COVID-19 SOCIAL & ECONOMIC IMPACTS

City of Melton

2020 - 2021

CITY OF
MELTON

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Melton City Council acknowledges Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples living and working in Melton.

Council recognises the people of the Kulin Nations as the original custodians of the land now known as City of Melton.

On behalf of the municipality, Council pays respect to their Elders, past, present, and future.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the Melton City Council staff, Councillors, local service providers and community groups, who contributed valuable insights which informed the development of this document.

Contact

If you have any enquiries regarding this document, please contact Melton City Council Customer Service on 9747 7200.

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MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR

On behalf of Melton City Council, I am proud to deliver the COVID-19 Social and Economic Impacts Report, a detailed document highlighting the breadth of impact experienced by our community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social distancing restrictions.

Given the extent, and long-term impact of hardship experienced by our community, Melton City Council has a responsibility to keep abreast of emerging community needs and to identify evidence-informed responses that support our community on the road to recovery.

This report aims to raise awareness, and promote understanding of the range, extent, and experience of social and economic impacts across the municipality, by highlighting the significant financial hardship and wellbeing impacts felt by the whole community.

It reveals that some groups have disproportionately experienced impacts throughout the pandemic, including barriers to service access and support for people with disabilities and their carers, along with increased mental health impacts for people living alone during prolonged periods of isolation.

The long-term impacts of the pandemic are still being revealed and need to be monitored closely. However, this report indicates that ongoing experiences of financial hardship, mental health issues and delayed physical health needs will place ongoing strain on the City of Melton's fragile local service system that should be readily available to support the community with their acute needs during recovery.

The information contained in this report will enable Council to respond to community needs not only during the pandemic, but also well into the recovery phase, strengthening our community's resilience in the face of future challenges.

The report will also reinforce Councils ability to advocate to State and Federal governments for timely, local responses to these impacts, which will in turn address our community's acute and long-term needs.

Cr Kathy Majdlik GAICD
Mayor, City of Melton

CEO FOREWORD

The City of Melton Community has shown significant strength and resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to this shock event, the introduction of social distancing restrictions and lockdowns resulted in a range of social and economic stressors on communities in the City of Melton.

The social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are vast and striking and a common theme within the hardship articulated in this report is the exacerbation of social inequality evidenced by the disproportionate impacts on specific community cohorts.

Council will use the information collated within this report to inform recovery actions and initiatives that will sit under the strategies of our Council and Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025. This will enable Council to embed actions for the recovery of our community in our program planning, service delivery and infrastructure development not only over the next four years, but beyond.

Council, along with local community service organisations and agencies, community groups, and residents have come together throughout the pandemic, and inspired me with their generous support for one another and our broader community.

We as Council are well placed to not only partner with State and Federal governments, but also to bring together the community and local service sector to deliver a collaborative recovery effort. This will enable us to further develop community resilience and ensure we are better placed to face future challenges together.

Kelvin Tori,

Chief Executive Officer, City of Melton

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 is a highly contagious infectious disease which first emerged in Australia in January 2020. The City of Melton has been living under the weight of the pandemic for a significant period of time. The Australian and Victorian Governments implemented public health measures (social distancing restrictions) as of the 12 March 2020 to ensure that the hospital system could provide critical treatment to those who require it, and hence to limit the number of COVID-19 related deaths. In addition to the shock event of the pandemic, these social distancing restrictions have resulted in a range of multidimensional and rapid social and economic stressors on communities in the City of Melton. Data and stakeholder feedback contained in this report was collected between March 2020 and August 2021, with a focus on the 2020 March – October pandemic outbreak period.

The City of Melton community has experienced significant hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social distancing restrictions. Council has an integral role in facilitating the recovery of its community post pandemic, alongside State and Federal levels of government. This report seeks to outline the social and economic impacts of the pandemic as experienced by the City of Melton community. Its purpose is to build Council's understanding of the pandemic's impact to inform evidence based decisions on how best to support the community during the pandemic, after the pandemic and into the future. The findings presented in this report have been used to inform recovery planning in the development of the Community Vision 2041, the Council and Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025 and other strategic documents. The key strategies outlined were utilised within stakeholder and community consultation, through a deliberative engagement process, to embed key actions for recovery in the four year plan.

This report identifies evidence based concerns which are significant and widespread. In some cases, the hardship experienced locally is more so than in Greater Melbourne, evidenced through local unemployment (high of 11.1 per cent) and family violence rates (initial increase of 39.8 per cent). Further social impacts include delayed attention to physical health needs (pathology testing -50 per cent), significant concerns regarding the long term impacts of social exclusion (particularly digital exclusion), and poor mental wellbeing for both those with pre-existing mental illness and in previously well individuals.

Rising unemployment is a significant economic concern (high of 11.1 per cent in August 2020, up from 5.2 per cent in March 2020). Job losses have disproportionately impacted those in the hospitality, air travel and tourism, creative arts and entertainment, and sports and recreation sectors. This has led to unprecedented reliance on income support and material aid. The local material aid support system has been overwhelmed. Several of the noted sectors are predominantly staffed by young people and women, resulting in disproportionate experience of unemployment. There has been a significant reduction in revenue for small businesses which is likely to lead to long term financial impacts for many.

Existing social inequalities have been compounded by the pandemic and associated social distancing restrictions. This means that the noted impacts have been experienced disproportionately by certain cohorts of the community.

These cohorts include, but are not limited to:

- Diverse communities
- People with a disability
- Women
- Older People
- Young People
- Children.

These cohorts experience these impacts in nuanced ways. Understanding these nuances may support the identification of more appropriate support and recovery to ensure no one in the community is left behind. Local Government is ideally placed to understand the nuanced experiences of the local community, hear and address local emerging needs, and advocate on behalf of these needs to State and Federal Government

Further reinforcing these findings, City of Melton Councillor's (Melton City Council, 2021) note the high prevalence of social isolation, mental health concerns, financial hardship in the community as well as the devastating impact for local business owners that they have observed through their work supporting community during the pandemic. Furthermore, Councillor's reinforced the disproportionate impacts experienced by people with disability and their carer's, and Women and children living in at risk situations. Social isolation was also noted as being felt closely by older people in the community, children and young people, as well as single people living alone.

Integration of the Report findings allowed for identification of a Framework for action to aid recovery and resilience building in response to the pandemic. This Framework is for guidance only, it is not a Council endorsed Plan that directs Council action. This framework is presented in Figure 1 presents titled 'The City of Melton Recovery and Resilience Framework' (the Framework). The Framework presents foundations, pillars and streamlined strategies for action that not only address immediate acute need, but also seek to address existing vulnerabilities that exposed the City of Melton community to experience disproportionate impacts as a result of the pandemic.

The Framework is built on foundations which will ensure all streamlined approaches are inclusive, equitable, people centred, collaborative and flexible. The pillars holding the Framework together are adapted from the Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management (Emergency Management Victoria, 2017) and the Resilient Melbourne Strategy (City of Melbourne, 2016) presenting best practice approaches to achieve the goal 'A recovered and resilient City of Melton'.

Figure 1 The City of Melton Recovery and Resilience Framework

Local services, community groups, settings and community members have shown significant strength and resilience throughout these challenging times. Council is well placed to partner with State and Federal Government and bring together the local community and local service sector, to deliver a collaborative recovery effort and move forward together to become a resilient community in the face of future challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, Melton City Council (Council) commenced the development of a COVID-19 social and economic impact assessment and subsequent report (the Report). The intent of the Report was to build an understanding of the social and economic impacts of the pandemic and associated social distancing restrictions[1] to facilitate Council's response to, and advocacy for, local community needs.

PURPOSE

This Report seeks to understand the local social and economic impacts of the pandemic to inform evidence based decisions to support the community during the pandemic, after the pandemic and into the future. The Report identifies opportunities for action, which have informed the development of the 2021-2025 Council and Wellbeing Plan with a COVID recovery lens.

The Report presents an overview of the impact of the pandemic as of March 2021. This report is not a Council adopted plan, it instead seeks to provide guidance for the incorporation of strategies for COVID recovery into service planning and the development of key Council strategies and plans.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended primary audience of the report are Council officers and external Council stakeholders, such local community organisations. The Report is meant as a tool to strengthen understanding and inform action to support the community through the response, relief and recovery phases which will occur simultaneously in the coming years.

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[1] Note when this report refers to the 'impacts of the pandemic', it is also referring to the flow on impact of the social distancing restrictions which were implemented as a public health measure in response to the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This Report has been informed by emerging data and research at state, national and international levels, in addition to local data gathered from Council staff, local service providers, Councillors and community groups.

The Report was developed through the following steps:

1. Questions were designed by Council officers and used to collect data from internal Council teams, external local service providers, Councillors and community groups to capture experiences of adapting to COVID-19 as well as observed community needs. Two tools were used: an internal COVID-19 recovery mapping survey (ICRM survey) and an external COVID-19 recovery mapping survey (ECRM survey). We received 25 responses to the ICRM survey and 33 responses to the ECRM survey.
2. A qualitative analysis was conducted on the data collected through the ICRM and ECRM surveys to highlight emerging themes.
3. The data from the ICRM and ECRM surveys was then triangulated with a wealth of state, national and international evidence and research relating to the impacts of COVID-19 and associated social distancing restrictions.
4. The collated information and evidence was contextualised to the City of Melton, specifically in regard to local demographic data to create a picture of the impact on the local community.

The collated information was categorised into the following areas, which are depicted within this Report

- Council's current response
- local service context
- social impacts
- economic impacts
- community cohorts most impacted.

COUNCIL'S INITIAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Council initially responded to the pandemic and associated social distancing in a number of ways, including adaptation of service provision, supporting existing community connections and finding new ways to meet emerging community needs.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY

Council initially responded to emerging community needs during the pandemic through a number support pathways. The following information regarding Council's response was documented from March 2020-September 2020.

COVID-19 Hotline: The COVID-19 Hotline was established by State Government to support community members who were unable to access food and necessities due to self-imposed isolation or because of vulnerability. There were 444 callers (some repeat callers) from the City of Melton between March and September 2020. While the COVID-19 Hotline may not have received a large volume of calls, local community services were inundated with calls, indicating that residents were more likely to seek information and support from familiar organisations that they knew and trusted.

Council staff: Neighbourhood houses and community centres have compiled anecdotal information about community need and requests for help. For example, Kurunjang Community Hub received information from Kurunjang Primary School about increased family violence and mental health concerns in families. Stevenson House received 12 calls within 25 minutes after a local school mistakenly promoted that Stevenson House was offering food relief services. Kirrip House received over 240 additional calls for help between 30 March and 23 June 2020 for a range of needs including material aid, child protection, legal queries and family violence.

Welfare checks for existing client base: Council services such as Housing Services and Community Care provided phone/text/online welfare checks for their existing client base.

Dissemination of information: Information on available local services was disseminated through community-facing Council departments. Information provided by Council as of August 2020 predominately focused on COVID-19 physical distancing information, core service adaptation and service referral information.

Providing relief: Community Connector Hubs were established in May 2020 at Timbertop Community Centre (Aintree), Kurunjang Community Hub and Stevenson House (Caroline Springs) in response to the overwhelmed relief system. The Community Connector Hubs provide face-to-face support, food packages, ready-made meals, care packs, financial wellbeing support, job readiness support and social connections to local community members in need. Approximately 330 people were supported each week, with a total of 5610 community members supported

between May 2020 and August 2020. This model has been extended to run until September 2021.

The Community Grants Program was suspended early in the pandemic, pending review. A new funding stream, the COVID-19 Community Relief and Recovery Fund was established to provide emergency relief to residents via not-for-profit organisations. Grants of up to $5,000 were made available from September 2020 in fortnightly rounds which will run until the total pool of $100,000 is expended.

ADAPTING CORE BUSINESS

In addition to meeting emerging needs, Council has had to adapt core business during the pandemic to ensure delivery of vital services for community.

