



# *Raising young children in Greater Dandenong*

An initial needs study for the Communities for  
Children Program



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# Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Overview of Greater Dandenong</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3 Method</b>	<b>2</b>
Reflections on the process	3
<b>4 Findings: Characteristics of people interviewed</b>	<b>5</b>
Gender	5
Age	5
Place of living – suburb	6
Partner in household	6
Ethnic origin	7
Time overseas respondents spent living in Australia and in Greater Dandenong	7
<b>5 Findings: Raising a family in Greater Dandenong</b>	<b>8</b>
Residents’ opinion of the place where they live	8
Child and family services used and desired	10
Specific issues in relation to services	11
Barriers to accessing family and children’s services in general	14
Improvements to physical infrastructure for parents	17
Information provision	18
Community strengthening and social capital	19
<b>6 Conclusions</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>7 References</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>List of figures</b>	
Figure 4.1 Gender of the 111 survey respondents	5
Figure 4.2 Age of the 111 survey respondents	5
Figure 4.3 Place of living of the 111 survey respondents	6
Figure 4.4 Number of children by percentage of respondents	7
Figure 5.1 Satisfaction with suburb	8
Figure 5.2 The ten services most frequently used by respondents (N=65)	10
<b>List of tables</b>	
Table 3.1 Interview groups	3
Table 4.1 Suburbs in which respondents lived, other than Dandenong, Dandenong North, Dandenong South or Bangholme	6
Table 4.2: Time overseas-born respondents had lived in Australia	7
Table 4.3: Time respondents had lived in Dandenong	8
Table 5.1 Table 5.1 Comparison of methods of travel to work between Greater Dandenong and metropolitan Melbourne	16

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# 1 Introduction

Communities for Children is a new program funded by the Australian Government which seeks to improve the outcomes for Australian children up to five years of age. The four-year program is located in 45 sites<sup>1</sup> chosen according to need. Needs were ascertained with reference to numbers of families receiving Family Tax Benefit, other indicators of disadvantage and consultations with state and territory governments. Under Communities for Children, non-government organisations are funded to coordinate and facilitate local services and the resources of the local community to improve the well-being of young children.

The target issues are defined on the Communities for Children web page:

- early child and maternal health—focusing on pregnancy and post-natal care, promoting healthy lifestyles and support for children with additional needs
- early learning and care—focusing on better integrated service delivery, early learning from birth and the transition to school
- child-friendly communities—creating environments that support children and families
- supporting families and parents—strengthening relationships and support for parenting
- working together—focusing on partnerships and flexibility (Department of Family and Community Services 2006).

Mission Australia, in association with the City of Greater Dandenong, has been funded to facilitate Communities for Children in Greater Dandenong. This site covers the postcode 3175, comprising Dandenong, Dandenong North, Dandenong South and Bangholme. The Brotherhood of St Laurence was engaged to coordinate an initial study of the needs of children in this area. The study, undertaken in August and September 2005, involved consultations with local community members. It was designed to particularly capture the opinions of both residents and those using the services of the community.

This report outlines the findings from these consultations. It should be viewed as a working document from which information will be refined as the Dandenong Communities for Children program develops.

## 2 Overview of Greater Dandenong

The Local Government Area (LGA) of Greater Dandenong is located 31 kilometres south-west of Melbourne. It is Melbourne's second largest city, with an estimated population of 133,000 in 2005. It is bordered by the City of Kingston to the west, the City of Frankston to the south, the City of Casey to the east and the Cities of Monash and Knox to the north.

The City of Greater Dandenong is the most culturally diverse municipality in Victoria. It is home to people from over 150 different nations who speak over 40 different languages. More than half of the population (52%) were born overseas, compared with 27% across Melbourne. Each year some 2,300 new migrants settle in Greater Dandenong.

Since the Second World War, Dandenong has been an industrial and service hub and a popular area for settlement by migrants including refugee and humanitarian arrivals. In the 1950s, large numbers of immigrants from European countries such as Italy, Greece, Malta, Poland and Russia settled in the area. In the 1970s, people fleeing war and persecution in Vietnam and Cambodia began arriving. Significant numbers arrived from Bosnia and Afghanistan in the 1990s. In recent years, large numbers of immigrants have come from Sudan, Afghanistan and Ethiopia (City of Greater Dandenong 2005a, pp. 4–5). Between 2001 and 2005, the number of Afghan migrants increased by

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<sup>1</sup> A small number of new sites have recently been announced by the federal government.

two-thirds to 1,600. The latest new arrivals include 890 Hazara, Tajik and Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan: these are mainly men who have experienced detention in Australia and have now, after five years on Temporary Protection Visas, received permanent residency (personal communication, Ainslie Hannan, 7 December 2005).

The largest number of humanitarian arrivals in Greater Dandenong has been (and is predicted to remain in the next five years) from Sudan (City of Greater Dandenong 2005, p.8). Between 2001 and 2005, Sudanese residents increased ten-fold to 1,800. Other large groups are from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, China, India, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vietnam and Cambodia. The four main religions of residents in Dandenong 3175 are Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. In Dandenong South there are more Islamic residents than Christian, with 43.3% of residents being of the Islamic faith.

The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSED) score, derived from ABS 2001 Census data, shows that the City of Greater Dandenong is the lowest-ranked of Victoria's municipalities (Department of Human Services 2003). The median weekly disposable income of Greater Dandenong residents in 2001 was \$295, around three-quarters of the Melbourne median of \$405 (City of Greater Dandenong 2003, p.14).

A higher percentage of residents in Greater Dandenong (31%) work in labouring or trades than the Melbourne average (20%) (City of Greater Dandenong 2003, p13). The unemployment rate (11% in 2001) has largely been around 50% higher than that for metropolitan Melbourne, for nearly a decade. Residents who have come from countries such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Albania, Cambodia, Vietnam and China experience particularly high levels of unemployment.

In postcode 3175 there are 47,600 residents, including 2,660 children under four years of age. There are 8,480 families with children, distributed between Dandenong North (4,680), Dandenong (2,780), Dandenong South (920) and Bangholme (an area with a combination of industry and farming, with only 100 families with children).

### 3 Method

This Community Needs Study was undertaken by staff from the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Janet Stanley, Nina Bailey, Jill Webb and Martina Boese) and Communities for Children staff (Helen Ansems, Corrie Berkeley and Maria Agrofilakos). The Brotherhood of St Laurence designed and coordinated the study, in association with Helen Ansems, Manager, Communities for Children, Greater Dandenong.

Information on community needs was gathered from selected existing community groups who both care for young children and who may be at risk of social exclusion. Eight groups were selected to provide variety in terms of location, type of group and ethnic mix (see Table 3.1). In addition to these groups, members of the public were approached at two well-known Dandenong locations (Dandenong Market and Dandenong Plaza Shopping Centre) to gain insights from a broader selection of people who live, work or use facilities in Greater Dandenong. Interviews were conducted with 111 respondents.

**Table 3.1 Interview groups**

<b>Group name and location</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Indigenous Playgroup, Noble Park	5
Dandenong Playgroup, Dandenong	6
South Dandenong Playgroup, Dandenong South	3
Club Young Parents, Noble Park	9
McFees New Mothers Group, Dandenong North	10
Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES)	13
English Class 1	
AMES English Class 2	17
Multi-Cultural Playgroup, Dandenong	8
Dandenong Market	26
Dandenong Plaza	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>

In addition , three separate focus groups were held:

- the **Arabic Women’s Group** in Springvale, with 12 women present
- the **Serbian Parents and Grandparents Group** in Dandenong, with six women (three parents and three grandparents), five of whom live in Dandenong and one who lives in Berwick
- the **Afghani Playgroup** in Noble Park, with ten women, living in Narre Warren, Endeavour Hills, Dandenong, Hallam and Hampton Park.

