



LighthouseProject
GREATER SHEPPARTON

Falling Through the Cracks

Stories of youth disengagement in
Greater Shepparton

November 2016

Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project

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1. Acknowledgements

The author, Michelle Luscombe, would like to sincerely thank the 83 young people interviewed who shared their time and views to make this research possible; the learning centres and youth services for their cooperation in accessing young people; and the Fairley Foundation for funding. It is our hope the report reflects the views of all participants accurately and confidentially and the learnings will lead to better outcomes for other young people in the future.

2. Executive Summary

The aim of the consultation and subsequent report is to investigate and document the reasons why significant numbers of young people (aged 12-24) living in the Greater Shepparton area are not participating in mainstream education, employment or training (work or study).

Greater Shepparton has approximately 7,800 15-24 year olds¹ and approximately 30%² of these, or 2,300 young people, are not currently engaged in work or study (otherwise referred to as being disengaged).

The reasons for disengagement for the majority of the young people interviewed were complex and were most commonly attributed to one or more, and often several, of the following factors:

- Trauma in the home
- The breakdown of the family unit
- Experiencing a combination of moderate to severe physical, verbal and online bullying
- Anxiety issues, often linked to the experience of being bullied (at school)
- Significant schooling missed – most commonly due to being bullied (at school) over an extended period and/or anxiety issues
- Anger issues/violence at school leading to the expulsion of the young person
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse by the young person.

There was a particularly strong correlation between a young person experiencing ongoing bullying in school and also experiencing one or more of the following:

- Trauma in the home and/or
- An unstable home life and/or
- The family unit was no longer intact.

Of the 38 young people interviewed who said they had experienced ongoing bullying at school, 32 had experienced one or more of the abovementioned situations in their home life.

There was also a particularly strong correlation between being a bully and/or being angry/violent at school and also experiencing one or more of the following:

- Trauma in the home and/or
- An unstable home life and/or
- The family unit was no longer intact.

Of the 21 young people interviewed who said they had anger/violence issues at school or were the bully at school, 19 had experienced one or more of the abovementioned situations in their home life.

The majority (34 of the 38 or 89%) of the young people who were bullied did approach the school for assistance to address the issue. The majority (29 of the 38 or 76%) also reported that they felt unsupported by the school when they and/or their parents had reported their concerns and the situation had not been satisfactorily resolved.

Anxiety and depression also appear to be a very real barrier to learning and engagement. Many young people interviewed stated that their anxiety issues prevented them being able to stay in a mainstream school environment and that it led to them missing significant schooling, sometimes for weeks or months at a time. Anxiety was noted as a factor in disengaging for 33 (42%) of the young people interviewed, while depression was mentioned by 26 (33%) of the young people as contributing towards their disengagement.

The most common reason given overall for disengagement was because the young person had missed significant schooling. This was most commonly due to the factors outlined above – experiencing bullying, anxiety/depression, violence/being a bully.

Young people also cited 'learning difficulties' and being unable to keep up with their school work, as a reason for missing significant schooling.

3. How was the consultation undertaken?

3.1 Profile of Greater Shepparton

The City of Greater Shepparton is located in north central Victoria, approximately 180 kms north of Melbourne. Greater Shepparton includes the township of Shepparton plus many smaller towns and farms (2,422 square kms) and has a population of 63,300³. A total of 13% (7,840)¹ of the Greater Shepparton population are aged between 15-24.

The median weekly household income is \$971 (Victoria: \$1,214)¹. The largest sectors in which residents are employed are health care and social assistance (14.2%), retail trade (12.7%), manufacturing (12.4%), agriculture (8.2%), education and training (7.8%) and accommodation and food services (5.2%)¹, with a decline in the retail trade, manufacturing and agriculture sectors between 2006 and 2011¹.

3.2 Interview process/collection of information

The consultation involved individual interviews with young people, aged between 12-24 who reside in the Greater Shepparton area and who were not currently engaged in mainstream education, employment or training, often described as 'disengaged'.

An interviewer and a scribe were present at each interview.

The purpose of the interview was explained to the young person and appropriate consent was sought from the young person. It was explained that participation in the interview was voluntary. The young person was also advised that their interview and information collected would be confidential and that their experiences would form part of a collective report.

Generally, each interview took between thirty minutes and one hour.

3.3 Accessing Young People to interview

Due to the nature of disengagement, it was often difficult to access young people to interview. Some of the young people interviewed were approached in local coffee shops, and public areas such as skate parks, where they agreed to be interviewed in a safe public setting.

Some of the young people were accessed through a request on Facebook and via word-of-mouth.
A number of young people interviewed were also accessed through local alternate learning centres and via a local youth service.

Young people were accessed through the following alternate learning centres as part of the consultation:

- Mcauley Champagnat Program (MCP)
- Shepparton ACE College
- Flexible Learning Centre
- TAFE VCAL

And through Brayton Youth Services.

3.4 Interview Data Collected and Key Questions

3.4.1 Demographic Data/Background information

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Housing situation
- Family
- History of employment
- Involvement in community activities
- Year level when left school
- School/s attended (primary and secondary)

3.4.2 Interview Questions

- What lead to you leaving school?
- What did the school do, when you were beginning to disengage?
- What attempts have you made to return to education?
- What support have you received in getting back into education or employment?
- What services have you accessed, or do you currently access?
- What effect has not working or studying, had on your life?
- What can we learn from your experiences? /What would have made a difference for you?
- What would you like to see introduced in the Greater Shepparton area to support young people like yourself?

3.4.3 Young People interviewed but not included in the aggregate data

Eighty-three (83) young people were interviewed in total.

Five of the young people interviewed were not included in the data/findings in this report. They were initially considered to be disengaged, but after interviewing it became apparent they were currently engaged in either work or study.

The aggregate data and findings referred to in this report are based on the remaining seventy-eight (78) young people interviewed.