Council services adapted to COVID-19 restrictions: Many Council services were adapted for online/phone delivery such as maternal and child health and customer service, and some were put on hold or cancelled such as community events and group programs.

Notably, online delivery of Council networks and Advisory Committees has often resulted in better attendance and accessibility and allowed for external connections to be maintained. Some Council officers report that due to this greater engagement, they intend to maintain online delivery of some core services and programs. Some staff note that online engagement will need to continue for some time to service those with pandemic-related anxiety who will resist face-to-face services.

THE LOCAL SERVICE CONTEXT

Services and community groups operating in the City of Melton have been required to adapt considerably in response to the pandemic. This has included a transition to tele-service and online delivery of core programs where possible.

Services and community groups have reported that the transition to online processes has been expensive and resulted in a need to build their workforce digital literacy. Social distancing restrictions have made emergency relief and aid delivery more time and resource intensive. For example, physical delivery of food relief rather than drop-in food bank services. Local services and groups struggled to meet demand (with some closing) during the pandemic. Demand is indicated to be driven by overwhelming unemployment, increases in family violence, significant and widespread mental health concerns and exacerbated social inequality.

"The community is anxious, irritable, and flat and the fear of the unknown is there. There is a lot of worthlessness among volunteers as they no longer come, and a lot of isolation."

(ECRM, July 2020)

The following are common challenges identified by local services and community groups as they strive to meet demand as a result of the pandemic:

- limited access to volunteers due to social distancing and an older volunteer workforce who experienced vulnerability to COVID-19
- declines in volunteer-led revenue due to closures of opportunity shops as well as decreased fundraising opportunities
- outdated or inconsistent information, due to the constantly evolving nature of the pandemic restrictions and services able to be delivered
- limited access to reliable technology for remote work
- limited workforce capacity to utilise the range of ways to engage with community in the digital world
- an inability to adapt all programs to tele/online delivery has meant a reduction in available services. For example, a service is still able to offer individual family violence counselling, however group-based programs (such as men's behaviour change) have been postponed
- emergence of new challenges and a need to reorient and develop new ways to support clients. For example, the increased stress and family tension as a result of remote schooling
- reorientation of resources to meet acute need. For example, the provision of devices to students who do not have appropriate access to remote learning.

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While the challenges local services and community groups are encountering are significant, there are opportunities for Council to offer support such as:

- support services to bridge gaps in inability to fundraise
- providing updated, consistent information to community about accessing services for support
- providing digital access and literacy programs to bridge the gap for the digitally excluded.

"Some community members don't have access to technology to acquire information, and maintain compliance or appointments."

(Melton City Council, 2020)

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

The Report presents the social impacts and economic impacts of the pandemic separately to avoid complication, however it should be understood that these two categories, and the sub categories presented within, are fundamentally interrelated. Further to this, the way in which the social and economic impacts are experienced by people differs by community cohort and those experiences are nuanced. There is an additional section to explore this further that unpacks 'community cohorts most impacted'.

SOCIAL IMPACTS

The following are the key social impacts of the pandemic for the City of Melton community.

Family violence

Prior to the pandemic, the City of Melton experienced the third highest rates of family violence in all of metropolitan Melbourne. Data published by the Crime Statistics Agency (2020) highlights 787 family incidents recorded in the City of Melton between April-June 2020 compared to the 563 incidents recorded in the same period in 2019. This represents a 39.8 per cent increase in the number of family violence incidents, and a 34 per cent increase in the rate per 100,000 population. Further to this the City of Melton has seen an increase of 33.9 per cent family violence interim orders, and a 64 per cent increase in the number of breaches of family violence protective order offences.

There has been a 39.8 per cent increase in family violence incidents

(Crime Statistics Agency, 2020)

While the City of Melton has been experiencing an ongoing trend of increasing rates of family violence in previous years, this significant increase correlates with the introduction of social distancing measures and the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. This rise in reports has led to an overwhelming demand for specialist family violence services, with some services noting up to six month wait lists for ongoing case management (Melton City Council, 2020). In addition to this, there has been increased need for access to safe accommodation with refuges' capacity

I had a family reach out – The Mum is unemployed and has had to escape her physically violent husband with their three children, and is now living in a friend's garage. Centrelink could take up to three months to process her payments. She has never been in this kind of situation before and is struggling to keep her head above water. She doesn't have a Health Care Card and has been turned away from three food banks and various services due to this pre-requisite.

(Melton City Council , 2020)

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decreased due to social distancing meaning reliance on motel-type refuge accommodation (Melton City Council, 2020).

Family violence specialist services are witnessing new forms of violence (Pfitzner, et al., 2020), including cases of perpetrators:

- insisting victims wash their hands and face excessively, often until they bleed
- controlling access to information about the most current restrictions
- not letting victims leave the home.
- using COVID-19 transmission as a threat towards victims and their children.

The way in which victim-survivors of family violence are seeking help has been significantly impacted in the current restrictions (Pfitzner, et al., 2020). Previously help may have been sought through face-to-face GP appointments, Centrelink appointments or even through social networks or at school drop off. In the current climate, there is reliance on tele or online service access which may not be possible, perhaps even dangerous, while confined to the same home as the perpetrator (Melton City Council, 2020). Specialist family violence services and the State Government have been quick to act, identifying escape from family violence as an essential reason for leaving home, and offering text and email based options to facilitate connection with services. Despite this, it is reported that for many during the lockdown period there is less ability for victims to seek help (Pfitzner, et al., 2020). Council's Maternal and Child Health staff report a reduction in opportunistic family violence screening during phone consultations due to victim safety concerns (Melton City Council , 2020). An increase in opportunistic family violence disclosures to Council staff working in community facing roles (such as Libraries and Family Services) is expected as restrictions ease.

Twenty-six per cent of survey respondents from outer metropolitan areas disagreed that their neighbours were helping each other to get through the coronavirus restrictions

(VicHealth, 2020)

Anecdotal evidence (Melton City Council, 2020) highlight increases in both intimate partner violence, (specifically men's violence against women) and elder abuse. These types of family violence are highlighted further under disproportionately impacted community cohorts of Women and Older People.

Social Isolation and Community Cohesion

The flow-on impact of social distancing restrictions has resulted in significant widespread social isolation for Victorians, particularly those residing in metropolitan Melbourne. This is due to the extent of time (approximately seven months) that strict measures, such as only leaving home for essential purposes, remained in place.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics national Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey (2020) found that 28 percent of women and 16 percent of men reported feeling lonely as a result of the pandemic. Given this is national data, and Victoria

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(specifically metropolitan Melbourne) experienced a longer timeframe under lockdown, these results may be higher for the City of Melton community.

Research by VicHealth (2020) highlights that Victorians during the second lockdown reported feeling less connected to others in comparison to the first lockdown, and data from February 2020.

The following sub groups reported significant decline between February 2020 and September 2020 in less favourable results in comparison to the Victorian average when asked the extent of their agreement with the statement "I feel connected to others":

- Victorian females experienced a greater decline than males with 31 per cent of females and 27 per cent of males reporting a less favourable result
- Victorians aged 45-52 years and 65-74 years experienced the most significant decline in results, however reported similar results as all other age groups (between 30-31 per cent reporting less favourable results) with the exception of 18-24 year olds
- Victorians whose SEIFA index was on the lower three quartiles compared to those on the upper two quartiles
- Victorians who live in inner metro or interface Local Government Areas (35 and 32 per cent less favourable result respectively)
- Victorians who earned in the income bracket 40,000-59,999 (35 per cent reported a less favourable result)
- Victorian parents with children under the age of 18 (32 per cent reported less favourable result)
- Victorians whose main activity in September 2020 included home duties (as opposed to employed or unemployed) were significantly less likely than the rest of Victoria to report that they agreed that they 'felt connected to others'. (VicHealth, 2020)

The survey reported no significant improvements in the extent to which respondents felt more connected to others between February 2020 and September 2020. VicHealth (2020) also revealed that those living in outer metropolitan areas were more likely to disagree that their neighbourhood shares the same values (20 per cent) and that their neighbours were helping each other to get through the coronavirus restrictions (26 per cent) during the first lockdown.

Digital exclusion[2] has presented a significant barrier to Victorians' ability to remain connected with friends and family during the pandemic. While VicHealth (2020) note increases in social connection via telephone, videoconferencing, social media and email during the first lockdown compared to February 2020, numbers still only account for just over half of survey respondents. Over 10 per cent of City of Melton residents (.idcommunity, 2016) and more than 22 per cent low income households do not have an internet connection at their dwelling (.idcommunity, 2016) . In addition, many sites that offer public access to internet have been shut down during

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[2] Digital exclusion refers to one of more of the following: no home internet connection, no access to appropriate devices such as computers/tablets or low level of digital literacy.

the pandemic, presenting significant challenges to digital access. ECRM survey respondents (2020) noted the challenges of bridging the gap of digital exclusion for the most vulnerable in the community, noting the socioeconomic divide of covering the costs of devices and data in addition to digital literacy barriers for many, including older people.

Forty-two per cent of VicHealth survey (2020) respondents reported that they had found staying connected with friends and family outside of their household 'hard' or 'very hard' in September 2020. The decline in favourable results most significant for older people aged 65+ years, those living in metropolitan areas, those who were retied or whose main activities included home duties and those with self-reported disability.

"Sense of loss/ grief being felt due to not being able to attend face-to-face [faith] gatherings. Attending church on a Sunday is a routine many people have done for life and are feeling lost not being able to attend. Feeling that spiritual needs are not being met. "

(Melton City Council, 2020)

Community groups and settings which foster community connection and inclusion for the community have been significantly impacted by the restrictions. Previously, volunteerism was highest among older residents. Community organisations report that they have seen a 58 per cent drop in volunteer numbers (Cortis & Blaxland, 2020, p. 9) with local services noting the drop may be due to volunteers' personal health concerns during the pandemic (Melton City Council, 2020). Faith settings which offer significant spiritual and social connection for residents have also had to restrict gatherings in places of worship, with some organisations moving worship online (Melton City Council, 2020). The reduction in group, community group, or sports club involvement between February 2020 and September 2020 was greatest for those who were retired (33 per cent reporting decreased involvement) and females (74 per cent reporting decreased involvement) (VicHealth, 2020).

The future of such settings may be uncertain given the extended closures, loss of income raised through fundraising, membership, sponsorship and mounting bills. Membership-based settings, such as sporting clubs, may have challenges maintaining membership given the ongoing economic impacts of the pandemic on members of the community. The Melton City Council (2020) survey of sport and recreation clubs highlights that 35 per cent of the

Economic circumstances mean that clubs income will remain depressed for the foreseeable future

(Melton City Council, 2020)

clubs surveyed have experienced a negative financial impact between $10,000-25,000 since March 2020. Seven per cent of survey respondents reported they only had funds to cover costs for a further three months, and a further 57 per cent only had funds to survive 6-12 months. A further 63 per cent note they predict a decline in interest for the following season. Social isolation and the extent of its impact on community members varies depending on circumstance, for example someone

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living alone who has recently lost work or study opportunities may be more susceptible to the long term mental health impacts of social isolation.

Further to the influences on individual's sense of social isolation, the pandemic has also impacted the sense of community cohesion as a whole in the City of Melton. Community cohesion is the sense of belonging for all communities, where people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued,. A strong mitigating factor for social isolation, depression and distress is a strong sense of community cohesion (Joongsub, 2020).

Mental wellbeing

Social isolation and lack of community cohesion (Joongsub, 2020) are key drivers of poor mental health outcomes in communities, however not all residents that experience social isolation will go on to develop mental health concerns. Research has revealed that duration of loneliness is more strongly correlated to mental health symptoms than intensity of loneliness (Loades, et al., 2020). The duration of loneliness and social isolation being experienced by community members is an apparent concern for many living in the City of Melton due to the length of time social distancing restrictions have been in place for metropolitan Melbourne.

There will be a significant minority who will be affected by long-term anxiety as a result. Health care workers, people placed in quarantine, and individuals with life-threatening cases of COVID-19 are at increased risk of long-term mental health problems.

