

Covid-19: how we were affected

The Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on every part of our work during 2020-21.

Crisis support

When the second wave of Covid-19 cases hit Victoria in 2020, our community was significantly affected. Moreland had the seventh highest number of cases in the state, by local government area. We had 3 of the 10 Victorian 'priority' postcodes.

But we were a key part of the multi-agency effort to help get the virus under control.

We supported the lead agency in the emergency response and relief activities. This was the then Department of Health and Human Services.

We provided an incident management team and sites for initial testing blitz operations. We helped transform CB Smith Reserve into a drive-through testing site and incident control centre. This site was used for a mobile testing blitz early in the second wave.

We provided other facilities and resources to support the State Government's response as the year went on. This included:

- 21 council facilities for testing, rapid community engagement and other emergency coordination operations
- around 45 officers to assist with the emergency response operations
- assets to support State Government messaging.

We established a local Covid-19 coordination group of Moreland's Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee.

Members of our senior management team performed Municipal Recovery Manager duties throughout 2020-21. They worked in partnership with the State Government and local authorities.

We worked in collaboration with:

- Merri Health
- Northern Health
- Victoria Police
- Ambulance Victoria
- Australian Defence Force
- Victoria State Emergency Service.

Our services

During 2020-21 we built on the service changes we implemented at the start of the pandemic. We faced many challenges in providing services for the community. This was because of the ongoing changes in restrictions and several lockdowns.

Most of our core services continued. We kept providing essential support for older or vulnerable residents. We increased services such as providing meals and food relief.

Other essential services continued to be a priority. These included:

- waste collection
- maintaining roads

- open space maintenance.

People used our parks and open spaces more during the pandemic. As a result, we increased the frequency of bin collections there. We also adjusted our maintenance programs, including mowing and cleaning. This was possible due to the gardeners and street cleaners we employed through the Working for Victoria scheme (see below).

We put measures in place to ensure we delivered services in a Covid-safe way. We ensured we acted in line with State Government directions.

We adapted many services to meet the changing needs of the community. We spoke to residents about the impact of the pandemic on them. This telephone and online survey provided valuable information. We also completed a secondary impact assessment. Then we developed a Covid-19 Recovery Plan. This covers a broad range of actions we will take to support the community during and after the pandemic.

Covid-19 has highlighted inequalities. It has exacerbated existing barriers some in our community face. These include:

- food security
- access to employment and housing
- financial security
- social isolation
- racism
- gender inequality
- discrimination
- social cohesion
- digital inclusion.

It has also highlighted the strength of our local community. Community groups have been at the forefront of providing support to those in need. They have shown the resilience of the local service sector and our community. We established a grants stream to support community-led initiatives and groups involved in response and recovery efforts. These Thrive Community Grants gave a total of more than \$96,000 to 21 Moreland community groups.

We worked with these groups to coordinate the local emergency relief program. We provided direct food and material aid, and personal support to over 400 recipients. This included distributing thousands of masks to our most vulnerable community members.

This aid was distributed through the Community and Social Isolation Initiative. It was funded by the former Department of Health and Human Services, now the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

We also established the Moreland Food and Material Aid Network to coordinate local emergency relief.

We gave a \$10,000 grant to the Salvation Army and supported Community Information Services Moreland (\$40,000). The Northern Community Legal Service was also provided with resources (\$30,000) to establish a legal clinic for international students. We supported an anti-racism campaign and provided internal resources to support relief programs. This included council facilities, staff and technology.

Libraries

Four of our 5 libraries were closed or operated reduced hours for extended periods during 2020-21. These forced closures and restrictions led to a 67% decrease in library attendance.

But we continued our delivery and click and collect services, with:

- 13,461 items supplied by contactless home delivery in our Books to Your Door service
- 1,706 items supplied by a contactless click and collect service
- 36,886 items delivered to the homes of older or housebound residents.

Our Home Library Service for older or homebound members of the community continued whenever restrictions would allow.

We continued to help residents improve their digital literacy. We held 219 one-on-one telephone sessions during the year. In May 2021 we held 32 in-person sessions.

Our iPad lending scheme continued. Sixteen community members were able to stay connected and increase their digital capabilities through free iPad loans.