3.4.4 Young mums

Young women aged 15-19 years who were caring for their children (and not working or studying) were also included in the definition of disengaged, and a number of young mums were interviewed.

3.4.5 Project team

Lead: Michelle Luscombe
Support: and Rena McKenzie

4. Demographic data/Quantitative data

The aggregate data and findings referred to in Tables 1 to 20 are based on the seventy-eight young people interviewed.

Table 1 – Age of Young Person

AGE	12-13	14-15	16-17	18-19	20-21	22-23	24	TOTAL
No.	0	6	34	24	9	5	0	78
	0%	8%	43%	31%	12%	6%	0%	100%

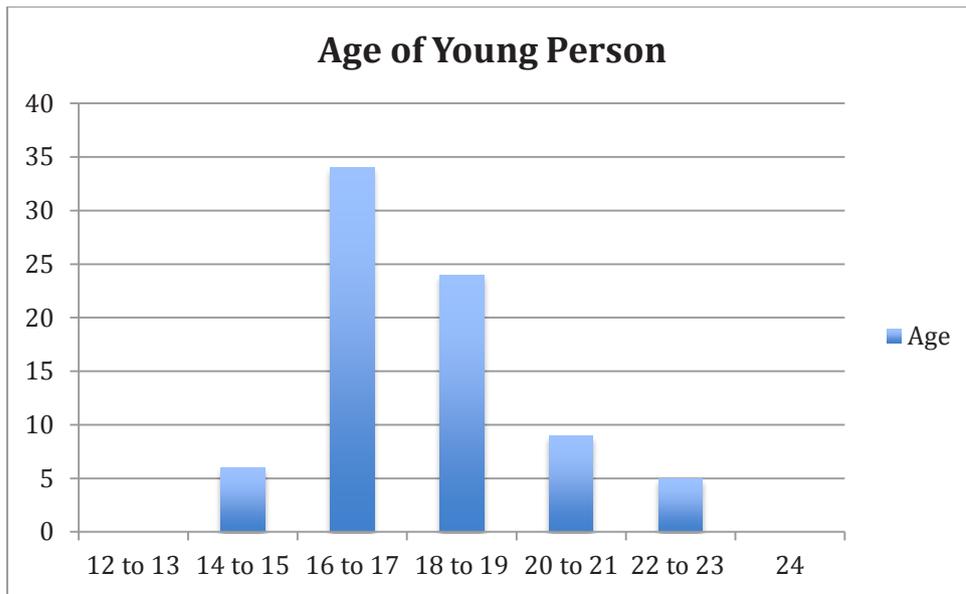


Table 2 – Gender of Young Person

GENDER	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
	44 56%	34 44%	78 100%

Table 3 – Ethnicity of Young Person

ETHNICITY	OTHER	INDIGENOUS	CALD	TOTAL
	57 73%	19 24%	2 3%	78 100%

Table 4 – Housing Situation of Young Person

HOUSING SITUATION	LIVING INDEPENDENTLY	LIVE WITH ONE PARENT	LIVE WITH BOTH PARENTS	LIVE WITH OTHER FAMILY MEMBER	FOSTER CARE	HOME LESS	YOUTH ACCOMMODATION - BRAYTON	YOUTH ACCOMMODATION - THE FOYER	YOUTH ACCOMMODATION - JACARANDA	TOTAL
No.	14	32	11	6	2	3	4	5	1	78
%	18%	41%	14%	8%	3%	4%	5%	6%	1%	100%

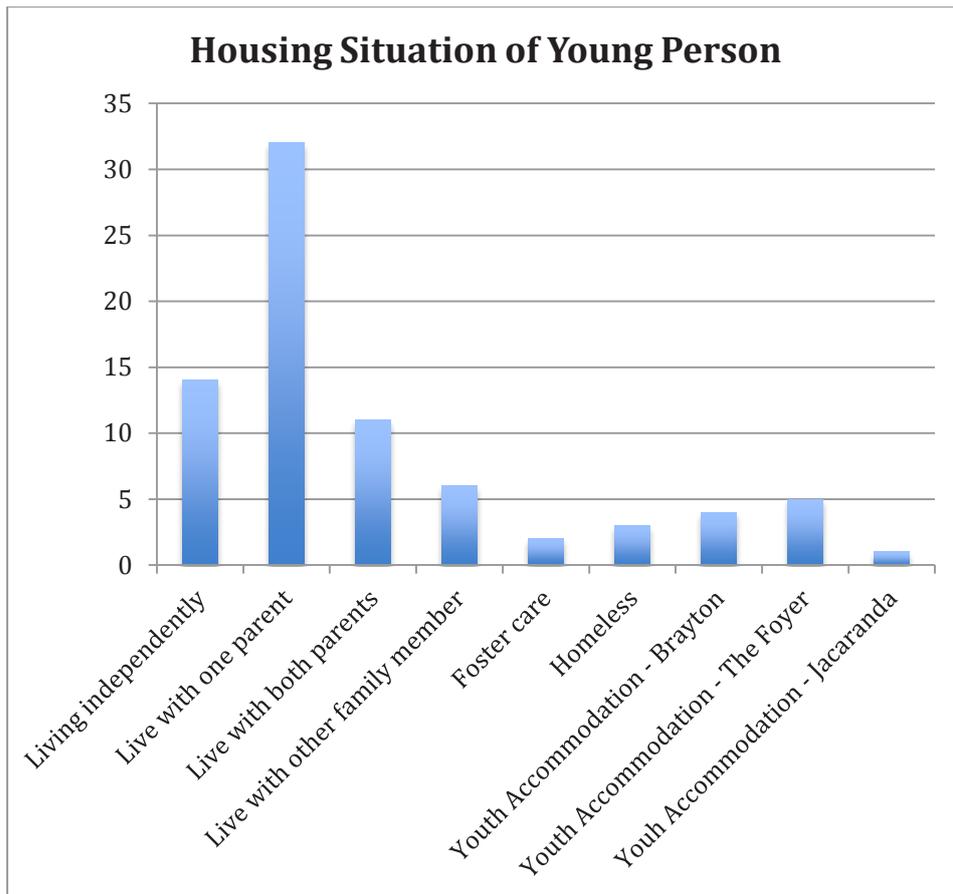


Table 5 – Family Status of Young Person

FAMILY STATUS	FAMILY INTACT	FAMILY NOT INTACT	TOTAL
No.	15	63	78
%	19%	81%	100%

Table 6 – History of Employment for Young Person

HISTORY OF EMPLOYMENT	No History	Casual	Part-time	Full-time	Total
No.	33	16	28	1	78
%	42%	21%	36%	1%	100%