(Black Dog Institute, 2020)

Common consequences of disease outbreaks include anxiety and depression, anger, confusion, uncertainty and financial stress, with estimates between 25-33 per cent of the community experiencing high levels of worry and anxiety during similar pandemics such as SARS and Swine (Black Dog Institute, 2020). Community members with pre-existing mental health concerns such as anxiety disorders, and those who are particularly anxious about health alongside other mental health disorders, are at increased risk of experiencing higher levels of anxiety during the pandemic. Further to this, unemployed and casualised workforces are at increased risk of poorer mental health as high job insecurity is associated with stress, financial strain, poorer health and increased rates of depression and anxiety (Burgard, et al., 2012).

High psychological distress is indicative of serious mental health conditions such as depression and or anxiety. When asked to respond to the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale Questionnaire, 16 per cent of VicHealth (2020) survey respondents were categorised as experiencing high psychological distress. Fifty-three per cent of

Sixteen per cent of survey respondents were categorised as experiencing high psychological distress

(VicHealth, 2020)

VicHealth (2020) survey respondents reported a low-medium rating regarding their 'satisfaction with life as a whole' during the second lockdown compared to 49 per cent during the first lockdown and 33 per cent in February 2020. This presents a concerning picture of the mental health of Victorians.

The following sub groups reported significantly less favourable results for their 'satisfaction with life as a whole' during the first and second lockdown (respectively):

- Victorians aged 18-24 years (57 per cent, 58 per cent) and 25-34 years (57 per cent, 62 per cent)
- Victorians living in the lowest SEIFA quartile (53 per cent, 59 per cent)
- Victorians living in inner metropolitan Melbourne (53 per cent, 54 per cent), outer metropolitan Melbourne (54 per cent, 57 per cent) and interface regions (NA, 55 per cent)
- Victorians who self-identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (70 per cent, 68 per cent) and those with a disability (62 per cent, 63 per cent)
- Victorians who are unemployed (60 per cent, 63 per cent) or students (66 per cent, 64 per cent)
- Victorians living alone (55 per cent for both), single parents with children (67 per cent, 58 per cent) and those living in a share house (59 per cent, 66 per cent)
- Victorians eligible for JobSeeker (58 per cent, 61 per cent).
  (VicHealth, 2020)

The following sub groups reported significantly less favourable results for their level of 'psychological distress' during the first and second lockdown (respectively):

- Victorians aged 18-24 years (23 per cent, 24 per cent) and 25-34 years (22 per cent, 28 per cent)
- Victorians living in the lowest SEIFA quartiles
- Victorians living in inner metropolitan Melbourne (24 per cent, 30 per cent)
- Victorians who self-identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (28 per cent, 33 per cent), speak a language other than English at home (25 per cent, 21 per cent) and those with a disability (29 per cent, 25 per cent)
- Victorians who are unemployed (27 per cent, 30 per cent) or students (17 per cent, 24 per cent)
- Victorians living alone (18 per cent, 19 per cent), single parents with children (19 per cent, 20 per cent) and those living in a share house (17 per cent, 21 per cent)
- Victorians eligible for JobKeeper (27 per cent, 26 per cent) or JobSeeker (26 per cent for both).
  (VicHealth, 2020)

Thirty-seven per cent of women aged 18-24 years revealed suicidal thoughts compared to 17 per cent of men

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020)

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Mental wellbeing is forecasted to be a significant long term concern for the ongoing health of the community as a result of the pandemic, particularly for the development of children and young people during the lockdown period. See more information in 'community cohorts most impacted' in the section regarding children and young people.

Physical wellbeing

There has been a dramatic drop in recorded screening for health concerns, including a 50 per cent drop in pathology testing (Cunningham, 2020), a 37 per cent drop in breast cancer reports (Asher, 2020), and a 40 per cent decrease in cancer patients being treated (Asher, 2020). Reports also note a lag in attending hospital for chest pain (Cunningham & Dow, 2020). This may be due to associated fear and anxiety about leaving the house, particularly to attend a health service and the perceived risk of contracting COVID-19. Survey respondents (Melton City Council, 2020) report significant barriers in attending hospital and associated health appointments, and for those to engage with services via telehealth options due to digital literacy or exclusion (see page 14 for those most digitally excluded).

> *"We have a few clients with complex health needs in Melton and these appointments are primarily at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. It is very difficult for these clients to get there."*
>
> (Melton City Council, 2020)

Exercise was included as an essential reason to leave home, with those living in metropolitan Melbourne allowed one hour per day for exercise outside the home. Exercise rates dropped during the first lockdown, with 27 per cent of VicHealth (2020) survey respondents classified as inactive during the first lockdown period.

Reasons given for reductions in exercise included:

- low motivation (39 per cent)
- restricted space to exercise at home (29 per cent)
- having no one to exercise with (18 per cent)
- not feeling safe to exercise outside (17 per cent).

Of the respondents from outer metropolitan Melbourne, 39 per cent noted their main reason as "I've been concerned about catching coronavirus". Significantly less favourable results regarding rates of exercise were highlighted for those aged 35-44 which correlated with 36 per cent of 35-44 year olds noting 'more childcare responsibilities' and 19 per cent noting 'less time' as their reason for less activity.

During the second lockdown period, new reasons for less participation in physical activity emerged, most common reasons included:

- 'having to wear a mask' (34 per cent)
- the one hour outdoor physical activity limit (22 per cent)
- the 5km travel zone (22 per cent).

Twelve per cent of VicHealth (2020) survey respondents reported worrying about having enough money to buy food during the second lockdown compared to 17 per cent during the first lockdown and nine per cent recorded in February 2020.

During the first lockdown seven per cent of survey respondent's report they ran out of food and 10 per cent reporting skipping meals to feed their household. Further to this, 23 per cent reported relying on a restricted range of low-cost unhealthy foods because of financial concerns, while 28 per cent reported cooking more regularly at home noting the preference to stay home and save money during the lockdown.

Seven per cent of VicHealth (2020) survey respondents reported drinking alcohol at levels that would put them at risk of short term harm. Sub groups reporting higher risk of short term harm included males (10 per cent), those with a disability (10 per cent) and parents (11 per cent). Levels of drinking alcohol associated with risk of short term harm improved significantly in September 2020 (second lockdown) compared to June 2020 (first lockdown). Common reasons given for increased alcohol drinking behaviour included boredom (46 per cent) dealing with anxiety or stress (43 per cent), having more time (32 per cent) or feeling lonely (20 per cent).

This data highlights that the pandemic has adversely impacted the lifestyle behaviours of Victorians, with lower rates of physical activity, increased consumption of sugary drinks, and financial concerns creating barriers to access healthy foods (VicHealth, 2020). These changes, in addition to delays in screening and delayed intervention, are predicted to have significant long term impacts on the health and wellbeing of the City of Melton community.

Two men in their 40s are struggling. One lost their job and has become reliant on alcohol and is really struggling with mental issues around weight gain and financial concerns. The other male is a single dad of three and has also turned to alcohol to help with the stresses of [remote] schooling and effects of lockdown.

(Melton City Council , 2020)

Risk of contracting COVID-19

The type of employment has an impact on individual's risk of exposure COVID-19. Those in frontline industries such as health and social assistance are at highest risk of being exposed to the virus, and those who work in industries where they are able to work from home, are of lowest risk (Lu, 2020). Davern et all (2020) identify a link between the number of cases, and the percentage of the population who are able to work from home. As depicted in Figure 2, the more purple the area, the greater the proportion working from home, the larger the red dot, the higher the rate of active COVID-19 cases (at the time of dashboards development). The dashboard reveals that areas such as the City of Melton with less people working from home are more likely to have greater density of cases when compared to areas such as Nillumbik where many worked from home, and there were less active cases.
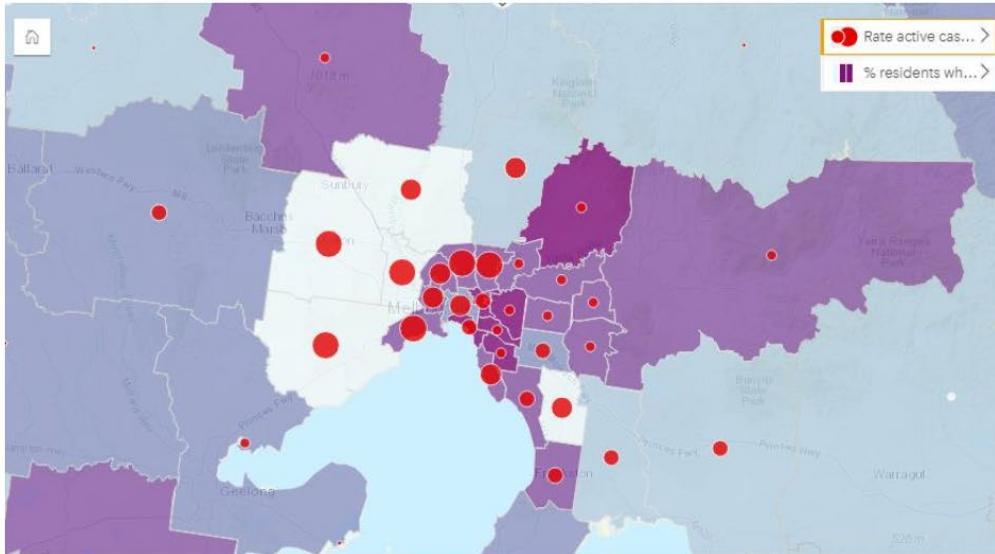
Figure 2 Image from 'Mapping COVID-19 spread in Victoria and ability of residents to work from home v3 Dashboard' (Davern et al, 2020)

In the City of Melton, community and personal service workers (including health and social assistance occupations) make up 11 per cent of all employed persons (.idcommunity, 2016), while less than 28 per cent of residents can work from home (Davern, et al., 2020). This demonstrates City of Melton residents are more likely than the greater Melbourne area to be susceptible to exposure to the COVID-19 virus (and thus risk of infection).

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ECONOMIC IMPACTS

The following are the key economic impacts of the pandemic for the City of Melton community.

Job Security

The lockdown has had significant impacts on the jobs and finances of Victorians, with VicHealth (2020) reporting that four out of 10 survey respondents had hours cut back, one in six experienced a pay cut and one in 10 were forced to take unpaid leave during the first lockdown, however these levels were lower during the second lockdown. With one in 10 Victorians reporting they had lost their job during the first lockdown (VicHealth, 2020) the impacts of the pandemic on job security are significant and potentially long lasting for the City of Melton community.

Data indicates that an additional 6,545 community members experienced unemployment as a result of the pandemic

(.idcommunity, 2020)

The height of unemployment during the pandemic to date was recorded in August 2020, with 11,924 (11.1 per cent of the working age population) recipients of JobSeeker and Youth Allowance recorded in the City of Melton. Unemployment rates compared between March and August 2020 revealed that the initial lockdowns associated with the pandemic resulted in 6,545 community members losing their jobs (+ 5.9 per cent). The accurate number of unemployed may not be fully represented by this figure due to many being ineligible due to visa status.

Figure 3 highlights the change in percentage of JobSeeker and Youth Allowance recipients by month during the pandemic, demonstrating changes in recipient numbers from March 2020 until March 2021.
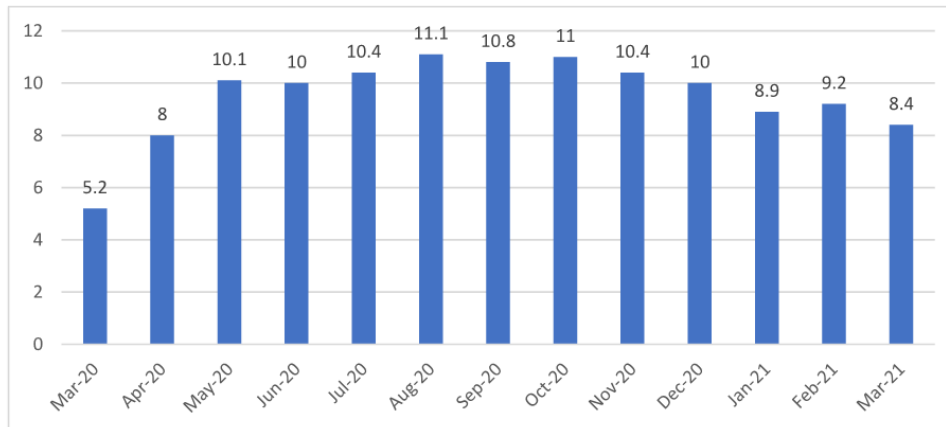

Figure 3 Percentage of working age population in the City of Melton accessing JobSeeker or Youth Allowance by month (.idcommunity, 2020)

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JobKeeper has been supporting families, but there may be bigger financial implications when this ends.