The Needs Study questionnaire was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative information. Respondents were asked about personal and household details as well as their opinions of Dandenong as a place to raise a family and to be involved in the community and the services available in this area.

The majority of the 111 questionnaires were completed during individual interviews. The exceptions were the following:

- Club Young Parents
- AMES English Class 1
- AMES English Class 2.

For these three groups, Section One of the questionnaire was self-completed by the respondents and Section Two was conducted as a focus group discussion. The interviewers made the decision about group or individual discussion just prior to the session; based on factors such as the presence of children, the need for translators, the need to suit the pre-existing group program, and site restrictions, such as room layout. The AMES English classes had the assistance of translators for each section of the questionnaire.

## **Reflections on the process**

### *Accessing people in need*

An inherent methodological problem of research with people who are at risk of social exclusion is the issue that because they are suffering from social exclusion, they are difficult to locate. The study methodology provided access to people known to attend at least one formal service group. Therefore, it could be argued that the interviewees were somewhat less excluded than people who belonged to no formal service groups. The size of the latter population in the 3175 postcode area is unknown. It is hoped that this group will be accessed as the Communities for Children program unfolds.

### *Respondents' reactions to the interview process*

While the attitudes of interviewees to being part of this Needs Study ranged from unwilling to enthusiastic, most were happy to share their thoughts on their neighbourhood and the issues they face as a parents.

A small number of people at the two public consultations—the Market and Plaza—declined to be interviewed because they said they did not have sufficient English skills. This was less than expected, considering that Greater Dandenong has the highest proportion of residents with limited fluency in spoken English in Victoria (City of Greater Dandenong 2003, p.7). Given that these people came from minority ethnic groups, and potentially represent some of the more isolated and socially excluded members of the Dandenong community, it would have been valuable to include them in this study. However, the wide range of languages spoken meant that it was not practical to use translators at the public consultations, although translators were used where necessary in the group discussions, particularly with the Serbian, Afghan, and Arabic communities.

There was one instance where an Indigenous respondent (at the Indigenous Playgroup in Dandenong) appeared uncomfortable being interviewed and appeared to censor her answers, making them as brief and uncritical as possible. This brings up the notion of interviewer as authority figure, in the sense that this woman seemed to distrust the interview process and was suspicious of how the information would be used. It could be hypothesised that some migrants who declined to be interviewed on the grounds of insufficient English were also wary (or even fearful) of authority figures asking them questions.

### *Strengths and weaknesses of the questionnaire, survey results and the interview process*

A few questionnaires from the public consultations were not fully completed. Some respondents were unwilling to spend the roughly ten minutes for the interview. Also, some respondents' limited English (in both the public consultations and the other interviews) meant that they were not able to respond to a question, or interviewers chose not to ask certain more complex questions.

A significant number of respondents (particularly at the two public consultations) were found to live outside of the 3175 postcode. It is not clear whether these people were describing Dandenong or their own suburb in some of their survey answers. However, the surveys are still considered useful as they demonstrate that the catchment area for retail and possibly early childhood and other services in Dandenong is wider than these four suburbs alone. The issues described (for example, drugs, crime, community interaction) are likely to be similar in surrounding areas to those found in postcode 3175. As one Hampton Park Wurunjeri mother said (at the Indigenous Playgroup in Dandenong), 'Here is same as other neighbourhoods—good/bad [sic]'.

This Community Needs Study was conducted with little lead time, in order to meet the deadlines of the Communities for Children program. It would have been beneficial to spend longer on the questionnaire design and testing. The questionnaire might have worked better in public settings if it had been slightly shorter, as it was sometimes difficult to engage people in ten or more minutes of conversation in the middle of their shopping. This might have improved the response rate to some questions. Interviewers might also have benefited from more training. However, the vast majority of interviewees spoke openly and comfortably about their parenting experiences and opinions of their suburb, so the major aims of the study were achieved.

Particularly successful methods of engaging interviewees included the handing out of balloons at the public consultations, to attract the attention of the children while interviewers introduced themselves to the parents and explained the purpose of the study. In the service user group consultations interviewers brought along a cake or other food to offer to the group and thank them for their participation, a gesture which was well received.

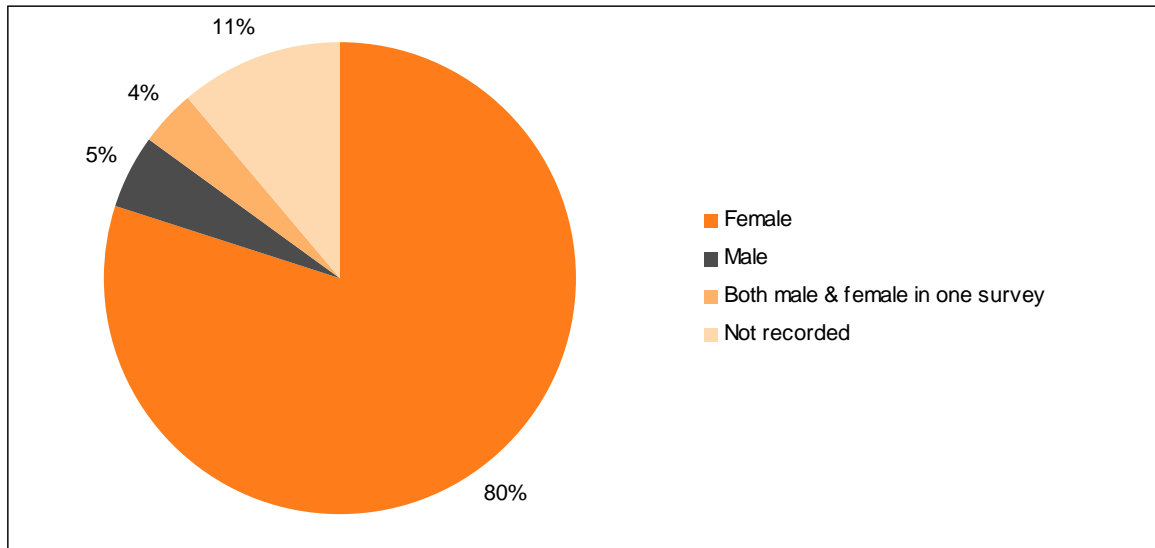


## 4 Findings: Characteristics of people interviewed

### Gender

As the groups surveyed were specifically organised for mothers or, in the case of the playgroups, were usually attended by mothers, most respondents were women (Figure 4.1). The AMES Class 1 and the Dandenong Market and Dandenong Plaza groups included men.

**Figure 4.1 Gender of the 111 survey respondents**

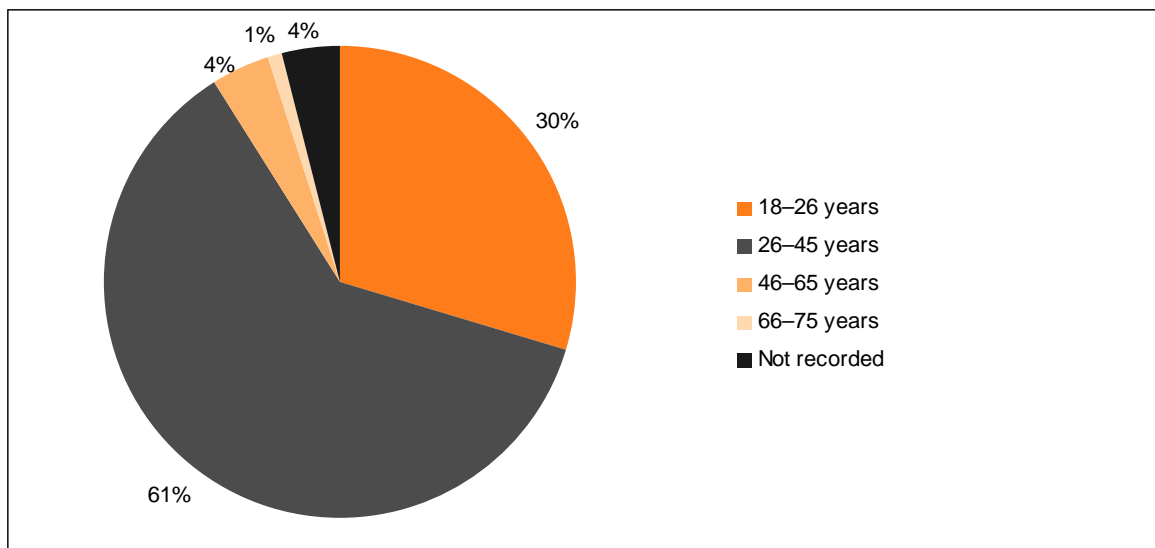


Note: Figures in this and subsequent charts may not add to 100% due to rounding

### Age

None of the parents interviewed was under 18 years old—not even those in the young mothers group (Figure 4.2). Interviewers might have expected some mothers under 18. It may be that such young mothers were missed due to chance, or that they are not attending existing group services—an issue which needs further exploration in the Communities for Children program. The study did interview some grandmothers, who generally spoke about the parenting experience of their children.