Casual, part time and full time employment refers to the young person's employment history. The young people in this study were not employed at the time of being interviewed.

Table 7 – History of Community Activities

HISTORY OF COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES	NONE	YES	LIMITED	TOTAL
No.	26	49	3	78
%	33%	63%	4%	100%

For example – sport and volunteering

Table 8 – Highest Year Level Completed

HIGHEST YEAR LEVEL COMPLETED	YEAR 6	YEAR 7	YEAR 8	YEAR 9	YEAR 10	YEAR 11	TOTAL
No.	2	3	11	20	32	10	78
%	2%	4%	14%	26%	41%	13%	100%

Table 9 – Young Mum or Dad

YOUNG PARENT	MALE - YES	FEMALE - YES	NO	TOTAL
No.	4	5	69	78
%	5%	6%	89%	100%

Table 10 – Number of Primary Schools Attended

NO. OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS ATTENDED	1	2	3-4	5 OR MORE	TOTAL
No.	29	24	11	14	78
%	37%	31%	14%	18%	100%

Table 11 – No of Secondary Schools Attended

NO. OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS ATTENDED	1	2	3-4	5 OR MORE	TOTAL
No.	46	20	12	0	78
%	59%	26%	15%	0%	100%

AVERAGE NUMBER OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS ATTENDED	2.5
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AVERAGE NUMBER OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS ATTENDED	1.5
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Table 12 – Which primary school did you attend?

Primary School	Number attending	%
St Georges Road	12	6
Wilmot Road	10	5
Gowrie Street	9	5
Bouchier Street	8	4
Mooroopna	8	4
Orrvale	7	3.5
Mooroopna Park	5	2.5
Tatura	5	2.5
St Mels	5	2.5
Other PS in Greater Shepparton region	26	13
Other PS outside Greater Shepparton region	101	52
Total	196	100

Note: Young person may have attended a number of primary schools (see Table 10)

Table 13 – Which secondary school did you attend?

Secondary School	Number attending	%
Wanganui Park	23	19
Shepparton High	21	17.5
Mooroopna	13	11
McGuire	12	10
Notre Dame	8	6.5
Goulburn Valley Grammar	1	1
Other Secondary School Outside Greater Shepparton	42	35
Total	120	100

Note: Young person may have attended a number of secondary schools (see Table 11)

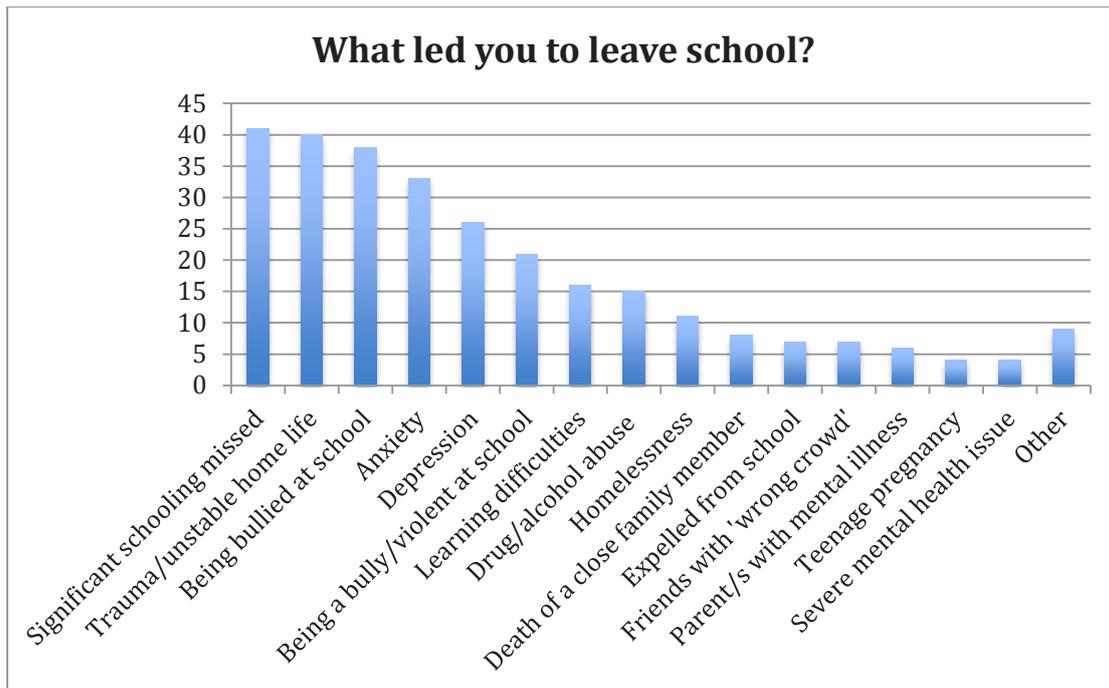
5. Interview Feedback

“What led you to leave school?”

Table 14 – What led you to leave school?