(Melton City Council, 2020)

Currently approximately 3.5 million Australians are receiving further support through the JobKeeper subsidy. The total number of JobKeeper applications processed by organisations within the City of Melton in June 2020 was 10,595 (The Treasury, 2020). While employees of these companies are not necessarily local residents, it does highlight a concerning picture for businesses located in the municipality.

At the time of June 2020, the JobKeeper supplement was a flat rate of $1200 for full time workers and $750 for part time workers, regardless of prior income level. In comparison, the maximum rate of JobSeeker was $815 per fortnight, originally $1115 pre-September 2020 (Duke, 2020).

Median fortnightly mortgage repayments are $693, and median rental costs are $520 in the Melton township area. In the Caroline Springs area median fortnightly mortgage payments are $976, and median rental costs are $730 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This highlights significant shortfalls between JobSeeker allowances for all residents in the City of Melton alongside further household costs, but more significantly so for those with a mortgage or renting in the Caroline Springs area due to higher median costs. The extent to which the shortfall exists between mortgage or rental repayments is dependent on the number of incomes for each household, however it does highlight that single income households are most financially vulnerable, particularly those with children.

The extent to which the shortfall exists between mortgage or rental repayments and supplement income is dependent on the number of incomes for each household, however it highlights that single income households are most financially vulnerable, particularly those with children.

As demonstrated in Figure 4, as of September 2020, the City of Melton has a higher unemployment rate than Victoria and Greater Melbourne, reinforcing the significant employment losses for those residing in the municipality.
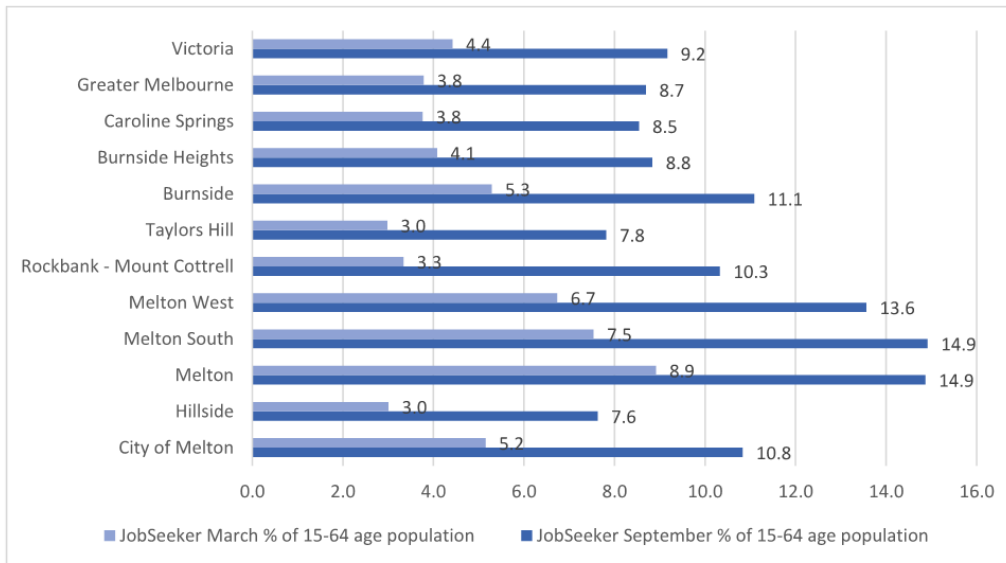
Figure 4 Percentage of 15-64 age population in the City of Melton accessing JobSeeker or Youth Allowance by SA2 Area, comparison March-September 2020 (.idcommunity, 2020)

The way that different community groups have experienced unemployment during the pandemic has not been felt equally. Low wage workers, women and young people are most vulnerable to the economic impacts of the pandemic (Wilkins, 2020). As well as those who worked in directly hit industries which were unable to continue operating, and those from secondary hit industries which had significant reductions in revenue.

Directly hit industries include sectors like hospitality, air travel and tourism, creative arts and entertainment, and sports and recreation (Wilkins, 2020). Secondary hit industries include sectors like store-based retail, tertiary education, mechanics and motor vehicle retailing, and accommodation (Wilkins, 2020), some of which were unable to continue operating when stage four restrictions came into effect in metropolitan Melbourne. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) reports that the highest job losses in Victoria have been in accommodation and food services industries, with a 24.4 per cent decrease in jobs during the pandemic.

In Australia, women make up 53 per cent of the workforce of directly hit sectors, and 65 per cent of secondary hit sectors (Wilkins, 2020). Young people are over represented in unemployment data, with young people aged 15-24 making up half of all the workers in Australia in directly affected industries. VicHealth (2020) data reveals that 26 per cent of young women aged 18-24 were impacted by job loss compared to 11 per cent of young men of the same age. People with disability also experienced a greater level of job loss with 22 per cent of survey respondents who identified as having a disability reporting they had lost their job since the public health measures had come into effect (VicHealth, 2020).

In short, those most exposed to the economic shutdown are also those least able to cope with it

(Wilkins, 2020)

Households likely to rely on income from directly hit industries tend to be in socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances. This highlights that households who were likely to be vulnerable to the economic downturn prior to the pandemic were "considerably more likely to be in poverty, experience financial stress, and have difficulty raising $3000 in short notice which is a measure of financial security" (Wilkins, 2020).

Education and employment pathways

VicHealth (2020) reports that 29 per cent of survey respondents reported that they were worried about their job prospects during the first lockdown, and 28 per cent during the second lockdown. SEEK reported that current job advertisements in Victoria were at only 56 per cent of pre-pandemic numbers (SEEK, 2020).

Students finishing their VCE or transitioning through VCAL programs to the workforce have experienced significant impacts on their ability to study due to remote schooling and a reduction in face-to-face study options for many courses. While Australia predicts a rapid decline in international students as a result of the pandemic, data suggests that a greater proportion of domestic school leavers than ever before may enrol in higher education (Hillman, 2020). In addition to more school leavers, it is predicted that a rise in recent graduates returning to post graduate study due to limited employment opportunities will be seen (Hillman, 2020). While the possibility of higher tertiary education attainment is a positive silver lining on the horizon given the City of Melton's current attainment levels, this also presents a future challenge for young people due to accumulative study costs they may be paying off well into the future, as well as those who may not make it through their VCE due to the additional challenges students are facing as a result of the pandemic.

The Australian Apprenticeships and Traineeships Information Service (AATis, 2020) recorded a 14.4 per cent reduction in apprentice commencements in Victoria in March 2020 compared to March 2019. Work experience placements have also been significantly reduced due to organisations' remote work arrangements limiting their ability to support students in the workplace. Entry levels roles are in high demand with younger people, and those with low educational attainment competing with recently unemployed people with more skills and experience, for entry level roles (Michael, 2020).

There has been a 14.4 per cent reduction in apprentice commencements in Victoria

(AATis, 2020)

Local business

As of 30 June 2020, 38.47 per cent of registered businesses in the City of Melton were registered to receive JobKeeper payments for their staff. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) reports that nearly a quarter of all Australian businesses who were receiving coronavirus support at the time of the survey expected to close once the support was withdrawn, with 29 per cent reporting they could sustain operations for only three months or less with cash on hand.

Nearly a quarter of businesses currently receiving coronavirus support expect to close once the support is withdrawn

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020)

While some local businesses experienced increased trade (for example pet shops, accountants and IT businesses), many experienced moderate to severe downturns in income and trade. Council proactively reached out to businesses through 1500 business engagement calls between March and August 2020. Officers involved in the business engagement calls observed that many hospitality and food service businesses closed initially then, reopened when they developed an understanding of how they could operate within the current climate, and what government support was available. Businesses reported early challenges during COVID-19 including lease and landlord negotiations, and Council officers anecdotally report observing mental health concerns for business owners.

Data collected the week of 3 April 2020 highlighted that during the first lockdown 24 per cent of businesses were classified as critically affected and 24 per cent likely to need help soon. Further to this, 15 per cent of businesses reported they had had to close and 42 per cent were open but at reduced capacity. Data collected the week of 1 May 2020, highlighted that 14 per cent of businesses were still closed, and an extra nine per cent of businesses were operating at reduced capacity (51 per cent). Further to this 39 per cent of businesses surveyed reported they were not eligible for any support funds.

There is feedback that the it feels harder this time and there is less 'will to fight'

(Melton City Council , 2020)

A high percentage of businesses in July 2020 noted they were in 'hibernation' and expressed upset in regards in ineligibility for government funding. Latest information collected from local businesses highlights significant impacts following stage three restrictions, and a low morale for returning to business as normal. As of late November 2020, a majority of businesses have returned to trade in line with government restrictions, however not all have been able to do so, with some closing for good.

Financial hardship

Experts predict that the full impact of COVID-19 won't be evident for a further three to four years due to the ongoing nature of financial hardship in growth areas. While some jobs, education, training opportunities, and businesses' revenue may begin to

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return when metropolitan Melbourne restrictions ease, the ongoing economic impact of the financial hardship experienced by many City of Melton residents will continue for some time. The option to put mortgages, rent and bill payments on hold during the pandemic delivered some relief, however the expenses continue to accumulate and will eventually have to be paid off. It is predicted that there will be substantial increases in housing stress for all, particularly more so for affluent postcodes (North, et al., 2020).

The Melbourne Institute (2020) reveals that the majority of Australians are at risk of financial vulnerability, with over 50 per cent feeling vulnerable to financial stress. One in four VicHealth (2020) survey respondents reported experiencing financial hardship during the first lockdown, an increase of 16 per cent compared to pre lockdown, however this number changed to one in five during the second lockdown. Twelve per cent of respondents reported having to ask for help from friends or family, and 11 per cent reported struggling to pay bills on time. Those who reported less favourable results included those aged 18-34 years, respondents with a self-reported disability, those who spoke a language other than English at home and single parents with children (VicHealth, 2020).

One in six reported they were concerned with the stability of their current housing

(VicHealth, 2020)

More than 413,000 Australians have frozen their mortgages across the country, with 24,000 of those living in Wyndham, Casey-South, Whittlesea-Wallan, Melton-Bacchus Marsh and Boroondara (Derwin, 2020). Data indicates that mortgage stress may be felt hardest by those aged 36-45 years, this may be due to relatively high outstanding mortgage balances, highlighting the concerns of the shortfall for JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments (Derwin, 2020).

Household costs have increased during the pandemic, due to additional costs such as face masks and sanitiser. Coles supermarket prices increased by 2.4 per cent for the 2019-2020 financial year compared to a 0.8 per cent rise the year prior (Murphy, 2020). The Jemena COVID-19 weekly electricity consumption tracker (2020) highlighted a five per cent increase in residential energy costs, 16 per cent decrease in small business costs, and a 10 per cent decrease in large business costs, highlighting the financial impact of more time spent at home during lockdown.

