



# City of Whittlesea COVID-19 Community Impact Report

12-23 October 2020

## Contents

<a href="#">Goal 1: Connected Community</a> .....	3
<a href="#">Goal 2: Liveable Neighbourhoods</a> .....	5
<a href="#">Goal 3: Strong Local Economy</a> .....	6
<a href="#">Goal 4: Sustainable Environment</a> .....	8
<a href="#">Data notes</a> .....	10
<a href="#">Data sources</a> .....	10

***The City of Whittlesea recognises the rich Aboriginal heritage of this country and acknowledges the Wurundjeri Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of this place.***

***Thank you to all staff and partner organisations who contributed to the information presented in this report.***

### Disclaimer

This report is provided for information and it does not purport to be complete. While care has been taken to ensure the content in the report is accurate, we cannot guarantee it is without flaw of any kind. There may be errors and omissions or it may not be wholly appropriate for your particular purposes. In addition, the publication is a snapshot in time based on historic information which is liable to change. The City of Whittlesea accepts no responsibility and disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information contained in this report.

## Goal 1: Connected Community

### Local impacts

#### Financial hardship is increasing in the municipality

- Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) report a sharp increase in the number of people seeking financial support in our community since the Coronavirus Supplement was reduced on 25 September:
  - The number of outgoing referrals from the WCC Financial Assistance Program to emergency relief providers have increased from 23 to 84 to 111 in the three weeks between 14 September and 9 October.
- In the last 6 weeks, WCC have also reported increased numbers of clients:
  - Seeking support with education and school costs like uniforms
  - Seeking material aid support like clothing
  - Who are unable to access state Government Utility Relief Grants as they have exhausted the maximum amount
  - Who have spent all of their COVID-19 Early Release of Superannuation
  - Who are using credit cards for bills and basic necessities
  - Who are Centrelink recipients reengaging with WCC's Emergency Relief service (WCC, 2020).

#### Impacts on local vulnerable communities

- The Whittlesea Community Futures Partnership Forum on 14 September identified the following key issues facing our community:
  - Women, people on temporary visas, international students and asylum seekers are disproportionately impacted
  - Increased family violence and difficulty accessing services
  - Services are reorganising to be online and offer telehealth, which has resulted in delays and access barriers for those without access to devices or the internet
  - Services are experiencing increased demand for emergency relief

- Challenges with the online environment – lack of hardware, internet and skills; challenges with home-schooling
- Older adults are isolated and lonely (WCF, 2020).
- The Whittlesea Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) COVID-19 Recovery Network meeting on 14 October identified the following key issues facing our CALD community (in order of importance):
  - Financial hardship
  - Unemployment
  - Housing/homelessness
  - Isolation and relationship issues
  - Awareness and navigation of services
  - Mental health
  - Physical health
  - Family violence
  - Home-schooling (Whittlesea CALD COVID-19 Recovery Network, 2020).

#### Online playgroups are not the same

- Families may be choosing not to attend playgroup because meeting virtually is challenging for both children and parents (CSNAP, 2020).



*The playgroup tried virtual meetings but it was too difficult because the children could not engage with other children via the screen. Parents found it had to talk because children were talking, crying and getting frustrated.*

**LEISURE AND COMMUNITY FACILITIES  
DEPARTMENT**

### **Young singing students have benefited from online lessons**

- Young singing students have benefited from the online lesson format, with tutors noting a distinct improvement in confidence and performance ability (CSNAP, 2020).



*A singing tutor has noticed a distinct increase in confidence and performance ability among her young students due to lessons being online.*

**COMMUNITY BUILDING AND PLANNING  
DEPARTMENT**

### **Ongoing restrictions continue to impact sports clubs and their ability to operate**

- Sports clubs have been unable to operate for the past seven months due to restrictions. As restrictions ease over coming months, clubs are likely to continue to be impacted under restricted return to sport (CSNAP, 2020).

### **Community groups are keen to reactivate**

- More than 60 community groups have registered to return to community facilities as soon as possible, suggesting groups are keen to reengage and reactivate. This number would have been even higher if density rules did not apply (CSNAP, 2020).

## **State and national impacts**

### **Carers are experiencing psychological distress, social isolation and financial stress**

- A national survey of carers in April-June 2020 shows a range of issues:
  - Nearly half of all respondents (47.7%) reported high or very high psychological distress.
  - More than one third of carers reported being highly socially isolated, with

another 25% reporting only low levels of social support.

- One in three carers said they never get time out from their caring responsibilities, with only around half having enough time to keep on top of other responsibilities.
- One in four carers reported spending more money than they made in the past 12 months.
- Many respondents (57.1%) lived in lower income households (gross income of less than \$50,000) (Carers NSW, 2020).

### **Victorians continue to seek mental health support**

- In Victoria, Medicare-funded mental health services were 31% higher in the period 16 September to 14 October 2020 compared with the same period last year (Hunt, 2020).