REASONS GIVEN	NUMBER	%
Significant schooling missed	41	14
Trauma/unstable home life	40	14
Being bullied at school	38	13
Anxiety	33	12
Depression	26	9
Being a bully/violent/angry at school	21	7
Learning difficulties	16	6
Drug/alcohol abuse	15	5
Homeless	11	4
Death of a close family member	8	3
Expelled from school	7	2.5
Friends with ‘wrong crowd’	7	2.5
Parent/s with mental illness	6	2
Teenage pregnancy	4	1.5
Significant mental health issue ie: Borderline PD, Psychosis, etc	4	1.5
Other	9	3
Total	286¹	100%

¹ Note: The young people interviewed often gave more than one reason for leaving school.



The answers given by the young people were for the most part, quite complex. The young people interviewed gave a number of reasons for disengaging and the most common themes arising through the interviews were:

- The young person experienced trauma in the home, which then appeared to leave them vulnerable to bullying throughout their school years. This eventually led generally to anxiety and/or depression or anger/violence issues and/or being a bully. Bullying and/or mental health issues, particularly anxiety, contributed towards significant schooling being missed. The anxiety issues meant the young person often had great difficulty being in large crowds and coping with school work and eventually led to them disengaging from secondary school. The violence/anger issues meant the young person was often expelled from school.

Interview 54 – " In secondary school I experienced a lot of bullying, physical and verbal, and I was pretty depressed, but had some good friends. As difficult as school was, school was an excuse to not be at home. Mum was a drug user (heroin) and a diagnosed schizophrenic. I took days off school to look after her; I had to do everything around the house. When she had another baby, I would look after that too, so I missed lots of school in Year 8. I eventually left school due to significant mental health problems including depression and anxiety."

- Sometimes the young person experiencing trauma at home, particularly violence, became the bully at school and said they experienced strong feelings of anger.

Interview 8 – “I was bullied a lot, both at home and at school – I was physically abused from a very young age by my father. I soon became the bully at school and had extreme behaviours ie: putting kids in hospital (through violence), throwing chairs through windows, etc”.

- There appears to be a strong correlation between being a victim of bullying in school, and a home situation where the young person experienced:
 - trauma in the home and/or
 - an unstable home life and/or
 - the nuclear family was no longer intact

Of the 38 young people interviewed who said they had experienced bullying at school, 32 had experienced one or more of the above situations in their home life.

- There appears to be a strong correlation between being a bully/violent/angry at school, and a home situation where the young person experienced:
 - trauma in the home and/or
 - an unstable home life and/or
 - the nuclear family was no longer intact

Of the 21 young people interviewed who said they had anger/violence issues at school or were a bully at school, 19 had experienced one or more of the above situations in their home life.

- Examples of trauma in the home given by the young people included: Parent/s with drug and/or alcohol issues; neglect (ie: inadequate food available, not enough clothing, no adult present to care for them on a regular basis); verbal and physical abuse of the young person; verbal and physical abuse between family members; sexual abuse experienced by the young person; the death of a close family member; or parent/s with a significant mental illness. Examples of unstable home life included homelessness (of the young person or the family) and/or being transient.

- 81% of the young people interviewed said their family unit was no longer intact ie. birth mother and father were no longer together, and many of the young people said their birth mother and father had separated/divorced before they were five years old. Many said the breakdown of the family unit had been a difficult and significant event in their lives.
- The young people that were bullied commonly said they felt unsupported by the school when they approached the school for help.

Interview 78 – "I loved school and learning, had friends, and then at the end of Grade 3 the bullying started. I was shocked at first, it was name calling because I was overweight. I told the teachers and they did nothing. One day I went crying to the Principal – he was meeting people who were bringing their children to start prep – he slapped me in the face and locked me in an office. Mum took me out of school and homeschooled me for the rest of Grade 4 and 5."

Interview 79 – "In Year 8 I was bullied, they just started picking on me. It was verbal and at first I let it go, but it kept on going. I told teachers but nothing changed. I developed depression and anxiety, and I'm (now on) medication. I told the Principal daily, but nothing happened (to deal with the bullying). This year I was walking out of the school with my little sister and this girl came and hit me in the back of the head. I fell to the ground and she was kicking me. She was suspended for 2 days and then she was back (at school) again."

- It was not uncommon for the school to suggest an alternate education setting, for the person who had been bullied and gone on to experience anxiety.

Interview 31 – After suffering bullying in Year 8 and 9, this young person suffered depression, anxiety, was suicidal and self-harming and her schoolwork deteriorated. "The Principal contacted the parents of the bullies but it didn't stop them. It was recommended that it was best that I leave the school. The Year Level Coordinator came with me to (alternate learning setting) which I then attended 2 days per week, and I attended the secondary school 3 days a week."

- Young people also cited "learning difficulties" as a reason for disengaging from school. Often this was because they had

missed significant schooling, and by the time they reached year 9, 10 or 11, they could no longer keep up with the required learning.

Interview 59 – "I have lots of trouble with spelling and reading. I think I have a disability but it hasn't been diagnosed. I'm 18, but I feel like my learning has not gone up since Year 8. I left school because the workload became too much, I couldn't deal with it. I told teachers and I felt they didn't care. I dropped out of school for 2 years and was homeless for a time, before coming to (alternate learning setting)."

- A number of young people said the reason they had left school was due to personal drug issues.

Interview 75 – "I got caught with drugs at school, so had to leave. I was sent to detox in Melbourne through the courts, and spent one month in juvenile detention."

Interview 77 – "I was popular - friends with the sporty kids and the ones that wanted to do drugs. When the sporty ones wanted drugs, I organised it. (The school found out) I was put on a warning, and then expelled (for dealing in drugs).

Interview 63 – "I went down a bad path, started smoking marijuana, and my marks went down because my brain wasn't functioning that well. I was using ecstasy and acid. I ended up with drug induced psychosis which meant I was in hospital for a (school) term. It gave me a major fright. I went back to secondary school, but eventually left because I was behind in schoolwork due to the drugs."