**Figure 4.2 Age of the 111 survey respondents**

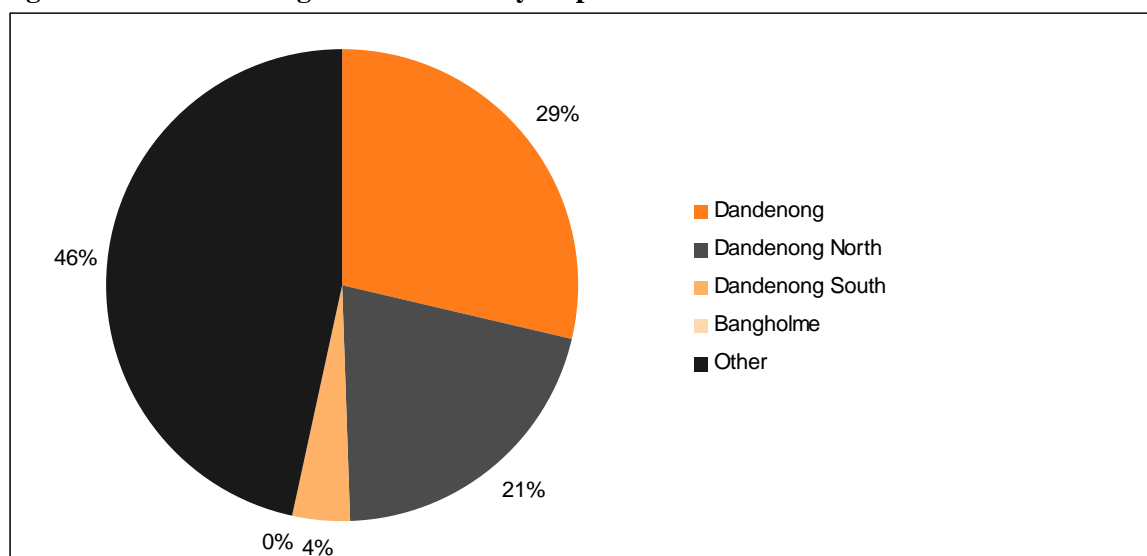


## Place of living – suburb

Figure 4.3 shows the respondents' place of residence: of 59 respondents who lived within the 3175 postcode area, 32 lived in Dandenong, 23 in Dandenong North, four in Dandenong South and none in Bangholme. This survey slightly over-represents the families with children who actually live in Dandenong and slightly under-represents the families with children who live in Dandenong North.

Forty-nine respondents lived outside the 3175 postcode suburbs (Figure 4.3, Table 4.1). These respondents generally live in other suburbs in Greater Dandenong or in the adjacent municipalities of Casey, Kingston, Frankston and Knox (69%). It is interesting to reflect on the numbers of people resident outside the area who use services within postcode 3175.

**Figure 4.3 Place of living of the 111 survey respondents**



Note: No respondents live in Bangholme.

**Table 4.1 Suburbs in which respondents lived, other than Dandenong, Dandenong North, Dandenong South or Bangholme**

Local Government Area	Suburb	Number of respondents (N = 49)	Percentage of total 49 respondents
Greater Dandenong	Noble Park, Springvale, Keysborough	13	27%
Casey	Hampton Park, Hallam, Endeavour Hills, Doveton, Narre Warren, Berwick, Cranbourne	22	45%
Kingston	Clayton South, Waterways	2	4%
Frankston	Frankston, Langwarren, Seaford, Carrum Downs	8	16%
Knox	Rowville, Ferntree Gully	2	4%
Bayside	Sandringham	1	2%
unknown	'a neighbouring suburb'	1	2%

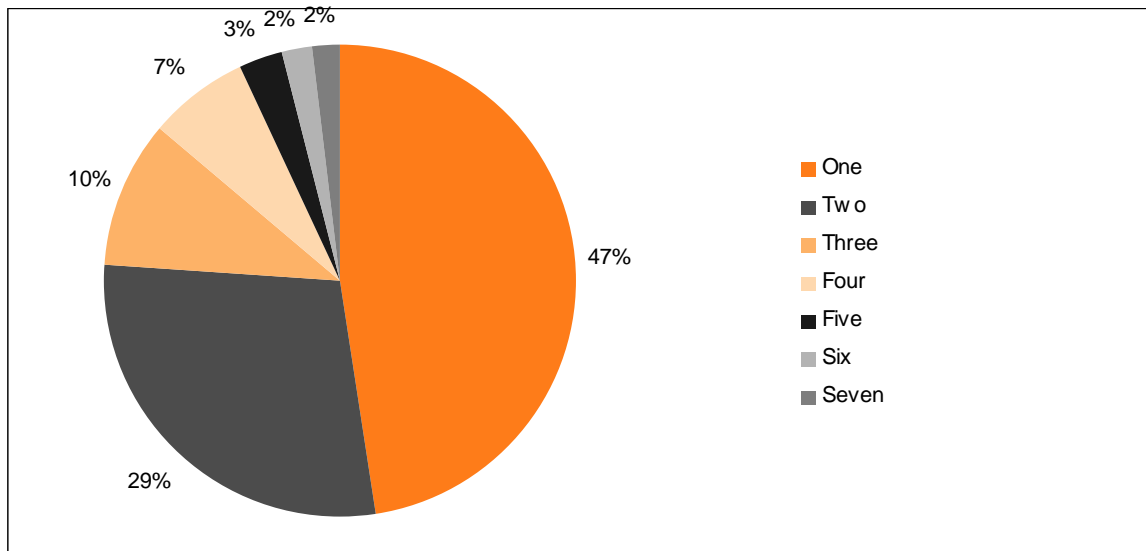
## Partner in household

Where this information was obtained (97 respondents or 87%), just over three-quarters of respondents (77%) came from two-parent households and 23% came from single-parent households. As the rate of single-parent households is 19%, the sample is fairly representative on this issues (ABS 2001 Census).

### Number and age of children

The largest group of respondents (47%) have one child (Figure 4.4). This pattern could reflect the fact that is often ‘first time mothers’ who attend parenting groups. Large families (with four or more children) represented only 14% of the respondents.

**Figure 4.4 Number of children by percentage of respondents**



### Ethnic origin

Twenty-five of the 111 interview respondents (23%) identified themselves as Australian. The other 76 people identified themselves with 33 nationalities mainly from across Asia and Europe. Of these the largest single group was from Sudan (23 people), reflecting their attendance at an English class used for the survey. The remaining nationalities were represented by one to seven people. Ten people did not respond to this question.

In addition to the 111 interviews, the three extra focus groups included 13 Arabic women (nationalities unknown, religion: 10 Muslim and 2 Christian); six Serbian women, and 10 Afghani women.