### **Financial stress and social isolation increase risk of family violence**

- A new study shows that between February-May 2020, women were more likely to experience family violence in the presence of financial stress, social isolation and prior history of abusive behaviour from a partner.
- The likelihood of experiencing family violence was not associated with a partner becoming unemployed or partners spending more time together at home.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were at increased risk of family violence, as were women with restrictive long-term health conditions (Morgan & Boxall, 2020).

## Goal 2: Liveable Neighbourhoods

### Local impacts

#### Vulnerable people are feeling unsafe outside because of people not wearing masks

- Some residents are feeling unsafe outside due to people not complying with mask rules, including an elderly resident who has changed his daily outdoor walking routine to exercising indoors on a treadmill (CSNAP, 2020).



*A retired gentleman told me that he is using a treadmill instead of his daily walks outside on the streets. This is because so many people are walking around outside without masks on, so he doesn't feel comfortable.*

**COMMUNITY BUILDING AND PLANNING  
DEPARTMENT**

### State and national impacts

#### Tenants are under stress

- According to a recent study of rental tenants in July-August 2020, many were facing a 'financial precipice' that was impacting mental health.
- Around half of respondents indicated that their mental health had been negatively affected by COVID-19 lockdowns.
- Households anticipating the need for financial assistance in the next 12 months had the greatest odds of reporting their mental health was significantly impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns (5.6 times more likely).

- Those with unaffordable housing costs were 4.2 times more likely to report mental health impacts.
- Many rental households (63%) experienced changes to their employment or income due to the pandemic. Young people were disproportionately affected across all categories of change.
- A rent alteration was requested by 16% of renters. Of these, 42% were granted a rent reduction, 17% entered into a rent deferral arrangement and 30% had their request declined.
- Many renters are currently buffered from the full economic effects of the pandemic by financial safety nets including their savings, superannuation, and rent deferrals, as well as temporary government supports like eviction moratoriums, JobKeeper and JobSeeker (Barker, Bentley, Beer, & Daniel, 2020).

#### Vacancies are up and rents are down

- Rental vacancies in Melbourne were 3.8% for September 2020, compared with 3.4% for August 2020 and 2.0% for September 2019.
- Average asking rent for the week ending 12 October 2020 was down 2.2% for houses and down 5.1% for units compared with the same time last year (SQM Research, 2020).

## Goal 3: Strong Local Economy

### Local impacts

#### Local jobs remain down

- Jobs fell by 7.1% in the local Whittlesea-Wallan area between mid-March and 3 October.
- Over the same period, there was a 6.6% fall in jobs in the broader North East Melbourne region (ABS, 2020).

#### Local unemployment is rising

- The unemployment rate in the North East Melbourne region (which includes the City of Whittlesea) was 8.7% in September, up from 7.6% in August and 4.5% in March (ABS, 2020).

#### There has been a slight decrease in the number of residents receiving unemployment benefits

- 15,790 City of Whittlesea residents received JobSeeker or Youth Allowance payments in September – 10.3% of the population aged 15-64 years. This is slightly lower than August (10.6%) but more than double the proportion of recipients in March (4.5%) (DSS and .id, 2020).

#### Some students are struggling to readjust to being back in the school environment

- Returning to school is impacting children in different ways. Younger children in particular are excited to be back at school. Other students are struggling to readjust to being back around other people in a noisy environment (CSNAP, 2020).



*Many older students who have returned to school are suffering anxiety, in tears, wanting to go home. They are finding the noise and being around too many people challenging.*

**COMMUNITY BUILDING AND PLANNING  
DEPARTMENT**

#### School attendance has increased for previously disengaged students

- Teachers report that many students who were previously disengaged have returned to school (CSNAP, 2020).

### State and national impacts

#### Job impacts continue across Victoria

- The Victorian unemployment rate fell slightly from 7.1% to 6.7% during September.
  - This is still much higher than the unemployment rate of 4.7% in September 2019.
  - The unemployment rate is higher for women (7.6%) than men (5.9%) (ABS, 2020).
- There are 6.4 jobseekers per position in Victoria, compared with 4 last year (Anglicare Australia, 2020).
- The number of jobs advertised on major online platforms in metropolitan Melbourne increased last quarter but is still down on last year's figures.
  - During July-September 2020, the number of advertised jobs in greater Melbourne increased by 32.4% from the previous quarter but is still 44.4% lower than the same quarter in 2019.
  - This fall is much larger than the Australian-wide fall of 12.2% in the September Quarter 2020 compared to the same quarter in 2019 (Labour Market Information Portal, 2020).

#### VCAL students may be disadvantaged

- VCAL students may be less likely to obtain their certificates than VCE students, with the courses and preferred learning styles for many students being less suited to the rapid online-transition and in the absence of some of the adjustments that were made for VCE unit 3&4 students (HWLLEN & VicLLENS, 2020).

### **Government support has helped people afford essentials**

- Of Australians receiving the Coronavirus Supplement:
  - 32% reported mainly using the payment on household supplies including groceries
  - 28% reported mainly using the payment on mortgage or rent.
- Of Australians receiving JobKeeper:
  - 31% reported mainly using the payment on household bills
  - 25% reported mainly using the payment on mortgage or rent (ABS, 2020).