One in five VicHealth (2020) survey respondents reported they were concerned with the stability of their current housing. For the period 1 March- 31 October 2020 there were 27 recorded rough sleepers in the City of Melton, compared to 14 in 2019 (+51.8 per cent). The number of people experiencing primary homelessness has increased by 62 per cent, local services and Council report an increase in the number of crisis clients (+46.9 per cent) requiring urgent assistance and accommodation because they have nowhere to live at that time. The number of crisis payments provided to pay for emergency accommodation increased which is likely driven by the significant financial strain people are under due to the pandemic (Melton City Council , 2020). In comparison, the number of people in the City of Melton at risk of homelessness has decreased. This may be due to the current rental moratorium during the COVID-19 lockdown, where landlords are unable to evict

tenants if they are behind in rent and are obliged to set up a feasible rental repayment or temporary rental freeze. While this was silver lining, when the rental moratorium expires, there are concerns the City of Melton may experience an increase in the number of residents seeking help.

Additional financial concerns have arisen regarding the accessibility of gambling during the lockdown period. Although initial social distancing restrictions have resulted in the temporary closure of pokies venues which had immediate benefits for some people who gamble, there has been a rise in access to online gambling (Australian Gambling Research Centre, 2020). The Gambling in Australia during COVID-19 Report (2020) highlights that the proportion of people who gambled four or more times a week increased from 23 per cent to 32 per cent during the pandemic. Young men aged 18-34 years were of most concern with increased frequency and monthly spending on gambling and most at risk of gambling related harm (Australian Gambling Research Centre, 2020).

This information presents a concerning picture of the financial implications for households as a result of the pandemic for City of Melton residents. The long term impact is particularly concerning, outlining the ongoing financial hardship that some residents will likely face for years to come.

[The] Mum and Dad have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 crisis and aren't entitled to government support as they are from overseas. They don't have a Healthcare Card so may not be able to access food vouchers or food banks. They have, however, been getting some support with pre-cooked meals supplied by various churches in the area. This has been helpful, but not enough.

(Melton City Council, 2020)

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COMMUNITY COHORTS MOST IMPACTED

The social and economic impacts of the pandemic have been significant and widespread, however the impacts have not affected all parts of the City of Melton community equally. There are particular community cohorts in the City of Melton who have experienced disproportionate impacts, which is largely due to the pandemic exacerbating existing inequalities in the community.

We must also acknowledge that COVID-19 has exposed some significant fragility in our system. Vulnerable people are always hit the hardest in an emergency or a disaster, and so it is in this pandemic. They are the most likely to get sick, the most likely to lose their jobs and the most likely to be evicted from their homes. And they have the least ability to absorb the income hit when their hours are cut or they go out and need to buy a new iPad when the kids are learning from home.

(King, 2020)

The following sections highlight which community cohorts' experienced nuanced and disproportionate experience of the pandemic's social and economic impacts. The intent is not to diminish the experiences of the broader City of Melton community but to provide insights in order to inform recovery actions that are equitable and targeted.

Children and young people

The population of the City of Melton is relatively young, mainly due to a high proportion of people under the age of 19 compared to Victorian averages, as well as a lower proportion of those aged over 50 years old. Over 43 per cent of households in the municipality comprise of a couple with children (.idcommunity, 2016). Due to this demographic profile the importance of investing in children and young people's wellbeing for future population health outcomes of the municipality is integral.

Research produced by The University of Melbourne (Vasileva & Alisic, 2020) highlights that the impacts on parents (such as unemployment, family violence and poor mental health), have flow-on impacts for children in their care, even when those children don't fully understand what is happening. The research notes potential regressions for newly acquired skills, sleep disturbance, anxiety and irritability. These regressions may then lead to negative developmental patterns and mental health problems, and affect social skills and school attendance.

These impacts may lead to mental health and social problems well into adulthood.

(Vasileva & Alisic, 2020)

Vasileva & Alisic (2020) predict that these impacts may lead to mental health and social problems well into adulthood. In the City of Melton over 20 percent of children are already identified as vulnerable on one or more domains (Australian Early Development Census, 2018), with the added impacts of the pandemic, the municipality may see an increase in children identified as vulnerable.

The remote schooling environment has raised concerns about the lack of opportunities for intervention by early years and school professionals to support children and students who may be struggling. There is particular concern that there are children falling through the gaps who may take some time to catch up and need intensive support on their return to structured learning environments (Melton City Council, 2020).

Further to developmental concerns, children and young people have generally suffered significant disruption to their schooling and social connections as a result of the social distancing requirements. Disruptions such as children moving to primary school, then back to childcare, then reliving their first day at school may have long lasting impacts on their school transition, and also the wellbeing of their families as they navigate through this challenging period. For older students, school achievement may have been negatively impacted as a result of remote schooling and loss of in-classroom support. For students undertaking VCE/ATAR this may have real world consequences as they transition into tertiary education and/or the workforce post 2020.

Children are emotionally distressed about school disruption and not seeing school friends as well as social distancing.

(Melton City Council, 2020)

One in 50 children in Victoria were on a family violence protection order as at 30 June 2020.

(Crime Statistics Agency, 2020)

Given the 39.8 per cent increase in family violence reports in the City of Melton, many children and young people may have been exposed to violence in the home and precarious living arrangements as a result of being in the care of a parent escaping violence. The Crime Statistics Agency (2020) reports that one in 50 children in Victoria were on a family violence protection order as at 30 June 2020. There were 1,114 child protection notifications recorded in the City of Melton between September and November 2020, an increase of 6.7 per cent compared to the same period in the previous year, equating to a rate of 645 per 100,000.

The Crime Statistics Agency presents the following statistics highlighting the impact of Family Violence on young people:

- Victoria Police incidents involving a victim survivor in Victoria aged 17 or younger increased 5.7 per cent between April to June 2020 compared from the same period in 2019
- emergency room presentations for family violence related injuries increased 35.5 per cent for patients under 18 years old in the second quarter of 2020 compared to same time period in 2019
- the number of people aged 17 and younger receiving support from the Victim Assistance Program increased 67.6 per cent in May 2020 compared to May 2019 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2020).

Further to the social impacts of the pandemic, the Grattan Institute (Coates, et al., 2020) highlights that young people are the hardest hit by the unemployment shock of the pandemic, with 15-19 years olds most likely to lose their job, partially due to

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the shutdown of the hospitality industry. These impacts of the economic downturn and reduced employment pathways may continue to be experienced by young people for some time. International research of 'crisis cohorts' in similar economic recessions showed they continued to experience higher unemployment, lower pay, and worse job prospects up to a decade later (Hillman, 2020). Ensuring that pathways exist, for work experience, entry level roles and education and training for young people to be equipped to enter the workforce is integral for the recovery of the labour market, and local economy.

Research by the Centre for Multicultural Youth and Australian National University (2020) highlights that young people from multicultural backgrounds, those who are first generation Australians and who are female, compared to their peers, experienced higher levels of COVID-19 related stressors.

Older people

Older people aged 80+ years experienced significant vulnerability to the adverse health impacts of COVID-19. Sadly there has been a high number of fatalities in aged care facilities in parts of Victoria, with a high number of deaths reportedly related to residential care facilities.

Crisis cohorts in similar economic recessions showed they continued to experience higher unemployment, lower pay, and worse job prospects up to a decade later.

(Hillman, 2020)

As a result of vulnerability to COVID-19, those living in residential care have been unable to have family visits for some time and when they are able to do so, they are contingent on strict social distancing and hygiene practices. This has left many older people residing in care facilities even more socially isolated and inactive than ever before (Ory & Smith, 2020).

In comparison to younger cohorts of the community (who moved to technology-facilitated day-to-day activities), older people have experienced a temporary ceasing of social and volunteer activities. Having to give up their usual activities and not feeling comfortable to go out due to their perceived vulnerability to the pandemic, many older people are feeling extremely isolated and lonely (Seniors Rights Victoria, 2020). While the transition of services and community groups to online delivery by organisations has occurred, local service providers report challenges for older community members to engage online (Melton City Council, 2020).

Local service providers report challenges for older community members to engage online

(Melton City Council, 2020)

The pandemic has exacerbated the incidence of elder abuse experienced by older people. Seniors Rights Victoria (2020) reported a 15 per cent increase in calls for help during the first lockdown. Over half of police recorded family violence incidents involved a person aged 55 and older were perpetrated by an adult child (Crime Statistics Agency, 2020). The number of people aged 55 and older establishing interim family violence orders against their perpetrator increased 61.4 per cent in June 2020 compared to June 2019 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2020). Ambulance

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Victoria recording double the number of ambulances attendances for this cohort that were flagged as family violence-related, and the number of people aged 55 and older receiving accommodation from a specialist homelessness services for family violence reasons increased 48.7 per cent in June 2020 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2020). Evidence suggests that the increased incidence of gambling, mental health and substance abuse issues in the community may be contributing to the rise in elder abuse reports (Senior Rights Victoria, 2020). Experts also noted situations of harm displacement, where as a result of an intervention order for intimate partner violence, an adult child returning to live with older parent/s continue to perpetrate abuse against their parents as opposed to their partner (Senior Rights Victoria, 2020).

For older people, particularly those with chronic health conditions, it is important that they are able to maintain a healthy lifestyle including exercise and healthy eating. However, due to pandemic related anxiety, some older people became more inactive than ever before and health check-ups have been avoided. Further to the benefits to physical health, physical activity is also linked to positive mental health outcomes in older adults, demonstrating that inactivity during the lockdown period may further exacerbate the physical and mental wellbeing issues of older people in addition to other pandemic-related health impacts (Melton City Council, 2020).

Previous economic downturns have demonstrated that older people are more likely to suffer declines in net wealth, and that unlike younger adults, have less time to make up such losses and bolster retirement savings, (Cohen, et al., 2020) highlighting a potentially concerning picture for future retirement. For some older people, while they may not have experienced significant financial impacts themselves, they may now be in the position where they are having to financially support family members who are out of work (Seniors Rights Victoria, 2020).

For some older people, while they may not have experienced significant financial impacts themselves, they are now in the position where they are having to financially support family members who are out of work

(Seniors Rights Victoria, 2020).

Women

In Australia, women make up 53 per cent of the workforce of directly hit sectors, and 65 per cent of secondary hit sectors (Wilkins, 2020). In the City of Melton, 11.5 per cent of employed women work in education and training (including tertiary education a secondary hit sector) compared to 3.2 per cent of men. Furthermore 13.9 per cent of women work in retail trade industries (directly hit industry) compared to 8.4 per cent of men (.idcommunity, 2016), highlighting gendered disparities in relation to industries that have been impacted by the economic shut down.

Women were already more likely to live in poverty pre-pandemic, account for the majority of single-parent households, and have less earnings and savings (UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, 2020). Further to experiencing disproportionate unemployment due to industry shutdowns and greater representation in precarious employment such as casual and part time positions, these compounding factors highlight a dire picture of women's economic security post pandemic.

Women also make up approximately 79 per cent of the health care and social assistance workforce, and the majority of school teachers, demonstrating the increased likelihood for women to be exposed to frontline work during the pandemic. The Black Dog Institute (2020) predicts significant mental health ramifications for frontline workers in the long term, as a result of working on the frontline during the pandemic.

With restrictions to childcare access and the move to remote school learning, there was a greater need for parents to take up more care responsibilities. This, along with the higher rates of unemployment in female dominated industries, has created a pressure for some families to return to traditional gender roles in the home. Recent evidence revealed disparities in the average amount of unpaid work by gender. The number of unpaid hours worked increased by over 3.5 hours each day for women, compared to 2.5 hours each day for men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

VicHealth (2020) highlights the disproportionate burden of caring roles on women during the first lockdown, revealing 76 per cent of Victorian mothers were primarily responsible for looking after pre-school aged kids compared to eight per cent of fathers. Further to this 72 per cent of Victorian mothers spent the most time helping their kids with remote learning compared to 26 per cent of fathers. These disparities in unpaid caring responsibilities in the home as a result of the pandemic highlight the extent to which the pandemic has exacerbated gender inequality in the home which may have impacted some women's ability to continue with paid work.