This range of cultural backgrounds reflects the cultural diversity within Dandenong. The study slightly over-represents migrant nationalities (2001 Census), but this was deliberate, reflecting a desire to understand their needs of people from a variety of ethnic groups.

### Time overseas respondents spent living in Australia and in Greater Dandenong

Sixty of the respondents (54%) stated they were born outside Australia (Table 4.2). Most of these were new arrivals, with 30% of the total number surveyed having been in Australia two years or less. This high number may, in part, reflect the inclusion of attendees in the two English classes in this survey.

**Table 4.2: Time overseas-born respondents had lived in Australia**

Time	No. (N=60)	% of total surveyed
Under 1 year	20	18%
1 to 2 years	13	12%
Over 2 but under 5 years	5	4%
Over 5 years	22	20%

All respondents were asked how long they had lived in Dandenong (Table 4.3), though some responded in terms of their present place of living (even if it was not Dandenong). The findings suggest some mobility: Forty-five per cent of the total survey had been in Dandenong (or surrounding area) less than two years. As noted in Table 4.2, some movement was due to migration from overseas. However, almost one-third of those surveyed appear to have locational stability.

**Table 4.3: Time respondents had lived in Dandenong**

Time	No. (N=95)	% of total surveyed
Under 1 year	27	28%
1 to 2 years	16	17%
Over 2 but under 5 years	23	24%
Over 5 years	29	31%

Note: Not known, 16 (of whom some lived outside Dandenong)

## 5 Findings: Raising a family in Greater Dandenong

### Residents’ opinion of the place where they live

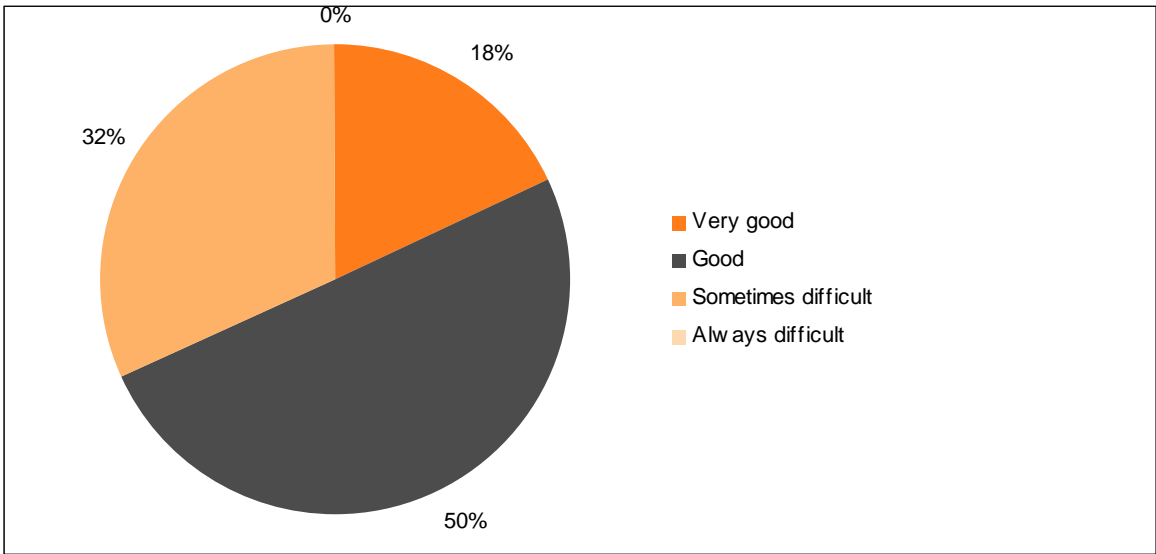
Interviewees and focus group participants were asked whether theirs was a good neighbourhood in which to raise children (Figure 5.1), with a choice between:

- very good
- good
- difficult sometimes, or
- always difficult

Only 68 of the 111 interviewees responded to this question. Roughly half of these people lived outside of the four postcode 3175 suburbs, but in suburbs close to or within the Greater Dandenong LGA. There was no obvious variance in responses between people within 3175 and those from other areas.

The majority of people expressed a positive opinion of their suburb (Figure 5.1). Sixty-eight per cent of respondents selected either ‘good’ or ‘very good’ and none described their suburb as ‘always difficult’.

**Figure 5.1 Satisfaction with suburb**



Note: Nil responses for ‘Always difficult’.

## Reasons for respondents' opinions about their suburb

### *The factors which make a suburb 'very good'*

Mobility and proximity to useful amenities or services were the reasons cited by most of the 12 people who said their suburb was a 'very good' place to live. Respondents specifically mentioned appreciating that they lived close to parks, a crèche, playgroup, primary school, health centre, shops and relatives. Five people felt they lived close to 'everything' they need, and three valued the fact that they can walk to most places they need to visit.

Befriending neighbours and experiencing positive social interactions also gave rise to positive attitudes towards place of residence. A Dandenong North mother commented on her experience of community cohesion:

Lots of friendly neighbours—we basically know everyone in five houses down. Shops very friendly. Baby-friendly. Don't look at you funny [sic].

### *The factors which make a suburb 'good'*

While 34 respondents described their suburbs as 'good', they tended to offer a positive comment and then qualify it with a criticism.

In brief, the main positive comments about respondents' suburbs concerned:

- having a **park** nearby
- **multiculturalism or tolerance of ethnic diversity**—valuing cultural diversity and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups feeling accepted in Dandenong
- access to a **library** for free children's books
- access to other **services** such as schools, health centres, bus service or generally 'good services'
- good **parenting infrastructure**, such as access for prams and the availability of baby-change facilities.

The main criticisms were:

- long **waiting lists**, such as for preschool.
- **unsheltered parks**, lacking 'a covered area for kids to play'
- **crime, drugs and lack of safety**
- **poor housing**.

### *The factors which make a suburb 'difficult sometimes' to live in*

Just under a third of people who responded to this question (22 people) reported that their suburb is 'difficult sometimes'. The following were the major problems cited:

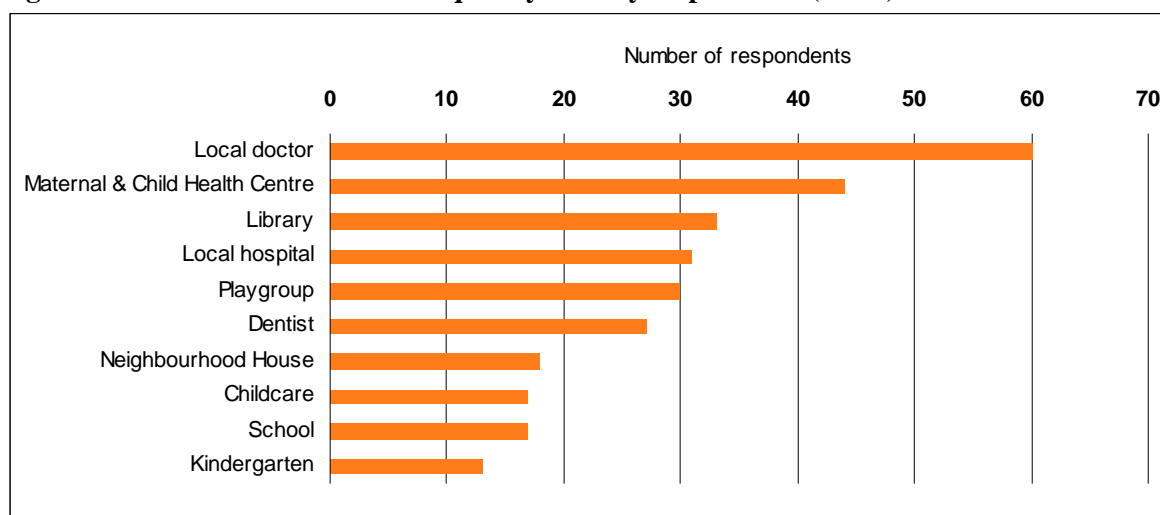
- **crime and drugs**
- **'hoons'**—conspicuously fast and dangerous drivers
- **cultural diversity**—children having difficulty mixing with children from different backgrounds at school or in the community
- **insufficient or unsuitable parks**
- **lack of transport** and/or **feeling isolated**.

