



Moreland
City Council

Pandemic Recovery

Community and business recovery effort over the next 18-24 months



Topic snapshot

In response to the State Government's declaration of a State of Emergency on 14 March 2020, a whole-of-Council response and relief effort was implemented, to protect and support the local economy, community and staff.

The impacts of Covid-19 have had a disproportionate effect on many vulnerable groups and has magnified existing inequalities. The Moreland community is relying on Council to continue "business as usual", while also responding to the needs of the community and businesses for new services, resources and support as the focus moves towards recovery. Disaster recovery provides an opportunity to "build back better" and work towards addressing entrenched issues of discrimination / disadvantage and climate change.

The key issues are:

- 1. Financial distress:** impacts for households.
- 2. Mental health and wellbeing:** the mental health toll on the Moreland community.
- 3. Digital access and inclusion:** impact of technological barriers.
- 4. Social inequalities and vulnerabilities:** isolation, discrimination and family violence.

Council's approach has been multifaceted and has included:

- Allocation of \$6,242,000 funding to complement and address (where appropriate) gaps in Federal and State support packages including: Council rates and fee relief for cases of hardship; and grants to community organisations and businesses are outlined below and in Attachments 1 and 2.
- Regular liaison with the Department of Health and Human Services and other departments and implementation of a range of initiatives, including the provision of logistical and other support for Covid-19 testing in priority suburbs.
- Performing emergency management roles and responsibilities as outlined in the Victorian State Emergency Management Plan including provision of critical emergency management public information.



Relevant Council services

Maternal and Child Health

- Telehealth for clients and a range of digital platforms for meetings, community forums such as dads' groups and new parent groups.

Libraries

- Story time, English language conversation classes, book groups, Maker Space, click and collect and "drop off" options for library books and internet enabled iPads for loan.

Youth services

- Digital platforms for a range of online events and creative programming

Children's services

- Online, outreach and 'drop off' of resources for playgroups

Meal delivery service

- "Drop off" options for delivered meals

Data and community feedback

Digital access and inclusion

- In 2016 almost 15% of households (approximately 9,500 households) in Moreland did not have internet access in their home (ABS, 2016). Older persons (46%) and low-income householders (38%) are groups with largest % without internet. Glenroy and Coburg had the highest numbers, each with around 1,500 households with no internet access (ABS, 2016, see also MCC 2020a).
- Local community organisations and service providers have indicated to Council access to technology is one of the most frequently reported community needs from the pandemic, including requests for devices and support related to digital literacy (MCC, 2020b).

Mental health and wellbeing

- Loneliness is the most experienced personal stressor related to Covid-19, with 22% people in Australia/ Victoria reporting high levels of loneliness and one in two (50%) reporting that they feel lonelier since the pandemic began (ABS, 2020; Lim, et al, 2020)
- It is estimated that the impacts of social isolation, unemployment and financial insecurity will result in an additional 750 to 1500 suicide deaths per year in Australia (Bartone, et al, 2020; Shakespeare-Finch, et al, 2020).
- People living alone make up 23% of all households in Moreland (ABS 2016, see also MCC 2020c); 33% of these households reported that they did not have internet access, and also one third were as older persons (65 years and older) (MCC 2020c).
- Glenroy Headspace (Youth Mental Health Service) has reported increased demand from young people seeking clinical mental health support since the pandemic began and the current waiting time to see a counsellor is approximately four months.
- Support related social isolation has been the second most frequently and consistently reported community need by local community organisations and service providers from March – September 2020 (second to food relief) (see MCC 2020b).