Seventy-six per cent of Victorian mothers were primarily responsible for looking after pre-school aged kids compared to eight per cent of fathers

As noted, the City of Melton community has experienced a 39.8 per cent increase in family violence incidents compared to the same time period last year. The key driver of men's violence against women is gender inequality, and the social and economic impacts of the pandemic have exacerbated gender inequality, which in turn is driving the rising rates of family violence.

The key driver of men's violence against women is gender inequality, and the social and economic impacts of the pandemic have exacerbated gender inequality, which in turn is driving the rising rates of family violence.

During the pandemic, women have also reported higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress than men. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) survey findings highlight that 35 cent of females reported severe levels of depression compared to 19 per cent of males, and 37 per cent of women aged 18-24 years revealed suicidal thoughts compared to 17 per cent of men. To cope with mental wellbeing concerns, women were more likely to report increased consumption of snack foods (27 per cent compared to 18 per cent pre lockdown) and alcohol (18 per cent compared to 11 per cent pre lockdown).

People with disability

Social isolation has been a concern for people with disability. This is partially due to the loss of in-home support, visits by friends, family or workers, group based supports and social opportunities that have had to cease during the social distancing restrictions. This has impacted mental wellbeing, with 62 per cent more people with disability reporting low-medium life satisfaction, and 29 per cent more people with disability classified as high psychological distress compared to Victorian averages during the first

Twenty nine per cent more people with disability revealed results highlighting they were in high psychological distress compared to Victorian averages during the first lockdown

(VicHealth, 2020)

lockdown (VicHealth, 2020). Some people with disability may have had to isolate to a greater extent, and for longer due to underlying health concerns which puts them at greater risk if they were to contract the virus. This may also have contributed to heightened fear and anxiety which further exacerbates existing mental illness.

People with disability reported finding healthcare very difficult to access during the pandemic, with 25 per cent reporting they didn't have access or it wasn't available (People with Disability Australia, 2020). Further to this, navigating day to day activities during social distancing, including mask wearing has been especially hard for people with disability such as those who are vision impaired (i.e. navigation by touch) and those who are hearing impaired (i.e. relying on lip reading for communication).

People who identify as having a disability were 22 per cent more likely to report that they had lost their job since social distancing restrictions had come into effect, and were 32 per cent more likely to report experience of financial hardship compared to Victorian averages (VicHealth, 2020). This may be due to higher rates of initial employment through social enterprise programs further compounded due to increased daily expenses.

"Very lonely without anyone checking on me, food is hard to get because we have no delivery and no supports means I have to pay someone to shop for me. I have to go without my medications to pay for these extra things."

(People with Disability Australia, 2020)

The Brotherhood of St Lawrence COVID-19 insights paper (Brown, 2020) notes the significant strain on families of people with disabilities who could not access their informal and formal supports during lockdowns, which limited their opportunity for much needed respite from their caring duties. The insights paper further highlights the implications for widescale digital servicing for people with disabilities who 'have on average lower digital inclusion' (Brown, 2020, p. 3) and resultant service exclusion being experienced by some people with disability as a result of a predominately online service system. The impacts on the pandemic of people with disabilities and their carer's is devastating and will have long term implications for these community members post pandemic.

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Carers

A carer is someone who provides personal care, support and assistance to another individual in need of support due to disability, medical condition, mental illness or age. The strain on children, young people, older people, and people with disability has further impacts on those who care for them, either in a paid capacity, or unpaid capacity. The strain on carers during the extended lockdown may be more significant for metropolitan Melbourne due to the extent of time the community has been living under strict social distancing restrictions.

> *"I am not able to provide the level of support my partner needs due to the restrictions on visits. I feel guilty, distraught, tearful, and anxious. I fear his health will deteriorate more rapidly due to the lack of support he is receiving from me"*
>
> (Caring Fairly Coalition, 2020)

The increased need for support to be provided in the home due to social distancing restrictions and reductions in capacity of social support services and informal supports such as food delivery.

Caring is gendered, with more women employed in social assistance workforces, and more women primarily responsible for providing unpaid care (Nguyen, et al., 2020). The Caring Fairly Coalition survey (2020) revealed that 60 per cent of carers lost supports for those they care for, and 47 per cent lost supports for themselves during the lockdown period. Further to this 44 per cent of carers reported increased time spent on unpaid care, with a 23 per cent increase in carers who provided over 46 hours of care per week. The day-to-day household disruption experienced by families during the social distancing restrictions may have been more acute for those who became the main source of support for their children with disabilities during remote schooling.

The load of caring responsibilities, alongside the broader mental health impacts of the pandemic highlights negative impacts on overall carer wellbeing with 81 per cent of carers reporting that their mental health had deteriorated during the pandemic (Caring Fairly Coalition, 2020). Further to this, carers may feel anxious about catching the virus and passing it the person they are caring for, limiting their own movements outside of paid or unpaid caring in order to protect those under their care, which further compounds the social isolation they experience.

> *"I have voluntarily stopped working because of the risk to my husband if he contracts the coronavirus. I worked in retail, so impossible not to have contact with customers."*
>
> (Caring Fairly Coalition, 2020)

The economic impacts of unemployment and financial hardship have been detrimental for carers during the pandemic. Seventy one per cent of carers report increased living costs, and 58 per cent of carers report they spent more money supporting the person they care for (Caring Fairly Coalition, 2020). A further 37 per cent of carers who noted that had to work fewer hours to provide extra support for the person they care for (Caring Fairly Coalition, 2020).

Diverse communities

In the City of Melton, nearly 30 per cent of people were born overseas, with 15 per cent of those having arrived in Australia since 2011 (.idcommunity, 2016). Over 32 per cent of the City of Melton community speaks a language other than English at home, with nearly six per cent stating low proficiency in English (.idcommunity, 2016).

Major areas of concern expressed by diverse communities in research presented by the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2020) includes social isolation, mental health and employment. The impact of these key concerns is similar to Victoria as a whole however

Given the varied languages and levels of fluency in English, these should include different forms of communication resources - especially cartoons, simple videos, audio materials, and hand-outs - as well as engagement with community connectors and channels which are commonly accessed by diverse communities.

(Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2020)

includes additional concerns such as digital exclusion (due to economic and language barriers to digital connection), racism, and health and safety concerns (directly related to the pandemic and may be driven by misunderstanding of information).

A key barrier for these communities was miscommunication and lack of communication related to service access and social distancing restrictions (Melton City Council, 2020). This was caused by a number of factors including language barriers, limited English literacy and the extensive use by State Government of mainstream channels where diverse communities are less likely to engage than the broader Victorian community (Melton City Council, 2020). While the State Government provided official information translated into community languages, the key concern was that the avenues for dissemination were not appropriate preventing timely receipt of vital information (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2020).

Temporary visa holders, asylum seekers and refugees, people who are not proficient in English and those who have experienced racial discrimination experience more barriers to participating in the labour market (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2020). This was true prior to the pandemic and was exacerbated with job cuts seen throughout the year. Temporary visa holders, such as international students, have emerged as a significantly impacted group. This cohort have experienced housing loss due to dorm closures and job loss due to high rates of employment in precarious industries such as hospitality and higher rates of casual employment. While government messaging encouraged international students to return home if they could not support themselves in Australia, this was not feasible for many. This was in part due to travel restrictions but also due to personal safety where home countries had been more significantly impacted by the pandemic, such as India (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2020). Most direct support for international students has been provided by charities and interfaith and ethno-specific groups, with diverse community groups in the City of Melton offering support through meals and in some cases, housing (Melton City Council, 2020).

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> *Young (African) people are not accessing benefits from Centrelink because of the distrust for the service they have experienced based on previous encounters.*
>
> (Melton City Council, 2020)

Local services and community groups also report that diverse communities face significant challenges in accessing services such as income support, Medicare, Centrelink and relief services (Melton City Council, 2020). Challenges included ineligibility for visa holders, distrust of government agencies, shame and pride related to asking for support.

The State Government's exclusion of international students, refugees and asylum seekers, and most temporary visa holders from emergency financial relief packages, left a number of City of Melton residents unsupported during the pandemic. Further, aid such as food relief is often not culturally appropriate for diverse communities featuring mainstream food options that are not suited to dietary norms in many diverse communities such as being Halal certified, or vegetarian (Lindberg, et al., 2020).

Services supporting diverse women during the pandemic have also noted an increase in complex family violence issues and family conflict. Specialist service provider InTouch recorded a 21.1 per cent increase in the total number of clients receiving case management services in the second quarter of 2020 from 2019 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2020). Supporting these women has been made more difficult due to social distancing restrictions and little or low proficiency in English (Segrave & Pfitzner, 2020). Women on temporary visas living in the City of Melton also experience additional risk and insecurity due to migration status, particularly those who possess non-partner visas such as international students, refugees and asylum seekers, and work related visas, because they are ineligible for visa support related to the experience of family violence (Segrave & Pfitzner, 2020). For partner-related visa holders (i.e. spousal visa), the reliance on perpetrators to survive in absence of financial supports presents significant barriers for women to leave violent relationships (Segrave & Pfitzner, 2020). The number of claims of intimate partner

> *We observe the impact of COVID-19 has been to intensify the impact of the exclusion of temporary visa holders experiencing family violence […] at a time when they need it more than ever.*
>
> (Segrave & Pfitzner, 2020)

violence received by the Department of Home Affairs regarding provisional partner visas increased 48.9 per cent between April and June of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2020).

VicHealth (2020) research highlights respondents who spoke a language other than English at home responded less favourably than the Victorian average for low-medium life satisfaction (52 per cent), subjective wellbeing (61.3 per cent) and were 25 per cent more likely to indicate high psychological distress during the first lockdown. Respondents were also 39 per cent more likely than the Victorian

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average to report finding it hard or very hard to stay connected with friends and family during the lockdown (VicHealth, 2020).

Further compounding factors for the mental health of members of diverse communities may include:

- the stress of supporting children with remote schooling, with English as a second language and a potentially unfamiliar Australian education system
- the experience of past hardship for refugee and asylum seekers may make community members more vulnerable to negative psychological impacts of the pandemic
- living with insecure visa status in the current climate may mean greater uncertainty and anxiety (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2020).

In response to the pandemic, there was also an increase in reports of racist incidents, and a particular emergence of anti-Asian attitudes and attacks (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2020). A higher number of reports have been registered by the Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission in metropolitan Melbourne (64 per cent) compared to regional Victoria (36 per cent), with a quadrupling of reports generally since early March 2020 (Melton City Council , 2020). Misleading media coverage has created an environment of blame towards specific diverse cohorts (such as South Sudanese and Muslim communities) regarding recent COVID outbreaks. There are significant concerns that racist incidents may continue to rise as social distancing restrictions are lifted. Due to the intrinsic link between experience of racism and poor mental health and wellbeing, key consideration needs to be given to how to tackle this issue prior to its emergence (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2020).

Survey respondents to research by the Centre for Multicultural Youth and Australian National University (2020) report high levels of racism and racial discrimination both for direct and vicarious experiences. The research highlighted key issues to be addressed included hypervigilance and worry about racism in public places as well as low level reporting.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
While primary concerns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) people included potential vulnerability to the adverse health impacts of the pandemic due to high levels of pre-existing illness, the number of total cases in First Nations peoples has remained low. However the health and wellbeing of First Nations peoples has still been impacted as a result of social distancing. One in four VicHealth (2020) First Nations survey respondents indicated high psychological distress, and 23 per cent more respondents reported low-medium life satisfaction compared to Victorian averages. One in two respondents also reported finding it hard or very hard to stay connected with family and friends outside of their household during the lockdown. Further to this, actual and perceived cultural safety may present barriers to community members seeking support for their physical and mental wellbeing at mainstream health services.

The number of family incidents involving First Nations victim-survivors of family incidents increased 6.8 per cent in the second quarter of 2020 compared to 2019.

The largest change in First Nations victim-survivors was for those aged 55 years and older which increased by 42.7 per cent compared to the same timeframe in 2019 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2020).