## Child and family services used and desired

Respondents were asked which child and family services they used, from a list of 15 choices. The ten most commonly cited are shown in Figure 4.6<sup>2</sup>.

It should be noted that for each service listed, there were people who did not respond, either because they did not want to or the interviewer skipped the question due to time or communication considerations, so the survey results may understate actual use. However, the findings give an indication of relative use.

**Figure 5.2 The ten services most frequently used by respondents (N=65)**



The local doctor and Maternal and Child Health Centres were the highest used services. The library is used by a number of respondents both as a book loan service and as the location of other services, particularly child immunisation. One participant at the Club Young Mothers group thought that the local library was the only place to access immunisation services.

Two mothers at the Indigenous Playgroup mentioned the Bunurong Co-operative on Stud Road and one other mentioned a 'Koori health service' which may also be the Bunurong Co-operative. Comments about Bunurong were generally very positive, including:

Bunurong is a source of information about services available (this comment from two women)

Bunurong provides services ('paediatrician, doctor, physio, family support services, food vouchers' and Maternal and Child Health).

These brief comments suggest that Bunurong meets the needs of at least some of Greater Dandenong's Indigenous residents well. One mother said, however, that the Co-operative has very long waiting lists, 'especially for housing'; and another said that it is 'limited by funding' and that with increased resources Bunurong could improve the Youth Worker services and, through cultural programs and events, increase local awareness of Indigenous issues.

Given that six of the groups surveyed were playgroups, the low numbers using child-care is perhaps surprising. This may mean that some of those who use child-care tend not to attend playgroups, child-care may not be used in some cultural groups, or there is a shortage of child-care. This last explanation appears to be supported in the findings, below.

<sup>2</sup> Other options were: counselling/support agencies, toy library, English classes, parenting education classes and help with finding a job.

Respondents were asked if they would like to use a service in the future that they are not using at present. Of the 65 respondents, 26 said no, while 39 said yes. Services that people would like to use in future are:

- child-care (9 people)
- playgroup (7)
- toy library (6)
- parenting education classes (4)
- kindergarten (4).

Twenty people named ‘other’ services, such as children’s play areas (3 people), English classes (2), swimming pools (2) and counselling services (2).

### **Specific issues in relation to services**

The major themes around identified need are discussed further in the following section.

#### **Barriers to accessing child-care**

While child-care was currently only used by 17 respondents, it was mentioned by nine others as a service they would most likely use in the future. Child-care (or more, or cheaper child-care) was also mentioned when asked about what would help them as a parent. While some of these respondents were parents whose children were too young for child-care, others were parents who would like to send their children to child-care but were unable to do so. Several barriers to accessing child-care were apparent in this study.

#### *Waiting lists*

A Vietnamese mother from Springvale commented that she would have to wait two years to get her son into child-care in Springvale:

I want him to go there now but he must wait two years.

The Arabic Women’s Group mentioned long waiting lists for child-care and participants said they had to sign their children up as soon as they were born.

#### *Costs*

When people discussed the barriers to using services, they were prompted by the interviewer with several issues, including cost. When people discussed high costs of services, child-care was often the service they thought of first.

An Indian mother from Dandenong commented that her family, like other migrant families on work permits, faces higher child-care costs than permanent residents or Australian citizens as they do not qualify for the government rebate:

I want to [use a child-care service, but] we’re on work permit so charges are little bit higher for us. I want her to go to child-care: she can learn language from other kids. But when I enquire about charges, it’s pretty high.

The young mothers at the Club Young Parents focus group discussed their options regarding returning to work after having their children. One said that the prohibitive costs of child-care made her feel that mothers are ‘punished’ for going back to work. Another said that due to the cost of child-care, ‘financially, it’s not worth us [mothers] going back to work’ but that ‘[a] lot of us would like to’. Similarly, a Doveton parent interviewed at the Plaza wanted to work but found it hard because child-care is \$50 a day—unaffordable on earnings of only \$80 a day.

The Arabic Women's Group noted that child-care is particularly expensive for single income families and causes financial pressure which they viewed as detrimental to the child. Part of this pressure comes from the fact that if their child is sick and cannot attend child-care, the family must still pay for the service.

#### *Availability/flexibility of the service*

Several respondents mentioned a lack of child-care at TAFE or other adult educational facilities. Increased child-care at TAFE would help many parents continue their education or complete training courses.

The Club Young Parents focus group discussed their experiences of child-care and one young mother said that she knew of Dandenong parents using child-care in Casey where there was more available.

At the Serbian parents' and grandparents' group a mother commented that she would like to use an occasional child-care service but wondered 'what's the point?', when she found that she must book a week in advance: 'If I need to go shopping, I can't just drop off my child'.

Cultural issues (discussed below) were also mentioned in relation to barriers accessing child-care.

### **Parks**

Parks were important for a number of respondents. Almost half of the 58 people who responded to the question about making neighbourhoods better places for young children mentioned access to parks or improved parks. When asked specifically what would help them as a parent, three interviewees said they would appreciate improved parks. Most groups also discussed parks, with (for example) the AMES English Class 2 group reporting that there were no parks in Dandenong North. A participant in the Serbian parents and grandparents group commented:

Not enough parks for children to play at. Dandenong's becoming more and more a business centre. Very built up, not child friendly.

The following factors were mentioned as desirable features of local parks:

- children's play equipment
- safety, both in terms of fences and child-friendly facilities, and an absence of crime or drug-taking
- location close to respondents' houses
- location away from major roads
- being well-maintained, free of litter and well-landscaped
- shelter from sun and rain

### **Drugs, crime and lack of safety**

Drug-taking and dealing and crime, and the resultant lack of safety, were frequent criticisms. People often discussed these factors simultaneously, so they have been grouped together here.

People specifically mentioned that syringes in parks created an unsafe environment. Four of the five mothers at the Indigenous playgroup reported that their suburb is 'difficult sometimes' and all four cited drugs as the reason. Other comments from parents included:

[Lack of safety is] the biggest problem. In parks, public areas, some [are] a no-go area. [I] would like it to be safer. Feeling safe at home—lots of burglaries; murders sometimes.  
(Mother, Dandenong North)



After the sun goes down, it's a nightmare. Until [my] son is 16, he's not allowed out after dark. (Mother, Noble Park)

Idiots around the area—drug addicts, bad drivers ... People throwing up in [the] gutter. Go to doctor 'cause kid 's sick and there's drug addicts getting needles. (Father, Doveton)

The mothers at the Club Young Parents focus group discussed concerns about safety at length. While one mother reported that she's 'fine' living in this area [her suburb is unknown] and 'not scared', she then qualified this comment by saying that she never goes to the train station by herself. Others were openly critical about a lack of safety, both at night and during the day, and relayed stories they had heard of robberies and rapes. One mother commented that a woman had turned up at her door, 'covered in blood because her boyfriend was trying to kill her'.

The Serbian Parents Group were concerned about a lack of safety (reported in the local paper) and crime and drug dealing at night and said that the Council needs to make parks safer for children. Another safety concern of parents was fast and dangerous driving in local streets. Seven people touched on this issue. Comments included:

I don't let [the kids] play out the front. The hoon issue is huge. The kids have to be in the backyard (Mother, Doveton)

It was felt that the police should do something about the drag racing. A mother from Dandenong South cited people driving very fast past parks and doing burnouts, as dangerous, and a Doveton father said that his daughter 'was nearly run over'.