### **More Australians are drawing on savings or reducing loan payments**

- One in five Australians (19%) reported that their household took one or more financial actions to support basic living expenses between mid-August and mid-September (compared with 14% mid-May to mid-June).
- The most common financial actions were drawing on accumulated savings or term deposits (9%) and reducing home loan payments (4%) (ABS, 2020).

### **Household finances – worse for some but better for others**

- Household finances worsened for 16% of households in the four weeks to mid-September (which is better than 19% reported in mid-June) but improved for 12% of households (fewer than the 16% reported in mid-June).
- Those in households with children were more likely to report their household finances had worsened in the last four weeks (21%, compared with 14% in lone person households and family households without children).
- Half of Australians have increased savings and/or reduced debt since the COVID-19 restrictions began in March:
  - One in five Australians (22%) have increased savings.

- One in fourteen Australians (7%) have reduced their debt levels.
- One in seven (15%) have both increased savings and reduced debt (ABS, 2020).

### **Many consumers are deferring energy bills**

- National deferred electricity and gas energy bill debt was over \$14.8 million for households (36,143 customers) and \$2.8 million for small businesses (1,995 customers) as at 28 September.
- Around 100,000 people are on hardship plans or have deferred payments (Australian Energy Regulator, 2020).

### **High rates of superannuation access**

- Nationally, \$34.3 billion has been paid out across 3.3 million initial applications plus 1.3 million repeat applications to the superannuation COVID-19 Early Release Scheme between 20 April and 11 October 2020.
- The average payment is \$7,665 (APRA, 2020).

### **High rates of loan deferrals**

- Nationally, \$229 billion worth of loans have been granted temporary repayment deferrals - around 8.5% of total loans outstanding.
- Housing loans make up the majority of total loans granted repayment deferrals, although small business loans have a higher incidence of repayment deferral with 16.2% of small business loans subject to repayment deferral, compared with 9.0% of housing loans.
- During August, \$14 billion worth of loan deferrals were approved or extended and \$24 billion of loan deferral periods concluded (APRA, 2020).

### **Half of Australian workers cannot take two weeks of paid sick leave**

- According to the ABS, half of Australian workers would not be able to take two weeks of paid sick leave if necessary (ABS, 2020).

### **Businesses continue to struggle**

- In October, 7% of Australian businesses were deferring loan payments (down from 16% in May).
- Loan deferrals were most common among businesses in Accommodation and Food Services (31%), Wholesale trade (21%) and Manufacturing (16%).
- 21% of businesses have sought additional sources of funding, with most reporting the funds were to cover operating expenses (ABS, 2020).

### **In line with State Government directives, many Victorians are working from home**

- From mid-August to mid-September, 52% of people in Victoria worked from home at least once (compared with 39% in Australia).
- 31% of Australians with a job reported working from home most days between mid-August and mid-September, compared with 12% before March 2020 (ABS, 2020).

### **A large number of Coronavirus-related fines have been issued in Victoria, but most have not been paid**

- More than \$27.8 million in Coronavirus-related fines have been issued in Victoria since the start of the pandemic, but only 845 of more than 19,000 fines have been paid. Data from Fines Victoria shows 1,424 of the 19,324 COVID-19 fines issued up until August 24 have been withdrawn or cancelled (Pearson, 2020).



## Goal 4: Sustainable Environment

### Local impacts

#### **Staff maintaining conversation reserves are limited by COVID restrictions**

- Contractors servicing conversation reserves need to limit close contact on site due to social distancing measures. This has affected the capacity of staff to complete work (CSNAP, 2020).

#### **Contractors are travelling to worksites via personal vehicles to adhere to social distancing measures, resulting in more cars on the road and impacts on the environment**

- Contractors servicing conversation reserves need to travel to sites in their personal vehicles due to social distancing measures. Multiple vehicles travelling to a site, as opposed to workers travelling in the same vehicle, means that services provided by the City of Whittlesea are directly impacting the environment through CO<sup>2</sup> emissions (CSNAP, 2020).

### State and national impacts

#### **Public transport use is down**

- Only 2% of people in Victoria used public transport at all between mid-August to mid-September, compared with 28% in NSW and 17% in Australia (ABS, 2020). Pre-COVID usage rates in Victoria is around 14% (MetroTrains, 2020).

#### **Energy use is up**

- According to industry estimates, residential energy consumption was up by 15-20% over winter (Bainbridge & Kent, 2020).



*Productivity losses can be attributed to COVID as staff are not able to work closely together or deliver certain activities, such as planting, due to restrictions only allowing essential park maintenance services under stage four.*

**PARKS AND URBAN DESIGN  
DEPARTMENT**

## Data notes

### CSNAP

The CSNAP (COVID Snapshot) is a short survey tool for community-facing staff at the City of Whittlesea to record observations of community impact related to COVID-19. The data is anecdotal and should therefore be considered in the context of other local, state and national data.

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