The financial impacts of the pandemic have also disproportionately impacted the First Nations peoples, with 74 per cent of survey respondents reporting experiencing financial hardship during the first lockdown, however this was high prior to the lockdown (63 per cent). This highlights the exacerbation of existing economic inequality (VicHealth, 2020). Local services noted that First Nations families have been struggling to meet demands in a digital world as a result of economic barriers. Some services report having to provide devices and data to children to ensure they are able to continuing engaging in school as a result of the move to remote learning (Melton City Council, 2020).

Pre pandemic First Nation's students in the municipality had higher school dropout rates (almost double in the west) than other Australian students. Anecdotal accounts highlight concerns for a greater gap of school attainment between First Nations Australians compared to other Australians as a result of remote schooling, and additional challenges faced by First Nation's families during the pandemic. Further remote schooling challenges include particular concern for children with complex needs falling behind, and the resultant stress and poor mental health outcomes for parents of these children.

The changing restrictions, and powers given to Victoria Police to deliver on-the-spot fines for social distancing breaches raises concerns for how this may disproportionately impact the First Nations peoples, given historic over-policing and poor understanding of family systems by law enforcement (Yashadhana, et al., 2020). It is reported that Aboriginal Community controlled Health Service and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service disseminated information and offered support to local First Nations communities in order to respond to this concern (Melton City Council , 2020).

Compounding experiences

The City of Melton community as a whole has experienced the adverse social and economic impacts of the pandemic in varying ways, however the above evidence highlights that some community groups have felt this more strongly than others. While data has been presented in relation to key cohorts, it is important to highlight that the lives of community members are not experienced in silos. For example, a young Aboriginal person will not experience the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic due to their age separately to their identity as an Aboriginal person, their experience will be unique.

In order to support community recovery during and after the pandemic, initiatives will have to be identified to ensure that the nuanced impacts of these cohorts of the community are addressed, to ensure that no one is left behind. While the cohorts identified have experienced disproportionate impacts as a result of the pandemic, they are by no means powerless. Each of these community groups has significant strength and resilience in the face of this adversity, and leveraging that strength is key to facilitating their ongoing recovery.

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COUNCIL'S ROLE IN LONG TERM RECOVERY

Local Government has a legislated responsibility to conduct local recovery efforts following a local emergency (State Government of Victoria, 2017, p. 21). Further to this, Local Government has a legislated responsibility for acting to improve the health and wellbeing of its community (State Government of Victoria, 2020). Council is ideally placed to understand the nuanced experiences of the local community and hear and address local emerging needs. Therefore Council has a key role in supporting the community with both immediate needs e.g. emergency relief, and long term needs e.g. social inequality.

Resilience is the capacity of individuals, institutions and systems to adapt, survive and thrive no matter what kind of chronic stressors and acute shocks they experience.

(City of Melbourne, 2016)

Council's considerable experience partnering with local stakeholders and community groups presents key opportunities for a collaborative recovery that engages all active players to provide a strong prospect for recovery and resilience building, post pandemic.

In response to the impacts of the pandemic, Council's role will be:

1. a whole-of-Council strategic approach to recovery planning to mitigate the long-term social and economic impacts of the pandemic i.e. recovery lens on the Council and Wellbeing Plan 2021-25 and Financial Plan 2020-2030

2. a strong community development focus, with resources directed to projects and activities that help communities to re-establish themselves, their recreation activities, employment, education and connection to one another i.e. facilitating local community groups to reconnect

3. an ongoing approach to investing in a resilient community to prepare for potential future pandemics and their impacts. I.e. advocate for stronger employment opportunities in more secure sectors.

Recovery will be a long term journey, particularly for community cohorts who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. This is likely to include groups who were not previously vulnerable or had not previously experienced hardship prior

Although the impact upon individuals and households needs to be understood and addressed, it is equally important to understand the impact and disruption to the social capital and connectedness of communities and the need to support the restoration of communities to a functioning state.

(Australian Emergency Management Institute, 2011)

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to the pandemic, and those who were already in precarious financial or social positions. The peak of stress experienced by the community as a result of the pandemic is expected to occur in three to four years, for example the height of mortgage stress (North, et al., 2020), due to extended periods of unemployment, reduction in savings and reduced government support.

The predicted timelines for recovery and beyond are demonstrated in Figure 5. The interconnected nature of the diagram represents both the interrelated and simultaneous nature of the different stages of recovery. Timelines presented are dependent on the strategic investment by Council in response to the impacts of the pandemic.
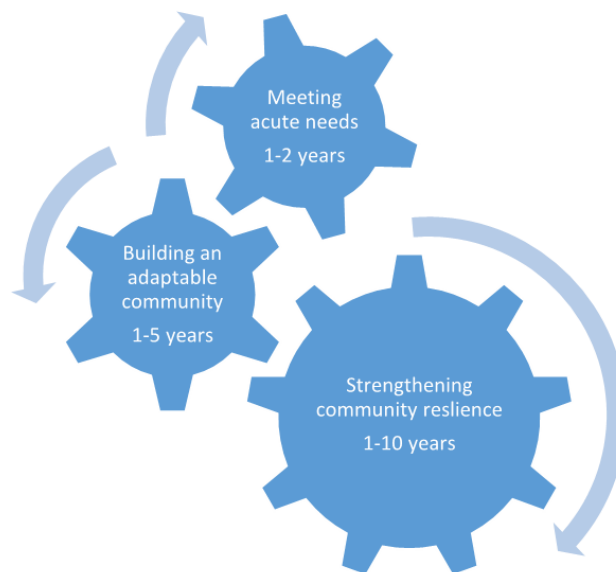

Figure 5. Predicted timelines for recovery

During the recovery the outlined roles of Council will occur simultaneously. The ultimate goal for Council is to ensure the local community and Council itself have ultimately recovered from the impacts of the pandemic, and are more resilient in the face of future pandemics and emergencies.

The ultimate goal: to ensure the local community and Council have ultimately recovered from the impacts of the pandemic, and are more resilient in the face of potential future pandemics and emergencies.

A RECOVERED AND RESILIENT CITY OF MELTON

The City of Melton Recovery and Resilience Framework (the Framework) is based on the findings of this report to develop strategies to aid recovery and build resilience in response to the pandemic. These strategies not only address immediate acute need but also seek to address existing vulnerabilities that exposed the City of Melton community to experience disproportionate impacts as a result of the pandemic.

Local Government has an integral role in responding and mitigating adverse events such as disease, climate change or natural disaster. In addition to Council's roles and responsibilities, a resilient community will be equipped to plan, address, respond and support one another through such challenges. The community will do this supported in the confidence that Council will act to support those who are most vulnerable.

The Framework is built on foundations which will ensure Council's response is inclusive, equitable, people centred, collaborative and flexible. It has been adapted from the Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management (Emergency Management Victoria, 2017) and the Resilient Melbourne Strategy (City of Melbourne, 2016) presenting best practice approaches to recovering from an emergency and strengthening resilience. The Framework's vision is 'a recovered and resilient City of Melton'.
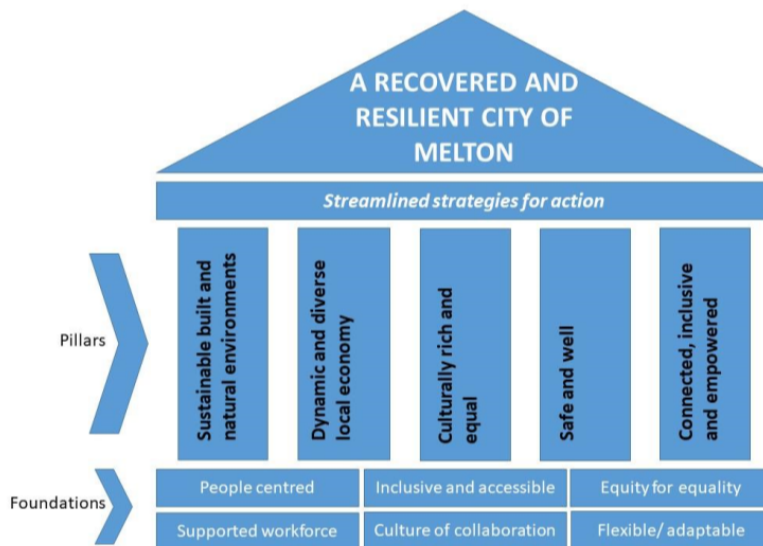

Figure 1. The City of Melton Recovery and Resilience Framework

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FOUNDATIONS FOR ACTION

The following foundations are integral to responsive and effective strategies which meet the needs of the unique and growing City of Melton community. All recovery and resilience building strategies should be built on these principles to ensure impactful and equitable outcomes are achieved.

People and community centred approach

A community and people centred approach ensures that the community is heard, engaged and empowered to work with Council to ensure tailored strategies are implemented. Where possible, an asset based community development approach should be taken to harness existing community strengths for community driven solutions.

Flexible and adaptive action

The immediate future is uncertain, so there will be a requirement to adapt as conditions continue to evolve. Resourcing for recovery efforts which are supported and delivered by Council need to be flexible and adaptable to ensure they can meet the ever changing needs of the local community in a timely manner.

Supported workforce

The recovery workforce, is any Council or local service employee whose role includes supporting those who have been impacted by the pandemic. Given the far reaching impacts of the pandemic, this is likely to include a broad range of employees and will not be limited to service support staff. In order to ensure that all employees who have a role in supporting community can do so to the best of their ability, it is integral that they are in turn supported through provision of adequate training, resources and debriefing.

Culture of collaboration

Leveraging the strong partnerships across Council and with external organisations and community groups will ensure a collective (and thus stronger) impact for the community. Collaboration will ensure that shared knowledge and capabilities contribute to strengthened initiatives. Effective recovery and resilience building will require an interdisciplinary focus, delivering multiple benefits and breaking out of narrower, more traditional silos of work.

Inclusion and accessibility

Ensuring that all community members have the opportunity to participate and benefit from strategies for recovery and resilience building, to the fullest extent possible, it is essential to ensure no community members are left behind.

Equity for equality

An equitable approach will ensure that all community cohorts and individuals have access to the right amount of resources and opportunities to suit their personal circumstances. This ensures recovery efforts are fair and that everyone gets the resources and opportunities they need.

PILLARS FOR ACTION

The following pillars for action aim to guide evidence based strategies to achieve a recovered and resilient City of Melton. The pillars are interdependent on one another and strategies may respond to more than one pillar.

A recovered and reslient City of Melton will...				
Capitalise from sustainable built and natural environments	Enjoy a dynamic and diverse local economy	Celebrate a culturally rich and equal community	Be a connected, inclusive and empowered comunity	Foster a community that is safe and well

Figure 6. Pillars for action for a recovered and resilient City of Melton

Pillar one: Sustainable built and natural environments
Sustainable built and natural environments in the City of Melton would look like:

- strong natural assets and ecosystems
- active transport, and accessible and safe public transport
- available and affordable private and social housing
- green open space and opportunities to connect with land and nature
- timely and sustainable provision of community infrastructure that promotes community cohesion, equality and opportunity.

Why is this important and what can be done about it?

During the pandemic, the City of Melton community experienced increased rates of homelessness due to existing vulnerabilities in secure and affordable housing in addition to an increased rate of family violence. This put community members in precarious housing arrangements which further exposed them to the pandemic and its impacts. This highlights the need for more social and affordable housing within the municipality.

Council needs to be prepared for potential future pandemics and the adverse impacts of climate change. In particular the community is vulnerable to extreme heat events. The City of Melton has the equal second highest urban heat island reading in metropolitan Melbourne (Department of Enviornment, Land, Water and Planning, 2018). Tree canopy coverage plays an integral role in cooling and reducing heat in urban areas however the City of Melton has the lowest tree canopy cover in metropolitan Melbourne at only 4.1 per cent compared to the Melbourne average of 16.2 per cent (Department of Enviornment, Land, Water and Planning, 2018). Increasing tree canopy coverage and green spaces will offer protection for the community against future heat waves.