Social inequalities and vulnerabilities

- There are significant populations of other vulnerable community groups living in Moreland that are likely

to be disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 (and extreme weather such as heatwaves), including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, persons living with a disability, persons with poor or no spoken English, single parent families, low-income households, persons that are unemployed or at high risk of unemployment, and older persons (see MCC 2020e for further information on vulnerable communities in Moreland)

- In the year up to June 2020 there were 2,010 incidents of family violence recorded in Moreland, directly affecting 1,452, women, and 123 children (CSA 2020) and recent research indicates that since Covid-19 many women in Australia have experienced an onset or escalation of violence and abuse (AIC, 2020).
- Over 100 local community organisations and service providers have indicated to Council the categories of most community need are food relief, social isolation support, health and medication, and IT support (MCC, 2020b).

Financial distress

- In 2016 there were around 25% of Moreland households were classified as low income; people living alone and single-parent families were more likely to be low income than other household types (ID, 2019).
- In July this year, just over 12,000 Moreland residents were receiving either Job Seeker or New Start Allowance, this is an increase of 7,000 since March 2020 (DSS, 2020, see also MCC 2020f)
- Residents employed in Accommodation and Food Services industries are likely to have had their employment status impacted the most by Covid-19 and in 2016 this industry employed around 6,400 Moreland residents (ABS 2016, see also MCC 2020f).

Note: In addition to the information above, a Secondary Impact Assessment is being undertaken to determine and assess the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the social, economic, built and natural environments and the Moreland community, as part of Council's Emergency Management obligations to the State Government. The Secondary Impact Assessment research is scheduled to be completed by December 2020 and will provide an important and additional source of data and community feedback to the information above.



Key issue 1: Financial Distress

Impacts for households

Key issue 1: Financial Distress

Issues overview

Many Moreland households are enduring financial stress due to employment impacts and the consequent reduction in income. Unemployment and under-employment are likely to worsen in the coming months, as short-term job creation schemes wind up and the Jobkeeper wage subsidy ends in March 2021. Young people, women and people from asylum seeker, refugee and migrant backgrounds have been particularly impacted by the collapse of the jobs market.

For some groups who are not eligible for Federal or State Government support payments, it has meant no income at all. These groups include asylum seekers, refugees and international students. Many have relied on local organisations for food and other emergency relief. People with disability and their carers are experiencing additional and unforeseen costs, with some facing extreme financial hardship.

The ongoing provision of emergency relief will continue to be an important role as many households are expected to face ongoing financial difficulties.

Opportunities

- Gather more data on the impact and community needs in the coming months to inform decisions on longer term recovery planning.
- Support and strengthen volunteering infrastructure to harness Moreland's strong culture of volunteering through the development of a strategy to assist in coordinating and supporting community recovery.

Challenges

- Supporting households facing uncertainty after March 2021 given the uncertain jobs market and indications that economic recovery is likely to be slow.
- Managing the growing demand for food and material aid as many individuals and families are accessing food relief services for the first time and Moreland food relief agencies are reporting they are not able to meet the demand.
- Providing culturally appropriate food relief and ensuring its safe delivery.
- Addressing the gap in Moreland's volunteering infrastructure in terms of both a need for better ways to harness the goodwill of the community and build capacity of organisations to involve volunteers.



Key issue 2: Mental Health and Wellbeing

The mental toll on the Moreland community

Key issue 2: Mental Health and Wellbeing

Issues overview

Council finances and assets need to be managed in a way that ensures the community has what it needs now and in the future. Assets are the infrastructure needed to deliver council services. For example, buildings, recreation centres, libraries, roads and parks. Consideration needs to be given to current and future needs for services and assets. Ongoing operational and maintenance costs also need to be considered.

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing of the Moreland community due to the impacts of public health measures: “stay at home orders” and restricted activities leading to widespread social and economic disruption (Shakespeare-Finch, et al., 2020). Social isolation and chronic uncertainty are exacerbating psychological distress and mental health problems among previously healthy people and especially among those with pre-existing mental health conditions.

Children and young people have experienced detrimental impacts due to disruption to education and inability to socialise and the stresses for families. The inability to enjoy recreation and sports or participate in extracurricular activities has also been a significant factor leading to stress, anxiety, and other mental health concerns. Moreland Youth Services and other local providers have also seen a significant increase in referrals for young people seeking support for mental health issues.