- Sometimes the young person felt unsafe at home, and was homeless for periods of time.

Interview 47 – " I was going to class and the teachers had an idea of what was going on – I slept behind my old primary school. I would sneak away from my room at night and go there because home wasn't a safe place (mum's boyfriend was using ice and beating her). Cooking at school was my main food".

Interview 48 – "I've been homeless for 3 years with a mixture of couch surfing and sleeping rough. I started Year 7 at xxx secondary school but missed lots of days. I was starving everyday, and bullied because my shoes were wrecked. I

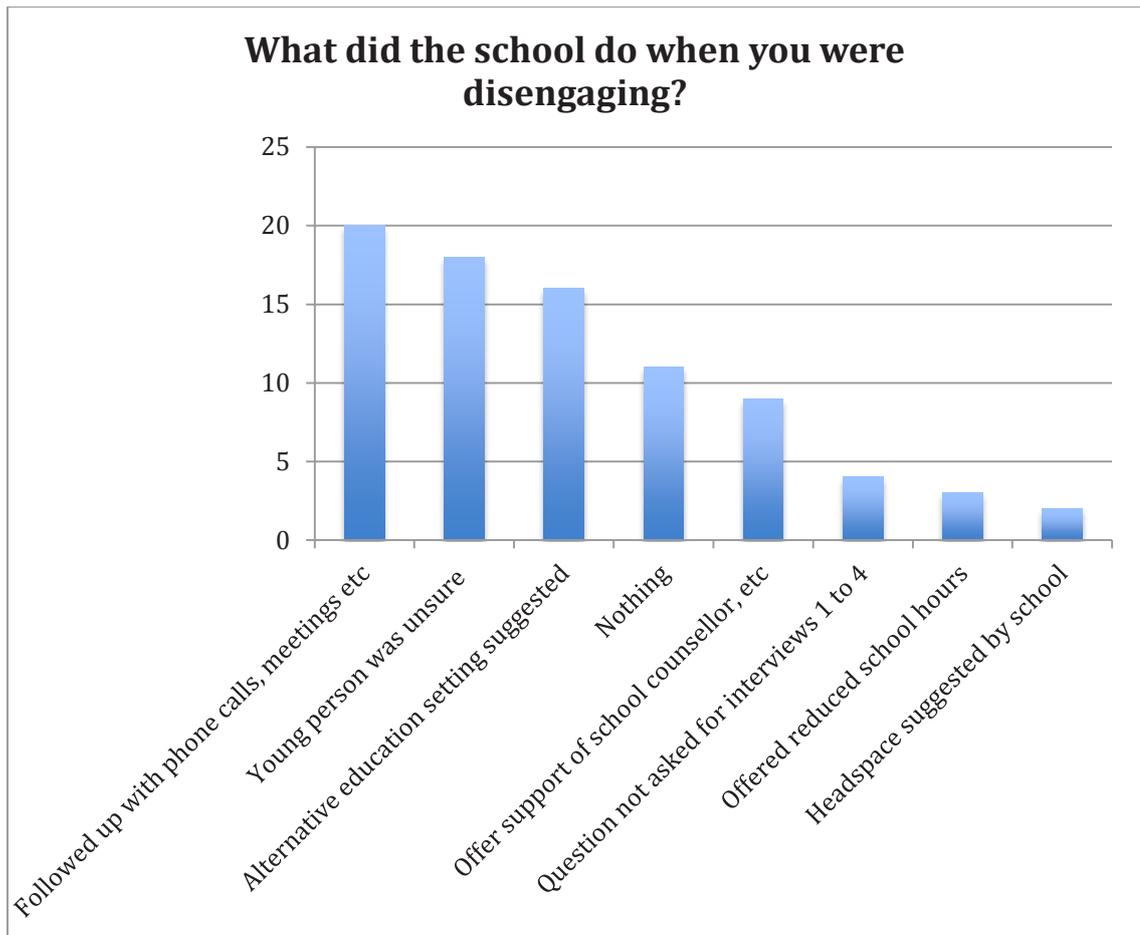
missed the second half of Year 8 (due to these problems) and by Year 9 I couldn't get to school. I was so stressed I couldn't do my (school) work."

“What did the school do, when you began to disengage?”

Table 15 – What did the school do, when you began to disengage?

School followed up with phone calls, letters, meetings, etc	20	24%
Young person was unsure or did not answer question	18	22%
School suggested an alternative learning centre ie: MCP, Shepparton ACE College, Berry Street School	16	19%
Nothing	11	13%
Offered support from school counsellor, chaplain	9	11%
Question not asked for interviews 1-4	4	5%
Offered reduced school hours	3	4%
Headspace suggested by school	2	2%
Total	83²	100%

² The school sometimes offered more than one strategy when the young person was beginning to disengage.



The most common answer given was that the school actively engaged with the young person's parents/guardians when they were beginning to disengage with one or more of the following strategies:

- phone calls to a parent/guardian on the days they were absent and/or
- letters were sent home to the parent/guardian relating to the young person's lack of attendance and/or
- meetings were attempted to be arranged by the school with the parent/guardian.

The school sometimes offered school chaplaincy or welfare support, or counseling services when the young person was disengaging (9 or 11%).

The second most common response was that the young person (18 or 22%) was unsure if the school had done anything when they were disengaging and they could not answer this question.

Almost one in five (16) of the young people said when they were disengaging, that the school had suggested that they might be better suited to an alternate learning setting such as:

- Mcauley Champagnat Program (MCP)
- Shepparton ACE College
- Big Picture Education
- Berry Street Learning Centre
- Academy of Sport Health and Education (ASHE)
- TAFE VCAL
- Homeschooling

Interview 5 – "The school suggested engagement with (alternate learning setting), to continue some level of education. However the ongoing bullying issue at school was never addressed".