### **Cultural diversity**

Greater Dandenong's culturally diverse mix of inhabitants inspires different reactions among residents. A number of respondents reported greatly valuing the multicultural nature of Greater Dandenong. Most of the CALD groups interviewed reported feeling accepted in Dandenong and appreciated being among other migrants. One Serbian mother commented that she felt 'more free here because I'm not the only migrant'. An Indian mother from Dandenong liked her multicultural suburb because she could 'learn from other cultures', while another appreciated that 'Dandenong has many people living together from different countries without fighting'. This quote from an AMES English class is poignantly illustrative of comparative tolerance encountered in Dandenong:

Dandenong, Australia is a good place to raise children because we are treated with respect and my children are treated with respect at school. In Egypt they threw stones at us and called us black monkeys.

A smaller number of respondents reported that cultural diversity makes their suburb difficult to live in. Most saw it as a challenge, but were not resentful about sharing their suburb with people from other backgrounds. A woman from Dandenong North felt that:

People stick to their own groups—too many differences. Nothing brings everyone together.

Only one person made a comment which was suggestive of actual resentment. An Anglo-Australian father from Doveton commented that:

Nationalities who come here don't want to take on Australian culture. Kids [are] fine, it's adults [who are] the problem.

Otherwise 'the problem' as reported by other respondents was more of a cultural gap that parents face but seem interested in overcoming.

Two interview respondents reported that their children have difficulty mixing with children from different backgrounds at school or in the community. One, an Anglo-Australian mother from Noble Park, said her family is:

Living in a saturated Asian area [Interviewer asks interviewee if she knows which countries these Asian people are from and she replies that they are Vietnamese]. Cultural differences, are hard for kids to interact—not that there’s anything wrong with that. They use other languages in school. I find it very difficult to get to know neighbours. Hard to get close. [My] kids go to [school in] East Bentleigh, very white, Australian area.

The same mother said later that she would like to get to know more about the culture and ways of people from different backgrounds and that she knows ‘that Vietnamese families have education very important to them so their kids don’t play much’.

Some of the CALD groups discussed the cultural issues they faced. Mothers in the Arabic Women’s group discussed the ‘clash of cultures’ they witness when their children are exposed to different cultures at school. They cited problems when, for example, their children are not allowed to attend school camps. Some said that they visit their children’s teachers before they start school, to ‘inform teachers about their cultural values’, and they wanted bilingual workers, who understand the cultural differences, in their children’s schools. The group also discussed different parenting styles and said that they were used to physically punishing their children but are keen to learn non-violent parenting skills.

The mothers and grandmothers at the Serbian Parents Group discussed their experiences of accessing child-care: one mother said she does not feel comfortable taking her child to child-care, preferring to leave the child with grandparents, so she doesn’t ‘need to worry about what they’re eating, toilet, health’. Another said that Dandenong needs more bilingual child-care workers, ‘specialist workers to help migrant children assimilate in child-care in the first few months, speak their own language’.

An Indigenous mother said she felt Dandenong needs ‘more awareness in the local community about Aboriginal issues’ and suggested that informal cultural events such as lunches could bring Dandenong’s different cultural groups together.

## **Barriers to accessing family and children’s services in general**

Of the difficulties accessing services (including child-care, discussed earlier), the following were the most common (in order of frequency):

- long waiting lists
- cost of services
- lack of suitable transport
- difficulties created for parents by physical infrastructure
- lack of information.

### **Long waiting lists or waiting times**

Long waiting lists were mentioned earlier as a factor preventing or delaying parents from accessing child-care. In fact, when asked about barriers to accessing all types of services, more than 20% of respondents mentioned waiting lists, making this the number one barrier encountered in this study. Respondents did not provide many specific examples, but one mother said she had waited three months to get into the Dandenong Playgroup (and that this was ‘too long’) and another said she had waited four to five months. Long waiting times for the dentist were mentioned by a couple of respondents: one mother from Dandenong South said she had a two-year wait for a dentist. Some of the young mothers at the Club Young Parents focus group reported that waiting lists at hospitals are too long.

A few respondents also commented on the waiting time at the service itself. One mother said that she had had to wait a long time at the hospital with her daughter with a suspected broken arm and said that her sister-in-law had experienced a six-hour wait. A young mother at the Club Young Parents focus group had 'watched a small baby having an asthma attack for hours', while waiting to be seen at a hospital. Another spoke of her displeasure at queuing for 45 minutes at Dandenong Centrelink. Long waiting times at the doctor's surgery and on the phone to the Maternal and Child Health Centre were also mentioned by interviewees.

### **Transport and mobility**

When asked about barriers to accessing services, a lack of suitable transport was another recurrent response. Several respondents mentioned feelings of isolation and frustration resulting from their lack of transport (both public and private). Conversely, other people reported satisfaction with their suburb because they are able to walk to the places they need to go to.

According to the City of Greater Dandenong, around 43,000 residents travel to work every day in the City. The vast majority of these (85%) travel by car (Table 5.1). Less than 8% of residents travel to work by train, 3% by bus and the remaining 3% by taxis, motorcycles, bicycles and walking. Greater Dandenong residents have much lower levels of public transport services than Melbourne as a whole (Stanley 2006). Bus timetables are a particular problem, with less frequency and shorter duration of bus services than in typical metropolitan areas.

Despite the high proportion of people travelling to work by car or truck, a third of two-parent families in Greater Dandenong do not own a car—a higher rate than the 19% for metropolitan Melbourne. Of single-parent families, 13% do not own a car, compared with 10% in metropolitan Melbourne (Greater Dandenong 2003: 16).

**Table 5.1 Comparison of methods of travel to work between Greater Dandenong and metropolitan Melbourne**

Method of travel to work	Greater Dandenong % of travellers	Melbourne % of travellers
Car: driver	76.0	74.0%
Car: passenger	9.0	6.0%
Train	7.8	9.2%
Bus	2.6	2.3%
Walked only	1.9	2.9%
Bicycle	0.6	1.0%
Truck	1.4	1.4%
Motorbike	0.3	0.4%
Taxi	0.3	0.3%

Source: City of Greater Dandenong (undated), *Private transport*<sup>3</sup>

An Indigenous Australian mother interviewed, from Clayton South, is an example of those who are disadvantaged due to a lack of transport. She finds it difficult to get on buses with a pram and when her partner is at work with the family car, she is 'stuck at home'. Both the difficulty travelling on buses with a pram and experiencing isolation at home when one's partner uses the household's single car to travel to work were mentioned by other mothers.

#### *Forced reliance on private transport – the family car*

Isolation can also be experienced by some who own private transport but would prefer to be near to shops, friends and services than to have to travel long distances by car to reach these. A mother from Dandenong North made this comment:

No family [live near me]. Only connected to Maternal and Child Health. No close friends nearby, feel isolated, have to drive to go anywhere.'

A lack of regular, reliable public transport, combined with a lack of services and shops close by, means that residents rely on the private car, a significantly more costly transport option than walking or public transport.

#### *A lack of public transport*

A number of people said that Dandenong (or their suburb) lacks sufficient public transport. When asked what would make their neighbourhood child-friendly, seven people (out of 58 respondents to this question) cited better public transport. One woman from Noble Park said she was particularly frustrated by a lack of public transport between Dandenong and Berwick. Some mentioned specifically that public transport on the weekends is disappointing. A mother from Dandenong said that there are 'no' buses on Sundays (or one must wait for two hours) and that buses 'should be more frequent'. A mother from Doveton, when asked how she travels to services, said she has no car so she must:

Walk or get bus, train—and hope you don't have to go anywhere on the weekend!

While other respondents said that they enjoyed being able to walk to services, school and shops, several of the AMES English Class women would prefer having a choice. One said:

I am single and have children. I get tired having to walk everywhere: to school, to AMES, to child-care—I get so tired.

<sup>3</sup> A note from the original City of Greater Dandenong table: 'In the diagram, some categories overlap when people used two or more methods of transport to travel to work. In addition, some minor categories have been omitted, with the result that the percentages do not necessarily add up to 100.'