We continued holding a range of events and storytimes online using Facebook and YouTube. Our social groups continued using Microsoft Teams.

Leisure and aquatic centres

Covid-19 restrictions again had a significant impact on attendances and memberships at our Active Moreland venues. Our centres had to close on several occasions. When they opened they often had ongoing capacity restrictions.

We automatically suspended memberships during closures. We also froze membership fees for 2020-21. We also provided online workouts for members and the community to help them keep active.

Young people, older people and families

We continued our modified Maternal and Child Health service for families during 2020-21. We provided a mix of short face-to-face consultations and telehealth, online support groups and breastfeeding support during this time. Our immunisation services kept running with extra health and hygiene measures in place.

Our Oxygen Youth Space had to close during the lockdowns. Our team provided direct support to Moreland's young people in different ways. These included phone and video calls, and text messages. We continued programs online.

Social isolation in our older residents was also a focus. We maintained essential services including:

- direct support for people at home
- delivery of meals
- transport.

We conducted all these services using Covid-safe practices. We adapted our service delivery to meet the restrictions at any given time. We implemented a range of initiatives, including:

- online programs
- phone based social support
- small group programs.

Community engagement

The Covid-19 pandemic presented challenges for how we connect with our community. But we are committed to delivering high-quality engagement to our community about the decisions that affect them.

Residents, workers and visitors are focused on their health and wellbeing. Many are also experiencing economic stress. In response, we changed how we engage. We did this to maximise access to information. We provided a variety of ways to hear from people. And enable them to have conversations about local issues in person and online.

It is important to Moreland's recovery that we stay connected with our community and keep talking about local issues. The number of people engaging with Conversations Moreland has continued to grow. Conversations Moreland is our online community and digital engagement site. In the 6 months to 30 June 2021, 35,761 people visited Conversations Moreland and 2,540 people followed at least one project. This was up from 5,211 visitors and 345 total followers at 30 June 2020.

How we engaged differently

We hosted Covid-safe engagement opportunities when it was possible to meet in person. We provided QR check-ins, masks and sanitiser stations. We also met social distancing signage and requirements.

During lockdowns, when it was not possible to meet with our community in person, we provided:

- interactive online workshops and forums
- digital engagement opportunities
- dedicated times when our community could call and talk with us about local issues.

All our projects had a council officer assigned. Community members could contact this person at any time for information or to have their questions answered.

Major projects delivered in the past 12 months

We delivered the following during the pandemic:

- over 10 Covid-safe pop-up events
- over 150 telephone interviews
- over 20 online workshops
- postcard drawing activities
- 5 community forums
- digital engagement activities.

We also appointed Moreland's first ever community panel. Forty-four randomly selected local residents provided in-depth feedback on our 10-year community vision and 4-year council plan.

They also contributed to the development of key plans including our:

- 4-year budget
- 10-year asset plan
- 10-year financial plan.

They participated in 3 full-day, in-person Covid-safe deliberative workshops. They also did 8 shorter online workshops.

Other notable projects we engaged our community about in the last 12 months include:

- the impacts of Covid-19 to help us develop a recovery plan
- kerbside waste projects
- Moreland Nature Plan
- Fawkner Leisure Centre upgrade

- various streetscape and local park improvement projects.

Being kind

We created our Be Kind campaign in 2019-20 to support community morale and make sure locals did not feel alone or isolated. We continued this work during the first half of 2020-21. As the second wave continued, we increased our communications to this audience.

We promoted health information, as well as information about relief and support services. We shared our targeted messages in our usual ways. This included our:

- website
- social media
- an extra edition of our *Inside Moreland* magazine.

We also used other methods of reaching vulnerable groups. This included mail outs and information for local service providers and networks.

We continued our Moreland Connectors program. We used this to engage with people from established and newly-arrived migrant communities. We engaged 7 residents with strong networks in their communities. They shared essential health, restriction and service information in their language to over 7,000 community members. These were people who would otherwise not likely be engaged by our communications. These messages were shared through closed forums including:

- Facebook groups
- WhatsApp
- Viber
- WeChat.

We also provided updates to local service providers and community organisations. They could sign up to receive our Covid-19 community support newsletter.