Interview 52 – Bullying led to this young person leaving secondary school. "They (the school) said the bullying shouldn't be happening at all and thought (alternate learning setting) would be a better fit for my learning".

- A number of young people (11 or 13%) said that the school had done 'nothing' when they were beginning to disengage and a common theme was that when the young person or their parents went to the school to report bullying, they received little or no support to resolve the bullying issue.

Comments relating to bullying:

Interview 5 - When she (young person) told the school about the bullying they "never did much".

Interview 6 - "No support (from the school) for the bullying."

Interview 10 - "The school informed me they would deal with the bullies, but it made it worse and I was told by the Vice Principal, there is nothing we can do."

Interview 23 - When the school was informed about the bullying the school said, "We don't really care."

Interview 28 - The school told the young person's guardian that bullying was not happening and that "he's lying".

There were also comments such as:

Interview 8 - "There was no follow up (when I left school) as I was lost in the system."

Interview 19 - "They didn't seem to care either way, whether I got expelled or went somewhere else."

Note: This question was added to the study after the commencement of the interviews. It was not asked for Interviews 1 to 4.

"What attempts have you made to return to education?"

Table 16 – Attempts made to return to education?

Went directly to alternate learning setting	68	87%
Tried another secondary school then went to alternate learning setting	5	6%
Attempted to get employment then went to alternate learning setting	1	1%
None	2	3%
Enrolled in an accredited course then went to alternate learning setting	2	3%
Total	78	100%

A significant number of the young people interviewed (97%) said they had not returned to mainstream education, but had eventually moved on to an alternate learning setting such as ACE College, TAFE VCAL, Mcauley Champagnat Program (MCP), Shepparton Flexible Learning Centre, etc. Only 3% of the young people interviewed had not made any attempt to return to education whether mainstream or an alternate learning setting.

“What support have you received in getting back into education or employment?”

Table 17 – What support have you received in getting back to education or employment?

None/ Done it on my own	52	62%
Family Support	7	8%
The Bridge Youth Services	6	7%
Brayton Youth Services	5	6%
Berry Street	4	5%
Job Agency	3	4%
Alternate Education Setting	3	4%
Word of mouth	2	2%
Headspace	1	1%
Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative	1	1%
Total	84³	100%

A large number of young people (52 or 62%) said they had received no support in getting back to education or employment.

Others (16 or 19%) had accessed local youth agencies such The Bridge Youth Services, Brayton Youth services, the alternate education setting they were attending, Headspace or Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative.

A smaller number (9 or 10%) relied on friends (word of mouth) and family to support them in getting back into education or employment.

³ The young people interviewed stated that they sometimes had more than one source of support in getting back to education or employment.

“What services have you accessed, or do you currently access?”

Table 18 – What services have you accessed, or do you currently access?

Headspace	27	21%
The Bridge Youth Services	19	15%
None	12	9%
Berry Street	11	8%
Counsellor	11	8%
Brayton Youth Services	9	7%
CAMHS	7	5%
Kildonan Uniting Care	6	5%
Employment agency	5	4%
Education First Youth Foyer	5	4%
Rural Housing Network	2	1.5%
Ganbina	2	1.5%
Doctor	2	1.5%
Department of Human Services	2	1.5%
Jacaranda	2	1.5%
Primary Care Connect (Drug and Alcohol Services)	3	2%
Shepparton Foodshare	1	1%
FamilyCare, Shepparton	1	1%
Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative	1	1%
Psychologist/psychiatrist	2	1.5%
Total Services	130⁴	100%

A significant number (36 or 28%) had accessed or were currently accessing mental health services in Shepparton (Headspace, CAMHS, private psychologists, psychiatrists, general practitioners, etc).

⁴ The young people often accessed more than one service.

A number of young people had accessed housing services (16 or 12%) including Brayton Youth Services, Rural Housing Network, Education First Youth Foyer ('The Foyer') and Jacaranda Residential Care. A number of young people interviewed had only recently moved into 'The Foyer'.

Some of the young people interviewed were itinerant and said they hadn't accessed any of the services available to young people in Greater Shepparton to date.