These women who attended AMES classes generally did not drive. Some have family cars which their husbands use. Some said that they ‘want cars and licences’. Improved public transport should provide increased mobility for these parents.

#### *A need for service groups to provide transport*

At the Club Young Parents focus group also, transport emerged as an important issue. The group leader would drive around to pick up other mothers who had difficulty getting to the group each week. Though this was not easy, she was acutely aware that if she did not pick up some of these mothers, they would remain isolated at home with their child:

I get so many calls from girls but I can't go pick them all up ... I had a girl phone me today —she's only been in Melbourne a short time from New Zealand, she's got a 6-month child, she couldn't afford to catch the train here ... I feel we've lost a lot of girls because I can't pick them up.

This young mothers' group used to have a community bus to pick them up each week as part of their funding, but they no longer had the bus at the time of the focus group interview and said they missed this convenient transport.

The Afghani Playgroup has group money to pay for taxis if needed, which helps some group members who lack a car or access to public transport.

#### *Mobile services: services travelling to the parents*

Several people mentioned that they had been pleased to access mobile services, at their mothers' group or at their home. Some of the new mothers reported having very helpful home visits from nurses after the birth of their child. Young mothers valued the visits to Club Young Parents by Maternal and Child Health nurses providing lactation support, representatives from TAFE to talk about education options, and other guests providing information on cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), food handling, child-care information, and other aspects of parenting. A number of mothers said that their mothers' group or playgroup was one of the few (if not the only) opportunities for receiving parenting information.

## **Improvements to physical infrastructure for parents**

Parents mentioned different parenting facilities and issues of access which they would like to see addressed.

#### *Pram access*

Six people commented on difficulties accessing places (indoor and outdoor) with their children's prams. Particular problems have been encountered in:

- lifts at shopping centres: ‘Lifts at the Plaza often don't work and it's difficult on the escalator with prams.’
- parking areas: two respondents said they would like more parking for cars with prams and one wanted bigger car parking spots for cars with prams
- shops: ‘Shops not set up for prams.’
- outdoor settings: ‘Paths, gutters difficult’, ‘Need wider doors’ to access buildings

Four of these comments came from new mothers at the McPhees New Mothers Group.

#### *Baby changing rooms and/or toilets for children*

Two mothers interviewed said they would like to see more toilets for children, and two new mothers commented on a lack of public baby changing rooms. One new mother commented on her need for *discreet* baby care facilities:

I don't know if there's change rooms at Waverley Gardens—that makes me nervous. Endeavour Hills shops don't have one. That frightens me because when I need to feed [my child], I'm not the sort of person who'll feed her in the food court.

## Information provision

### Lack of information

When discussing barriers to accessing services, respondents were shown a list of ten issues, including that 'finding out about them' is difficult. The lack of information about services was the fifth-most commonly selected. Nine people said that finding out about services was a problem for them. A few gave examples, commenting:

- on the difficulty finding out about services when one is a recent migrant to the area
- on problems accessing information on antenatal services
- that finding out about services is 'a huge problem when you have no contacts in the area'.

Migrants to Greater Dandenong face particular difficulties accessing information about services. As an Albanian mother from Dandenong South said:

Coming from different country, I found when I got here hard to find out about services.

Neither of the two AMES English Class focus groups knew about Maternal and Child Health Services or other children's services. They had not been told about these services in Dandenong and were keen to find out about them, asking the focus group facilitators to return with this information. These parents all had children aged under five years when they arrived in Australia. Clearly information on Maternal and Child Health services needs to be provided to migrants at the settlement stage.

When asked which services they currently use, and shown the list of services, three respondents said they had not known that parenting education classes existed.

Seven interviewees specifically said they'd like more parenting information. One area where parents appear to lack information is on child nutrition. Several people commented on their own lack of information or that of other parents. One woman, an Australian-born mother from Berwick who was interviewed at the Dandenong Market, is a teacher who sees nutrition as a 'big issue':

Kids are coming to school on an empty stomach—no breakfast. Parents very busy working to provide for their kids [sic]. Difficult to provide information to the parents because they (both parents) work long hours, 7am to 7pm. Parents need to be more informed about services, not sure how this can be done when always working.

Another information gap relates to cultural issues, for example knowledge of Indigenous culture and about the Vietnamese culture, as discussed earlier.

### Sources of information about family services or parenting skills

Twelve interviewees commented on how they find out about services. Sources include:

- the Bunurong Indigenous Co-operative (mentioned by two mothers)
- Council booklet (English grandmother, Waterways)
- internet (mentioned by two people)
- local newspapers (two people)
- doctor referring people to services such as new mothers' group
- friends, neighbours or family (mentioned by three people)
- husband's workmates (mentioned by one newly arrived woman).

The AMES English Class 1 focus group mentioned finding information at their local library. The Afghani Playgroup runs information sessions every two or three weeks and the group leader publicises the playgroup via Afghani radio and newspaper. Doctors and nurses provided information about Maternal and Child Health services to participants at the Arabic Women's Group focus group.

## **Community strengthening and social capital**

### **Community involvement**

Respondents were asked about their involvement or interest in their community, namely:

- if they would like the opportunity to get to know more people in their neighbourhood and
- what would help them become more involved in the community.

A significant number of respondents said they did not want to be more involved with their neighbourhood or community; however many of these also mentioned ways they are already involved in community activities (such as canteen work or helping out at kindergartens at school, playgroup ['to meet other mothers'] and mowing lawns). Mothers often said they were too busy for, or not interested in, community involvement, but they valued their time spent at Playgroup or their Mothers' Group. While these people did not necessarily recognise this time as a community activity, such groups are shown to be excellent methods of fostering community interaction and participation.

Of the 52 people who responded to the question about whether they would like the opportunity to get to know more people in their neighbourhood, just over a third (19 people) said that they didn't want to get to know more people. The reasons for this (where stated) were that respondents already felt they know enough people, they already have good relations with their neighbours or they are busy and have trouble keeping in contact with friends, so are not looking for further neighbourhood involvement.

As noted above, the single main reason people gave for not wanting *more* community involvement was being busy with their own children. This applied particularly to new mothers:

I have a new baby, am busy. As child gets older and gets more involved with activities, I'll get more involved. (Mother, Dandenong North)

No, I am fine: concentrating on being a new parent. At present not interested [in community involvement]. (Working mother, Dandenong North)

Among the respondents who did want the opportunity to meet neighbours and be involved in the community, having a group or place to meet emerged as the main factors which they felt would encourage this involvement. If they explained what type of place they meant, most people wanted a community space—somewhere where parents can talk in comfort and children can play in safety. Few concrete examples were given, although a mother from Dandenong North, at the McPhees New Mothers' Group, offered this comment:

I meet a couple of ladies once a week and we always meet at shopping centre and spend money on coffee, cakes. That ten dollars could be spent on something else. I want a place like this [pre-school centre]: easy parking, kettle, toilets.

### **Socialisation through mothers' groups and playgroups**

Interviewers noted that a number of people interviewed while attending a group activity spoke positively of the role these groups played in their lives. Mothers commented that their mothers'

group or playgroup provided a vital form of contact with others, particularly with others in similar circumstances—new mothers, young mothers, or mothers with young children.

Of the ten new mothers interviewed at the New Mothers' Group, half offered unsolicited positive comments, saying that this group provides parenting education and an opportunity to discuss and share the new experience of motherhood. Several mothers commented that they are extremely busy with their new babies, with not much time for anything else, yet they are happy to make time to attend the New Mothers' Group. One mother said that, 'Bar [the] new mums' group, [I'm] not interested in anything else.'