The City of Melton's physical form and built environment plays an important role in promoting community cohesion. A socially cohesive community is one that works

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towards the wellbeing of all its members, addresses exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and offers its members equitable access to opportunities. Members of inclusive communities are better equipped to support one another through good times and bad.

Pillar one opportunities for action:

- focus on building local outdoor spaces and places within walking distance of all community members' homes which foster connection and community cohesion
- local provision of accessible and culturally safe health and social services with the capacity to meet future need
- increase green canopy coverage and access to nature
- prioritise active transport in and around the municipality
- advocacy and brokerage for the provision of social housing in the municipality.

Pillar two: Dynamic and diverse local economy
A dynamic and diverse local economy in the City of Melton would look like:

- secure employment opportunities for all
- adaptable workforces
- a community that lives, works and spends locally
- equitable access to education and employment pathways
- equitable opportunity and fair distribution of adequate household income.

Why is this important and what can be done about it?

The City of Melton community experienced significant and widespread job insecurity, financial hardship and local business downturn during the pandemic and associated social distancing restrictions. While this was consistent across Victoria, the City of Melton had disproportionate unemployment and financial hardship due to existing financial vulnerabilities. An insecure workforce with many community members reliant on casualised or part time work within insecure industries including hospitality and retail contributed to this vulnerability. Much of the community already experienced low socioeconomic status which meant they were hit hard by job loss, and will likely be overcoming these financial reparations for many years to come. The education and employment pathways of young people was further impacted by remote schooling, limited vocational training opportunities, loss of work experience and apprenticeships.

The community may not have been so hard hit if they were in a stronger socioeconomic standing prior to the pandemic. This may have meant that they had savings to fall back on and had a higher education, which may have meant greater likelihood of finding alternate work. Families of high socioeconomic standing may have had the home resources and support to maintain children's engagement in schooling as it moved remote. If individuals had not experienced such financial hardship, local spending may have been greater throughout the pandemic, contributing to the local economy and mitigating the impacts experienced by local businesses.

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Melbourne's economy is changing, moving away from a past of manufacturing and towards high skilled jobs (City of Melbourne, 2016). This means the City of Melton community will have the best possible future if they are equipped to work in emerging industries such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and high need services such as community service industries such as social support. For the City of Melton community, a focus on increasing rates of tertiary attainment, specifically those in STEM related fields, and promoting pathways to community service roles, will ensure they are best prepared for future employment trends. Further to this Council should invest in research to understand the current situation in regards to skill sets, local employment trends and education opportunities.

Pillar two opportunities for action:

- provision of ongoing hardship support and personal assistance for community members doing it tough and community organisations supporting these community members
- a focus on free accessible programs which support community members to build skills which are transferable in the workplace, encourage lifelong learning, and contribute to job readiness and financial literacy
- strategic planning and advocacy to bring secure jobs to the City of Melton which are accessible to all
- partnering with local organisations to provide work experience and or apprentice pathways for young residents, or those who are re-training
- provision of trusted and tailored information regarding local education, learning pathways, sector transition pathways and employment opportunities, particularly for STEM related fields
- building awareness of solopreneur, small business and gig economy opportunities
- supporting small businesses to grow and employ more local people
- investment in research to better understand local employment and education trends and needs.

Pillar three: Culturally rich and equal
A culturally rich and vibrant municipality would look like:

- the community welcomes and celebrates diversity
- all community cohorts have access to and engage in leisure and recreation
- the city has a diverse range of cultural events, arts and leisure which are reflective of all its members
- community members live free from discrimination and harassment
- all community members have equal access to opportunities and thrive.

Why is this important and what can be done about it?

The City of Melton is becoming an increasingly culturally rich community with a wide range of diverse community groups calling the municipality home. Understanding the diverse needs, capabilities and expectations of different community groups is imperative to ensuring their safety and resilience.

As highlighted in this report, the social and economic impacts of the pandemic caused an exacerbation of social inequality in the community. This resulted in

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disproportionate impacts for certain cohorts of the community. Due to gender stereotypes and roles, women took up a disproportionate amount of unpaid care during the pandemic. This negatively impacted on women's mental health and their ability to maintain paid work.

The limited amount of translated and tailored information regarding the pandemic, meant that a number of diverse community members were not informed of changes to the social distancing restrictions. The community may also not have experienced such isolation, loneliness and psychological risk if they were better connected to other community members in their five kilometre radius, and were actively supported by their neighbours and friends.

Social inequality in the community has left specific cohorts highly vulnerable in the face of the pandemic and associated social distancing restrictions. In order to build a more resilient community Council needs to invest in building an equal community, addressing existing inequality through equitable programs and services which bridge the gap, and ensure no one is left behind.

Pillar three opportunities for action:

- celebration of local history, diversity and arts by supporting local festivals, events, programs and activities which are inclusive and accessible to all community members
- offer a wide range of sporting clubs and recreation opportunities which are inclusive and accessible to all community members
- celebrate, promote and recognise Aboriginal culture through arts and leisure to facilitate enhanced community respect, understanding and reconciliation
- establish and enhance vibrant dining, entertainment and cultural precincts in activity centres and neighbourhoods across the City
- take specific and targeted equitable action to address social inequality in the community
- raise awareness and understanding of social inequality across the organisation that may be perpetuated by Council services and programs.

Pillar four: Safe and well
A safe and well municipality would look like:

- the underlying determinants of crime and violence are addressed and no longer occurs
- the community are enabled to live physically and mentally healthy lives
- everyone feels like they belong and feel proud of their local community
- health and wellbeing outcomes are strong across all age groups and demographics
- health and social services are accessible, culturally appropriate and available locally.

Why is this important and what can be done about it?

For the City of Melton community to have the best possible health outcomes, which are able to be maintained in the face of acute and chronic shocks in the future, the

social determinants of health need to be addressed in the City of Melton. The social determinants of health include early childhood experiences, education, employment, income, social and economic status, housing and geography, living and working conditions, agriculture and food production, quality of air, soil and water, social support networks, and access and use of health services (Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).

In response to the pandemic and for the future health of the community, Council is advocating for and local health and community services to establish in the City of Melton to cope with future demand. Council also has a role in preventing the long term physical and mental health consequences of the pandemic through primary prevention initiatives now to curb future tertiary service need.

Community members were subjected to strict lockdowns to curb the spread of the pandemic, resulting in limited movement within five kilometres of their place of residence. The importance of having nearby access to green open space and nature to be able to easily exercise has never been so apparent. Connection to nature and strong local networks are known protective factors for mental wellbeing and ensuring everyone has access to these should be a priority of Council moving forward.

People may have engaged more readily (and earlier) with health and social services when they needed them if they had been more accessible locally and were more culturally appropriate. Some local services were overwhelmed with demand, and long wait lists were experienced by community members (for example family violence case management) which placed further strain on community member's wellbeing.

Pillar four opportunities for action:

- training the recovery workforce to appropriately refer and provide information regarding health and social service support
- encouraging communities to engage in health check-ups to boost chronic disease interventions
- increasing passive activation of open and public spaces to promote perceptions of safety and physical activity rates
- providing equitable support for the community to access organised sport and recreation
- providing community connection to promote mental wellbeing and sense of belonging
- advocacy for local provision of health, social and specialist services to meet diverse population needs
- fostering local provision of food sources for accessibility and affordability
- address the underlying drivers of family violence.

Pillar five: Connected, inclusive and empowered
A connected, inclusive and empowered municipality would look like:

- the community has a strong sense of belonging and connectedness
- the community has a high capacity and is empowered to take action for positive change

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- all community members feel welcome and are encouraged to participate and feel they have a say in what matters to them and are engaged in Council matters
- young people in the community are supported, engaged and empowered to thrive
- there is high volunteerism across all cohorts of the community
- Council planning, emergency management and leadership is driven in partnership with the community
- the community feels a sense of responsibility for their own community and they self-organise in response to community need
- the community engages in lifelong learning
- community members have a high level of trust and confidence in Council and each other.

Why is this important and what can be done about it?

The City of Melton's growing cultural diversity is a strength and as part of supporting recovery, Council invests in supporting community inclusion and belonging. This supports resilience and effective response to pandemic impacts across the diverse community.

A connective, inclusive and empowered community has strong networks and structures which facilitate collaboration, communication sharing, learning, and provision of support to families in need. Strengthening this moving forward will ensure stronger community cohesion in the face of future challenges and the community will be equipped to survive and thrive during adverse events. This will in turn reduce the load on emergency services and Council and ensure greater resilience.

The need to actively engage community members in decision making processes is key to an empowered community. Involving the community in Council's response to the pandemic may have seen a higher level of trust and confidence in Council's responses. In order to become a more resilient community, individuals and communities need to be able to adapt in the face of rapidly changing circumstances. By providing access to education, information and knowledge, community members will have the resources they need to become more empowered and engaged.

Pillar five opportunities for action:

- support the return of volunteers and promoting volunteerism as a social connection opportunity
- provide free Wi-Fi at public venues such as community centres and libraries
- provide digital access initiatives including loanable devices, device repurposing and, digital literacy and digital mentor programs
- ensure equitable and accessible access to Council's services for the non-digital in the community
- enable the activation of neighbourhoods to promote belonging and community pride
- provide special grant opportunities to invite reengagement of the community in programs and activities

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- provide opportunities for different cohorts of community to come together to promote belonging and inclusion
- supporting local organisations and groups including faith centres and sporting clubs, to recover from the financial impacts of COVID-19 in order to continue providing integral social connection opportunities
- invest in transparent, two way communication between Council and the community.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

The social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are vast and striking. A common theme within the hardship articulated in this report is the exacerbation of social inequality evidenced by the disproportionate impacts of key community cohorts as a result of the pandemic.

Council has a legislated and moral obligation to support the community through this pandemic, as well as beyond the pandemic into recovery, alongside State and Federal levels of government. Further to this, Council is ideally placed to understand the nuanced impacts on the local community and act to address them both in the short and longer term, and advocate for these needs. An intended use of the information collated within this report is to inform a recovery lens on the development of the Community Vision 2041 Council and Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025.

The concerns identified within the report are significant and widespread. The City of Melton community has experienced significant hardship as a result of the pandemic, in some cases more so than greater Melbourne evidenced through its unemployment and family violence rates.

These concerns paint a dire picture of the state of social and economic impact within the municipality and highlight the scope of Council action required to support the community to recover post pandemic. Council does not have the sole responsibility to address all the concerns raised. Local services, community groups, and community members have shown significant strength and resilience throughout these challenging times. Council is well placed to partner with Government agencies and programs,, and facilitate collaborations across the local community and service sector in supporting recovery. This sector collaboration will enable us to move forward together to become a resilient community in the face of future challenges.

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APPENDIX: ICRM & ECRM QUESTION SETS

INTERNAL COVID-19 RECOVERY MAPPING SURVEY (ICRM SURVEY)

Council officers met with teams across Council and utilised the following questions to guide discussion and elicit information:

1. What initiatives/activities have been implemented in response to COVID?
2. Who is the audience/recipient?
3. How long will this initiative/activity continue for?
4. What resources have been allocated to this initiative/activity? (E.g. financial, staffing, other)
5. How successful has this been? (Numbers or reach if possible)
6. What information has been received about community experiences? (Formal or anecdotal)
7. What community expectations/needs have been identified? (short-term needs and long-term issues)
8. What service gaps have been identified? (Council or community services)
9. What external agencies have you been working with?
10. What work are you aware of external agencies doing?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

EXTERNAL COVID-19 RECOVERY MAPPING SURVEY (ECRM SURVEY)

Council officers delivered phone interviews with relevant stakeholders using the following questions to guide discussion and elicit information:

1. How has service/role delivered been impacted by COVID?
   You might ask: Where they closed for some time? Was there an increase/decrease in demand for their service? Did they have to do things differently? How? Have they been offering new services during this time?
2. What are they hearing from community?
   You might ask: What needs are you hearing from community, for your service or others? What are community members who interact with your service telling you they are experiencing?
3. What has the service got planned in next 12 months in response to community needs during COVID?