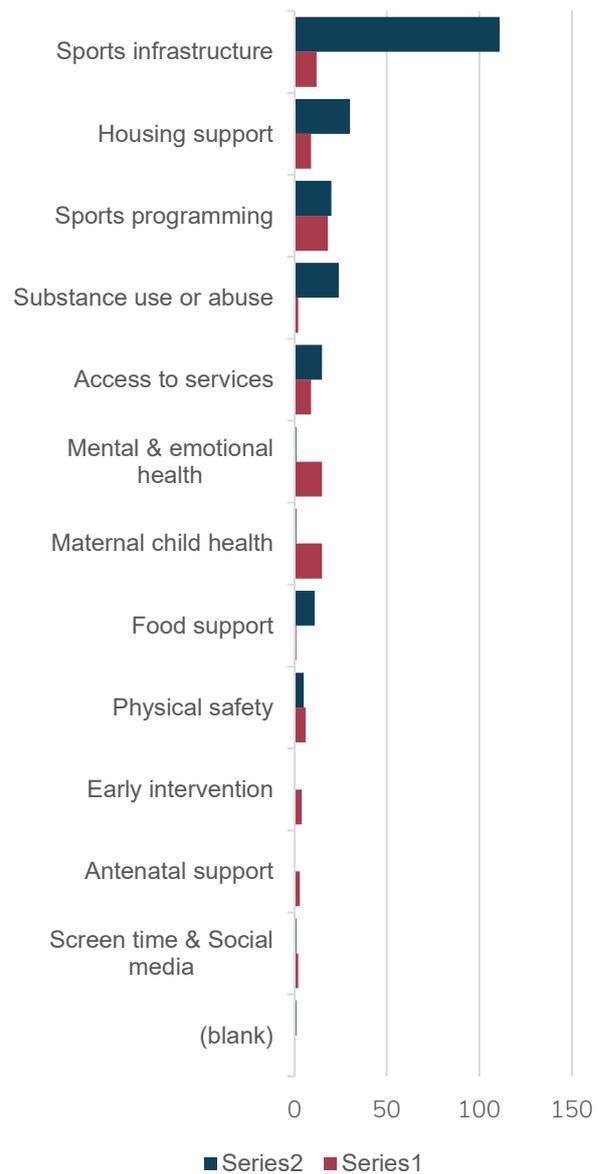
'Ensure all suburbs receive equitable service' (LGBTQIA+ Families Pop-up)

'Cut short the waiting lists in Allied health services, so the families can get access ASAP?' (Service Provider).

Theme 3: Health & wellbeing

There were 316 comments that talked about improving physical, mental and emotional health outcomes. This made up 19.9% of all responses to this question. More than two-thirds of comments were answering the simpler question designed for children and young people.

Sub-themes in 'Health & wellbeing' (n=316)



'Sports infrastructure' was the dominant sub-theme, making up 38.9% of responses (123 comments) in this theme.

This sub-theme was almost entirely populated by comments from children and young people. Responses included many comments focused on pools, basketball courts and stadiums.

'Improve sports like soccer, footy, basketball and more getting new balls' (5-11yr old, Community Vision activity).

'More sport facilities for teens for group kinds of sport are needed' (Community Connectors event).

'Sports programming' was closely related and made up an additional 12% of comments (38 comments). These comments were more about the offering at sport facilities, rather than the need for more facilities or equipment. Ideas included:

- Boxing classes
- Martial arts gyms
- More fitness programs
- Sports events and tournaments
- Camps for basketball
- More teams
- Dancing
- All abilities programs
- Swimming lessons
- Playgroups where parents can exercise
- More junior soccer

'Housing support' and **'food support'** made up 12.3% (39 comments) and 3.8% (12 comments) of responses respectively. While both sub-themes related to cost of living, housing support was more focused on the risks of homelessness and food support more focused on food security and healthy eating habits.

'More effort into giving homeless people homes and jobs' (5-11yr old, Coburg, Community Vision activity).

'Affordable housing for those in need, at affordable rates' (Brunswick Library Pop-up).

'Substance use and abuse' made up 8.2% (26 comments) of this theme. Comments largely focused on reducing the impacts of vaping, cigarettes, and alcohol.

'Less illegal substance use' (Young person, Youth Drop-in program).

Some comments talked about providing more support for substance abuse.

'Mental health awareness groups as well as drug and alcohol support groups' (12-24yr old, Youth Ambassadors).

'Access to services' was discussed in 7.6% of responses (24 comments) to this theme. Participants mainly talked about the need to improve access to health care (like hospitals and GPs).

'As a parent of a neurodivergent child with autism and ADHD who attends primary school, and as someone who wasn't born in Australia, I've found it quite difficult to understand and access the systems that support children and families.'

'I'd like to see the Council's strategy place stronger focus on supporting families like mine who are navigating additional barriers language, cultural differences, and complex systems around education, health, and disability' (35-44yr old man, Hadfield, Conversations website).

Building on advice about access to services, a small number of comments (4, 1.3%) talked about the importance of **'early intervention'**.

'We know that earlier support, from the earliest age, can avoid later issues in life. It's important to keep this in mind when making decisions as to where funding goes' (Service Provider).

'Mental & emotional health' represented 5.1% of responses in this theme (16 comments). Participants told us mental health needs to be affordable, accessible, appropriate in format, and culturally sensitive.

'Mental Health programs for kids' (Glenroy Library Pop-up).

'Mental health sessions in multiple languages focusing on different topics' (Community Connectors).

'Support mothers' mental health with events, workshops, conversation cafes: they should be able to bring children; timing is important...more in the morning and in school holidays' (Glenroy Hub Pop-up).

Building on mental and emotional health, 3 comments (0.9%) called out **'screen time & social media'** impacts specifically.