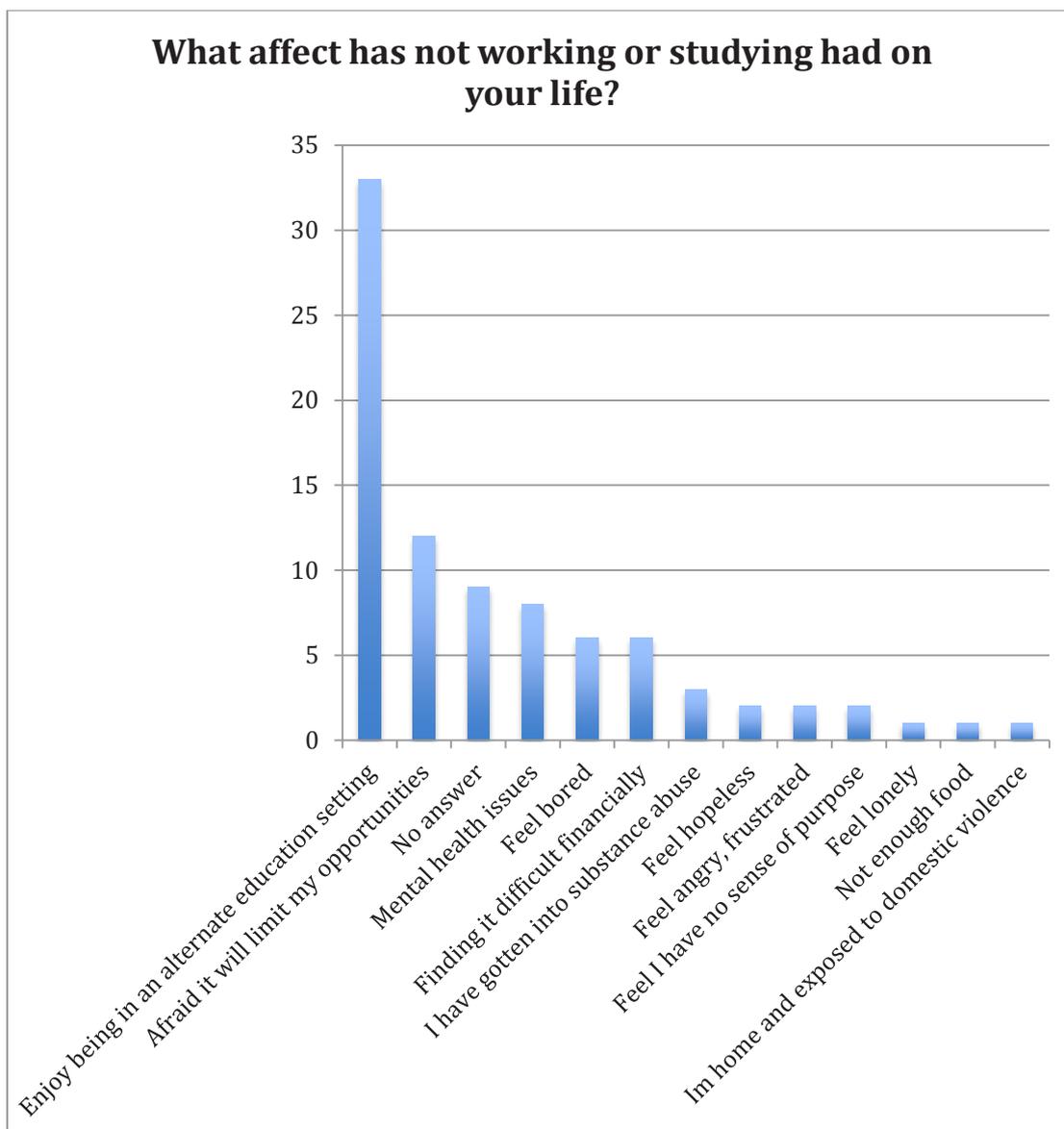
On average (1.6) the young people had accessed or were accessing between 1 and 2 local services.

"What affect has not working or studying, had on your life?"

Table 19 – What affect has not working or studying, had on your life?

Enjoying being in an alternate education setting	33	38%
Afraid it will limit my opportunities	12	14%
No answer	9	10%
Mental health issues	8	9%
Feel bored	6	7%
Finding it difficult financially	6	7%
I have gotten into substance abuse	3	3%
Feel hopeless	2	2%
Feel angry	1	1.5%
Feel frustrated	1	1.5%
Feel I have no sense of purpose	2	2.5%
Feel lonely	1	1.5%
Not enough food	1	1.5%
I'm home and exposed to domestic violence	1	1.5%
Total	86⁵	100%

⁵ The young people sometimes being disengaged had affected their lives in a number of ways.



Overall, most young people interviewed were dissatisfied if they weren't in a structured environment, learning 'something'.

- A number of the young people that had moved out of a mainstream school environment into an alternate education setting said the move had had a positive impact on their quality of life (33 or 38%). They reported bullying was dealt with quickly and effectively in the alternate education setting. The student to teacher ratios were much lower than in a mainstream school setting, which meant the young person received more one on one support from teaching staff, and the numbers of students in the alternate education was lower, which reduced the anxiety they felt in crowds. They also said that they felt 'cared for' by the teaching staff. There was a sense of relief for these young people that they had finally found somewhere where

they felt safe (from bullying), were able to learn at their own pace, felt cared for and fed.

"Previously my life was hell, but now my life's alright to be honest, since I've come to MCP."

Interview 46 – "I'm a lot calmer, my anxiety has gone down heaps and I'm not cutting."

Interview 49- "I'm aiming to be a social worker or counsellor."

Interview 53 – "I'm on the path where I want to be (to be a childcare worker)."

Interview 62 – "I don't think not being in mainstream school will have much effect. I want to work in equine or animal rescue".

Interview 64 – "I want to be a police officer and I think I can still do it (through alternate education setting)."

- A similar number of young people said not working or studying in the mainstream had had a negative impact on their lives (36 or 41%) and expressed some of the following concerns/opinions:
 - That it would limit their opportunities in the future
 - ongoing mental health issues
 - regularly experienced feelings of boredom hopelessness, anger, frustration and loneliness
 - felt they had no sense of purpose
 - were finding it difficult to manage financially
 - had gotten into substance abuse.

Interview 31 – "If bullying hadn't happened I would've stayed in mainstream school."

Interview 48 – "I'm stuck in circles going round and round."

Interview 51 – "Frustrating as I'm doing Year 11 for the 3rd time."

Interview 67 – "Getting into uni will be hard, it would have been more straightforward if I'd gone via mainstream school. I'd like to be a social worker in the future."

Interview 68 – "I spent a year smoking bongs, it was my escape, I would smoke, then sleep."

Interview 69 – “It means I can’t do most things I want. I wanted to go in the navy.”

Interview 79 – “I do want to go to university and study law, so this may delay the process (being in alternate education setting).”

Interview 81 – “I want to be a paramedic so it is going to take longer for me to get there.”

What can we learn from your experiences? /What would have made a difference for you?

Table 20 – What can we learn from your experiences?/What would have made a difference for you?