It is evident that Covid-19 has amplified the structural inequalities that drive poor mental health outcomes for women. Mental health services in Victoria have reported a significant increase in women presenting with serious mental health issues during Covid-19, including severe anxiety and depression.

Opportunities

- Strengthen the focus on mental health in the Council Plan (integrated with the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan) and the next Youth and Early Years Plan (currently being developed) and the implementation of the Living and Ageing Well framework.
- Influence the social determinants of health at the population level through regional partnerships to support mental health and wellbeing, for example, The Moreland Youth Commitment Network will have an increased focus on mental health in 2021.
- Promote community-led initiatives that support mental health and access to relevant services, for example, through our Community Grants program.
- Promote opportunities for community participation following Covid-19, to rebuild the confidence of residents to connect with others and address any mental health issues that may have arisen during this time.

Challenges

- While local government plays a key role in supporting the social determinants of health (the foundations for good health), it does not have a direct role in the mental health service system.
- Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the community in the context of other impacts of Covid-19, including growing inequality, poverty, unemployment, housing and financial stress.
- Ensuring local mental health services and supports are culturally appropriate and able to respond to the level of need in a timely way.
- The Jobkeeper wage subsidy is due to end on 28 March 2021, leaving many in the community facing potential financial insecurity and housing stress, both of which are risk factors for mental illness (Phillips, et al., 2020; WHO, 2014).



Key issue 3: Digital Access and Inclusion

Impacts of technological barriers

Issues overview

The digital divide has been highlighted during the pandemic, magnifying the disparity of access faced by Moreland's vulnerable communities. Households without internet access, those who struggle to afford access and others who do not have the skills to be digitally literate were all extremely vulnerable during Covid-19.

Waiting lists for early intervention and allied health professionals have also increased as some families experienced challenges with telehealth appointments due to technological barriers, preference for face-to-face appointments, and at times, disengagement with services.

Digital access has been key to maintaining social connections during the pandemic, and to accessing information, education, employment and critical programs and services, with many of these services operating remotely.

Opportunities

- Address digital inclusion across Moreland, particularly for older residents, people with disability, families and newly arrived communities.
- Expand digital loan schemes via libraries and neighbourhood houses.
- Explore the impact of broadening public WIFI access as well as advocating for more reliable, affordable National Broadband Network (NBN) access.

- Support for individuals, households and community groups with limited skills, equipment or devices to access data.
- Support with digital literacy to access available resources and to participate online.

Challenges

- Affordability is a significant barrier for low income earners and households experiencing financial stress.

Issues overview

Social isolation and loneliness are significant risk factors in relation to mental health. Requests for social isolation support has been consistent throughout the pandemic, particularly among older people and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Some older residents have chosen to suspend Council services due to safety concerns of having staff enter homes, for example, domestic assistance.

The loss of social interaction was the primary concern for most young people surveyed by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, with anecdotal evidence though Youth Services confirming this. Moreland Youth Commitment Network has reported that those already marginalised are the most impacted by the pandemic, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTIQ+, Indigenous, international students and students with a disability.

People with disability and their families experienced higher vulnerability due to pre-existing health conditions and disruption to essential supports and services. Many struggle to interact with the wider world online. Some families experienced greater adverse impacts of social isolation and increased stress due to being unable to access respite or informal supports.

Key issue 4: Social inequalities and vulnerabilities

Social isolation and loneliness

Opportunities

- Address some of the impacts of social isolation for older people. For example, a Social Connection for Older People working group was formed during restrictions. Several new programs and initiatives were also established, and existing services adapted to meet the changing needs.
- Provide meals and social support, with the need to support older people to stay at home with access to food and social connection opportunities.
- Support the Moreland community services sector to better meet the growing needs and to advocate to State and Federal Governments to ensure that a safety net is provided for the most vulnerable in our community.