A number of mothers discussed the importance of mothers' groups in providing vital socialisation opportunities. Comments to this effect include:

We've just moved into the area so [are] not really sure what's around. Don't know many people—the girls here [New Mothers' Group] are just about it. (Australian mother, Dandenong North)

My husband works 7am to 7pm daily. I feel at times isolated and depressed. [I] would like to meet mums, friends similar to me, [for] support. (Indian mother, Dandenong)

Members reported that Club Young Parents allowed otherwise quite isolated young women to mix with their peers in a supportive environment. When service groups such as these are resourced to be able to provide transport, they are even more effective in overcoming social isolation.

Similarly, mothers reported that they enjoyed coming to playgroup for the opportunities both for their children to socialise and for the mothers to make and meet with friends.

Besides mothers' groups and playgroups, some people said they would like other types of groups where they could meet new people and help them be part of their community. Suggestions included a walking group (meeting at a central location such as a shopping centre, and walking to a local park where children can play and parents can talk and exercise), a craft group and a language teaching group, to bring together people from Dandenong's many different cultural backgrounds.

### **Activities for children and families**

Some parents said that they would like to see more activities for families and children in the Dandenong area. Again, most did not give concrete examples, but rather seemed to want to be better informed about activities for children.

It would appear that local parents would appreciate Council-run family activities, as a couple of people mentioned their desire to see events they described as 'organised' or 'structured'. One of these, a mother from Noble Park, said she did not know 'where to start' to organise such events herself: 'I'm not going to go doorknocking! I'll scare people! I'd be scared if someone came knocking on my door' to organise or advertise community events. Another mother said that she wants to see organised events to occupy the children she sees 'hanging around on bikes'. She also reported that she has a friend who adopted two Ethiopian children but 'has nowhere to take them' and so would like to see events to 'bring all the kids together'.

From the data collected regarding people's information gathering discussed earlier, these activities would ideally be advertised at playgroups, mothers' groups, schools, local newspapers, cultural community media and libraries.

An Indian mother from Dandenong offered an interesting suggestion for engaging neighbourhoods in community activities. She compared Dandenong with her country of origin, saying that India has better socialisation and that one way the community comes together is via neighbourhood parties: 'India has festivals, parties all the time for people to meet others in their street'. She suggested that



‘the Government make a leader [from the street], and make him representative from that particular street. He organises parties’. Festivals and street parties, whether aimed at particular cultural communities or at bringing together Greater Dandenong’s many different cultural groups, could foster community engagement.

### **Family support**

Extended families can play a major role in assisting parents raise their children, just as lack of extended family can contribute to social isolation. Some interview respondents preferred to have family members take on child-care duties rather than use public services, either for cultural reasons or due to the cost of child-care services.

Respondents from CALD backgrounds often mentioned that they prefer family members to care for their children, or that they are grateful for the strong family support they receive. One Albanian mother mentioned that her sister told her about available services when she arrived in Dandenong, her mother (the child’s grandmother) looks after her young child when she has to go to the doctor, and her sister-in-law accompanies her to the doctor because she feels uncomfortable going by herself. The preference for using extended family support in some cultural groups may have significant implications for recent migrants who have few relatives nearby.

## **6 Conclusions**

This Needs Study gives an overview of the needs faced by families with young children in Dandenong, an area whose considerable disadvantages include a higher unemployment rate and lower income than the Melbourne average. There are infrastructure needs relating to public transport and housing. For several decades, Dandenong has attracted new migrants, a trend which continues with recent refugee arrivals, particularly from Afghanistan and Somalia. Thus, there is a steady intake of people who have experienced dislocation and need to establish themselves within a community. Moreover, some new refugees/migrants have had traumatic experiences which may also create isolation for other community members.

This study highlights some of the advantages and disadvantages of raising young children in Dandenong, as identified by the residents and/or those who use services in Dandenong. It is recognised that this Needs survey is a ‘snapshot’ rather than a comprehensive review. For example, although mentioned as an issue of concern by respondents, housing was considered by the Department of Community Services to be beyond the remit of the Communities for Children program. Other issues, such as access to pre-schools and schools could possibly be explored further as the Communities for Children program evolves.

People identified much that is good about living in Dandenong: the proximity (within walking distance) of shops and services, the friendly and particularly child-friendly people, the local parks and the thriving cultural diversity. Organised groups, such as mothers’ groups and playgroups, are seen to provide excellent opportunities for socialisation (for both child and mother), community interaction and parenting information.

There are, however, areas which can be improved, in order to make parenting easier and to foster a sense of community. The main learnings of this Needs Study can be grouped according to the target issues of the Communities for Children program in Dandenong.

***Issue 1: Early child and maternal health – focusing on pregnancy and post-natal care, promoting healthy lifestyles and support for children with additional needs***

The identified needs are summarised as follows:

- Playgroups/parent groups
  - The facilitation of playgroups and new mothers' groups which provide valuable opportunities for parenting education and networking, increasing socialisation and reducing isolation for parents and children
- Services for migrants
  - Provision of information on Maternal and Child Health Services for new migrants
  - Facilitating the use of extended families who play a strong role in support, child-care and information provision, as well as an awareness of the needs of those without family support
  - Newly-arrived migrant parents would like information on services and health, and some guidance on discipline of children. Sessions in playgroups could be one way of providing this information
- Other services
  - Further support for Bunurong Aboriginal Co-operative, which Indigenous mothers found helpful in providing information and support.
  - Provision of more home visiting and outreach to existing groups, particularly for new mothers, by nurses, TAFE personnel and other information sources.
  - Use of the Library as a good location for community information, a meeting point and service provider.

***Issue 2: Early learning and care – focusing on better integrated service delivery, early learning from birth and the transition to school***

Suggestions include:

- Nutrition advice for parents
- Counselling and parenting education services
- Links formed between preschool, MCH and doctors' services to facilitate a coordinated service
- Support visits to mothers' homes in first weeks of being a new parent
- New Mothers' Group and Young Mothers' Group used as a venue for parenting education and other information sought by mothers

***Issue 3: Child-friendly communities – creating environments that support children and families***

These issues include:

- Child-care services which meet needs in terms of cost, availability (waiting-lists and operating times) and transport accessibility. Also child-care at TAFE colleges and associated with other training.
- Services/activities which create contact networks, such as young mothers' groups
- Availability of a centre or building where people can meet for community events/activities
- Measures to address the problems of crime and drugs in the community and associated perceptions of Dandenong being a safe place to live
- Provision of more parks and improvement to the existing parks, particularly in terms of personal safety (reducing crime), safer and newer equipment, fences to stop children being able to run onto roads, and sheltered play areas
- Promotion of cultural awareness and knowledge and measures to promote social cohesion
- Organisation of family fun days and fostering of street-level interactions, for example through street parties

#### ***Issue 4: Supporting families and parents – strengthening relationships and support for parenting***

Addressing this issue would include family support services above, as well as:

- Facilitating the provision of affordable housing
- Provision of public transport
  - Improved bus services in terms of frequency and coverage, and linkages to train services
  - Improved walking and cycling opportunities
  - Pram access and storage on public transport
- Improved access to shopping centres for prams and small children
  - Lifts which are equipped for prams
  - Allocation of car park space for cars with prams
  - Secure and private parenting rooms and baby change facilities in shopping centres
  - Paths and pavements which are suitable for pram access.

#### ***Issue 5: Working together – focusing on partnerships and flexibility***

This issue largely relates to the need for services to coordinate and work in partnership to provide an integrated, inclusive, comprehensive and responsive service for children and young families in Dandenong. This issue of process was not addressed in this needs survey. However, seeking the opinions of residents and service users is a vital first stage in engaging the community in developing a child-friendly community. In addition, a strong finding of this survey, which is part of the integrated provision of services, is the need for the better provision of information. This relates to information about what is available, as well as how to develop a knowledgeable community about issues such as parenting and relationships.

This study is a first step in understanding the needs of the community. It is envisaged that this knowledge will be built on and refined as the Communities for Children program evolves to support children, young families and the community in Dandenong.

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