‘Physical safety’ was represented in 11 comments (3.5% of responses in this theme). Comments largely talked about street lighting – which was also raised in the Community infrastructure and transportation sub-themes under ‘Places & spaces).

‘Better lighting at Fawkner Station/ work on the building’ (12-24yr old, Youth Ambassadors).

Overlapping mental and physical health, one service provide has advice about childhood maltreatment.

‘Council should formulate a local response to the Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study. Unfortunately, child abuse is the single most impactful issue for children, and Merri-Bek could lead the way’ (Service Provider).

‘Maternal child health’ made up 5.1% of responses, (16 comments). Participants advocated for more of these services, along with some specific advice.

‘Outreach MCH program for families with barriers to engagement’ (Council staff).

‘We are an LGBTQIA+ family and have had some negative experiences with the MCH service. Having some training of MCH nurses would be great, or even a dedicated person’ (35-44yr old, Fawkner Festa).

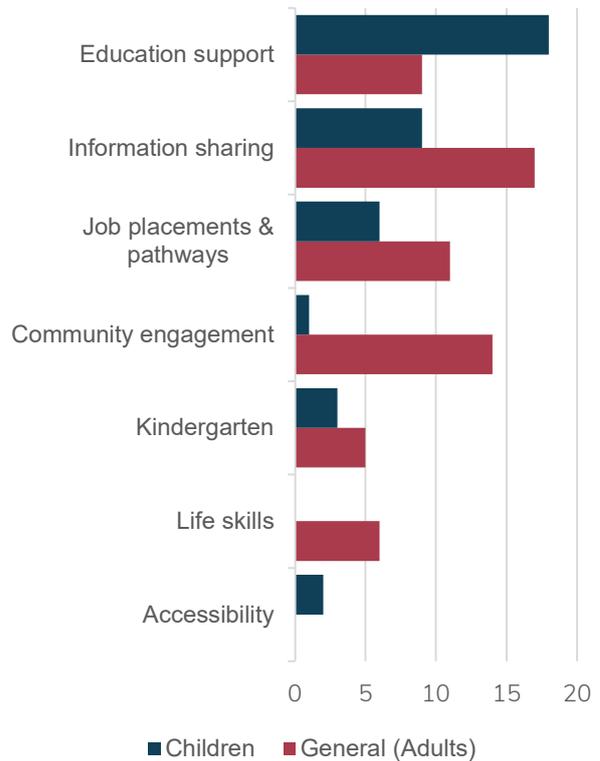
Building on this, a few comments (3, 0.9%) talked about **‘antenatal support’**.

‘Need to capture the antenatal period and support, include pregnancy in future Strategy’ (First Nations Advisory briefing).

Theme 4: Learning & participation

There were 101 comments that talked about the importance of getting children, young people and families excited about lifelong learning, equipping students to succeed in the adult world, and getting involved. These comments made up 6.4% of all responses to this question. One-third of comments were in answer to the simpler question designed for children and young people.

Sub-themes in 'Learning & participation' (n=101)



‘Education support’ was discussed in 26.7% of the comments (27 responses). This sub-theme came up more often in the simple question than the general question for adults. More schools, better access to schools, and more supports within schools, were all raised.

‘More support in school and in studies’ (Young People Drop-in).

‘Some kind of tutoring groups/services to help with school’ (Brunswick Baths Pop-up).

Building on the idea of support for education, **‘Accessibility’** was discussed in 3 other comments.

‘Improved safety, learning and wellbeing are the big ones but also more support for kids with disabilities in public schools and just generally in the community’ (12-17yr old, Coburg, Children’s Reference Group).

‘Information sharing’ included 26 comments (25.6% of responses in this theme), and refers to communications and information activities to build knowledge of things like:

- council services and support
- the Merri-bek community

- current issues for children and young people
- sporting and social opportunities
- health literacy and healthy foods
- parenting skills
- holiday programs and daycare

'Advertise more to youth – more sponsored posts on social media/targeted posts/ student advocates/ parents' (12-24yr old, Youth Ambassadors).

and providing pathways into (local) employment.

'Provide more training pathways e.g. barista course' (12-17yr old, Coburg High).

'Provide support for resume making and job interview preparation' (Glenroy Hub Pop-up).

Building on this, participants (6 comments, 5.9%) also talked about mentoring and **'Life skills'** as important to set up young people for success as adults.



'Community engagement' made up 14.9% of responses (15 comments). Participants focused on ways that Council could build stronger relationships with community and recommended a focus on young people.

'Coming into schools to talk about services' (12-17yr old, Coburg High).

'[We need] services designed and led with community - what does representation look like on steering committees / working groups?' (Service Provider).

'Education on life skills for young people e.g. work laws and taxes' (14-16yr old, Coburg High).

'Having more workshops on life skills like resilience, emotional strength, time management, etc.' (Community Connectors).

'Kindergarten' made up 7.9% of response in this theme (8 comments). Comments were varied, with some asking for more Council-run services, more outreach services to connect with migrant families and a bush kinder.

'Job placements & pathways' had 17 comments (16.8% of responses). This sub-theme related to employment opportunities,
Image: Young people participating in the Children's Forum activity

Next steps

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this engagement process!

How this report will be used

This report will be used to share with Council and decision-makers how the engagement process went, and what we heard.

The report, and its supporting data will be used by the project team at Merri-bek to begin a draft Children, Young People & Families Strategy. Another round of engagement on the draft Strategy is currently planned in the first half of 2026.

Community feedback that falls outside of the scope of the Strategy will (where possible) be shared with relevant parts of Merri-bek City Council – to advocate for your concerns and ideas.

For further information

To keep up to date with our project, follow us via our conversations website:

<https://conversations.merri-bek.vic.gov.au/children-young-people-and-families-strategy>