Challenges

- Mental health issues associated with social isolation and the consequent impacts are likely to increase the longer the pandemic continues.
- People are “falling through the gaps” due to a lack of information, infrastructure and eligibility for services.
- Many older residents are unable to volunteer due to social isolation and are cut off from family, friends and social connections.



Key issue 5: Social Inequalities and Vulnerabilities

Racism, discrimination and threats to social cohesion

Issues overview

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission reports that enquiries about racism have increased since the pandemic began, and anonymous reports of racism doubled between March and May 2020.

The nature of these reports also changed over that period, suggesting experiences of racial discrimination in employment had shifted towards racial abuse, and included reports of unfair treatment on the street, on public transport or online.

Opportunities

- Prioritise social cohesion activities in recovery from the pandemic by supporting access to education and cultural resources and opportunities to overcome social isolation.
- Build on innovative ways of working with the community, such as through the Moreland Connector Program, in partnership with organisations who employ or engage directly with members of the community (bicultural workers, peer educators, young people, seniors).
- Involve the community directly in designing and delivery of messages in appropriate ways for them.

Challenges

- Implications for promoting social cohesion into the future with the increase in racist attitudes, behaviours and experiences during the pandemic which has already caused significant harm to communities.
- Weakened trust people have in others and in public institutions, which may discourage people from connecting with the broader community, from seeking support from essential health and social services, and from engaging in other aspects of community life.
- Challenges for governments in communicating with and engaging many diverse and newly arrived communities as highlighted by Covid-19. Mainstream communication methods were found not to reach many in the community - messages needed to be targeted to ensure they were received and understood.

Issues overview

Covid-19 and related restrictions socio-economic impacts have heightened stressors for family violence, with women reporting significant increases in intimate partner violence. (Australian Institute of Criminology [AIC], 2020; Peterman, et al., 2020). Concerns have also been raised about possible underreporting of incidences due to “stay at home” orders.

Due to children’s lack of visibility in the community and increased family stress, child safety has been identified as a concern, with increase in Child Protection notifications during the pandemic.

Covid-19 has heightened the risk of family violence for some young people who live in highly stressed and unstable homes, with homelessness, housing and income insecurity leading to a general trend of young people returning to their family homes during this period, even if they are not always the safest places to be. Youth Services are also aware of several cases where young people have been the perpetrators of family violence, due to increased frustration and pressures impacting on families due to the highly restrictive “stay at home” orders.

Key issue 6: Social inequalities and vulnerabilities

Family violence

Opportunities

- Support the State Government’s Free from Violence Strategy at the local level.
- Continue to work with partnership with organisations in the prevention of family violence in alignment with the Moreland Gender Equality Commitment.
- Provide targeted, culturally sensitive information to a range of groups.

Challenges

- Inability of victims to access assistance, due to being confined to home with perpetrators. There has not been substantial evidence to support this but remains a potential risk.
- Increased need for support post Covid-19. It is expected that victims will start accessing family violence services at an increased rate following the easing of restrictions.

Related projects and strategies

Projects	Description
Community Information and the Be Kind Moreland Campaign.	Updates on restricted activities; accessing Covid-19 testing; where to get help and the range of services and supports available.
Emergency Management Coordination	<p>Ongoing coordination of response and recovery activities in alignment with Federal and State Government initiatives.</p> <p>Working in partnership with local groups and organisations to respond to local needs in a coordinated way: established service provider newsletter and networks; established food and material relief network; and</p>
Community Connector Program	The program has seven “Connectors” from non-English speaking backgrounds who assist in communicating essential information to community groups.
Community Activation and Social Isolation Initiative (CASI)	A Department of Health and Human Services funded six-month initiative - a team of four Community Navigators help people affected by Covid-19 maintain connections with family, friends and the community and build new social connections and networks of support.
Working for Victoria Program	State Government funding enabling Council to employ over 300 people for up to six months each in a variety of roles.



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