Support for businesses

Continued lockdowns were very hard on our local businesses. In response, we implemented our Boost for Business programs and activities throughout 2020-21. We supported over 3,400 businesses through this difficult time.

We awarded 2 rounds of Covid-19 Community and Business Development Grants. In total, we awarded 257 grants worth \$550,000. These went to a range of local businesses, from hospitality, retail and the arts to the manufacturing and services sectors.

Our Love Moreland Buy Local campaign continued. This encouraged the community to buy their goods and services locally. The campaign's online interactive map showed the location and details of Moreland businesses. As at 30 June 2021, over 700 businesses were featured. In the 2020-21 year, the site received 34,050 page views.

Our other programs to support businesses included:

- a food business compliance initiative supporting hospitality businesses to be Covid safe
- online digital training
- a shopfront improvement program
- the MoreSpace vacant shop initiative, which was replicated by other local governments.

We also worked intensively with hospitality businesses to enable safe and accessible outdoor dining opportunities. From October 2020 to June 2021, our Love Moreland Dine Local program:

- issued 299 footway trading permits to hospitality businesses
- provided 34 businesses with temporary and short-term parklets in Brunswick, Coburg, Pascoe Vale and Hadfield
- enabled 5 road closure permits, all in Brunswick
- issued permits for 7 additional temporary food truck locations across Moreland.

Our surveys revealed significant community and business support for the Love Moreland Dine Local program. We have extended it for 2021-22. This will allow hospitality businesses to apply for extended outdoor dining opportunities.

We also continued to support businesses to access accurate, relevant and up-to-date information. We shared frequent email newsletters and social media posts. We provided direct help through our business support hotline.

Our other initiatives included business and health and wellbeing webinars. We also offered online networking opportunities.

We are developing recovery programs to help create jobs in Moreland. We are directing more of our spending to local businesses and social enterprises. We have a program to develop and grow micro-businesses that employ fewer than 5 employees. These businesses make up more than 80% of Moreland's total businesses.

We supported registered food businesses and over 200 other businesses by waiving registration fees in 2020-21. We also reduced assessments due to lock downs and other restrictions facing businesses.

Support for the arts

We took a variety of actions to respond to the impact of Covid-19 on our arts and culture sector in 2020-21.

We developed an arts recovery grants program called Flourish. We provided over \$200,000 to 30 projects by local artists and arts organisations.

We produced a range of festivals and events to support and encourage the community. This included the Brunswick Music Festival which sold out in record time. Festival events were free or low cost. It supported hundreds of musicians and local music venues.

We delivered the Community Creator program. This helped artists, businesses and community organisations by providing paid employment opportunities. We matched 5 local artists with 5 local businesses and community organisations.

Our Making Space residency program connected local creatives with temporary spaces. We delivered Making Space with RMIT and the Brunswick Design District. It offered up to 20 short-term creative residencies in 2021. Each residency included the use of a space for up to 4 weeks and cash to support the residency and the development of projects.

Workforce impacts

Our workplace pandemic planning continued to inform our response to Covid-19.

We continued delivering our services in different ways in 2020-21. We maintained our focus on safety to keep staff and customers in our front-facing services protected.

Many staff continued to be redeployed from services that were unable to function as usual. This involved staff retraining or taking on new duties. These duties supported:

- adjusted service delivery
- business continuity
- relief and recovery.

We maintained our safety net for leave during the pandemic, including wage guarantees for casual and part-time staff.

At the end of the Working for Victoria initiative in April 2021, we had employed approximately 308 people. This initiative was funded by the State Government. It helped Victorians who had lost their jobs during the Covid-19 recession find work. It helped us support the Moreland community through:

- maintenance and renewal to our parks and open spaces, sports and recreation facilities, libraries, maternal and child health centres, seniors centre and other community venues
- cleaning of our assets, including graffiti removal
- food and meal delivery services to support vulnerable people
- waste management and signage work
- communications to support engagement and outreach to the community. These included culturally and linguistically diverse engagement roles
- local business and community advisory and recovery services
- public health and wellbeing compliance officers
- environmental, waterways and heritage sites community education and outreach work
- supervisory and human resources expertise to manage onboarding and delivery of Working for Victoria programs.

We offered some further temporary and ongoing roles to our Working for Victoria staff at the end of the scheme.