BULLYING		19%
Need early intervention with bullying	12	
Bullying effects a person profoundly	4	
Bullies can't be stopped	3	
Kick bullies out of school	1	
SUPPORT FROM SCHOOL		18%
Need more support from school	5	
Someone at school should notice something is wrong	3	
Speak up at school/ask for help	1	
Need more support networks/mentors	6	
Need early intervention with learning difficulties	3	
Teachers don't help those who fall behind	1	
ADVICE FROM YOUNG PEOPLE		12%
Stay at school	8	
Don't do what I did	1	
Don't hang with the wrong crowd	2	
Resist peer pressure	2	
No answer given	11	10%
DRUGS		6%
There is a big drug culture in schools	2	
Don't do drugs	4	
OTHER		
Various answers	24	22%
Alternate education is better for some young people	7	7%
More emergency accommodation needed for young people	6	6%
Total	106⁶	100%

⁶ The young people sometimes gave more than one answer when asked this question.

The main learnings from young people (20 or 19%) interviewed related to bullying, particularly that it requires early intervention. The young people who had been bullied over a long period of time understood the impact it had had on their lives in terms of mental health and that it often led to significant school being missed and sometimes required them to leave the school.

They young people (19 or 18%) also expressed that they needed more support from the school generally, and said that better support networks/mentors would be helpful. They wished someone at school had noticed that something was wrong, or that they needed early intervention with learning difficulties.

Young people (13 or 12%) also were keen to offer advice about their experiences to other young people such as 'stay at school', 'don't do what I did', 'don't hang around with the wrong crowd', and 'resist peer pressure'.

Some young people (6 or 6%) had advice about drugs for other young people, mainly 'don't do drugs'.

Some young people (6 or 6%) said Shepparton needed more emergency accommodation for young people, particularly when it was unsafe to stay in their home for the night.

24 young people gave varying answers from 'don't trust anyone' and 'don't expect much (in life)' to 'there is always hope' and 'there are plenty of good people in Shepparton'.

Some comments from young people in response to this question:

"Someone noticing around Grade 3 or 4 that my academic results were rapidly declining – intervention at this point may have had an impact."

"Intervention at year 7/8, when my interest in school was going down because of issues at home, which was being compounded (my stress) by my poor academic results."

"Please someone, address the bullying", a comment heard from young people many times.

"Bullying seriously impacts on a person's sense of themselves, it has been so devastating for me."

"I felt like I received no support from any sources (when I was a child and struggling) – but when I had a baby, many services kicked in."

"I wish I'd stayed at school – I wish I did my Year 12."

"I didn't have many people to talk to, not many friends or older cousins, etc., which may have helped."

"The size, atmosphere, laid back environment and one teacher who really knows you, really helps you to learn (talking about alternate learning settings)."

"Public schools care about you as much as a rock, they just push you through it."

"Bullying in schools is really significant – it led me to being violent, and led to me having depression and anxiety."

"You really can't change bullying, there is always going to be bullying."

“What would you like to see introduced in the Greater Shepparton area, to support young people like yourself?”

Youth Space/Hub	28	23%
Place to go for a meal/food	20	16%
Mentor Program	11	8%
Emergency Accommodation	9	7%
Don't know	7	6%
Get rid of drugs	6	5%
Shepparton already has a lot	4	3%
More social activities	4	3%
Peer support	3	2.5%
Bring back technical schools	3	2.5%
More work opportunities	3	2.5%
Creative place for young people	3	2.5%
Peer speakers in schools	3	2.5%
Bullying support	3	2.5%
More alternate education programs	2	1.5%
Drug and alcohol program for young people	2	1.5%
More chaplains/counsellors	2	1.5%
Drug education in schools	2	1.5%
Security cameras in Shepparton	2	1.5%
Life skills course	1	1.5%
More support in schools	2	2%
More kindness	1	1.5%
Education support for young mums	1	1.5%
Total	122⁷	100%

⁷ The young people sometimes gave more than one answer when asked this question.

Some comments from young people in response to this question:

"Need chaplains not just in high schools, but in primary schools."

"Mentor program for young mums – with someone to assist you with things like getting your 120 hours driving on your L's – something that is difficult when you have a little baby."

"Sporting mentor program– with someone to pick you up to go to training, watch you play."

"A youth hangout/youth groups where young people can talk to safe adults."

"A drop in centre that feels like ACE – it's like family."

"I wish I had someone to speak to, who had experienced what I had experienced (severe bullying with little support), even a peer, online especially because it is hard face to face."

"There needs to be help to stop the bullying. Having people who have experienced it, talking in schools, even kids who are the same age – I would talk to (kids) in schools."

"More homeless shelters – they have cool homeless shelters in Melbourne."

"A bit more kindness, I'd like everyone to just be happy."

"A group-mentoring program, particularly for young people who have had mental health difficulties."

"More programs like ACE College, they provide social support, they value you."

"It seems pretty hard (for me) to maintain an attachment to someone long term – building trust is the hardest thing for me." (frequently stated).

The young person said mentoring sounded good, but they were looking for long term relationships where people really cared about them.

"A hostel type thing for accommodation – a bunk bed in shared accommodation has to be better than sleeping out bush. It was very hard to do schooling living in the bush.

A "Get me Outta Here" assistance program. "A car to come and get you, because it is hard for young people to call child protection when they need a lift."

"Need something like a Men's Shed, for young people."

"Need more social/activities, which help build relationships, help to care for one another, everyone wants to be loved."

"More opportunity for creative people like poetry," from an interview with a young man.

Unexpected outcomes from the interviews:

Although it was not cited as a reason for disengaging from school, 30% of the young people interviewed stated that they were often hungry and that they had very limited access to food at home. When asked the question "What would you like to see introduced in Shepparton to support young people like yourself?", twenty (16%) suggested a place to go for a meal/access to food.

Conclusion

Some very strong themes emerged from the interviews conducted with young people not in work or study in Greater Shepparton. There appears to be a well-worn path that begins with a troubled home life and predisposes the young person to be bullied or become themselves the bully. These vulnerable young people find the transition to secondary school particularly difficult and many feel they do not get the assistance they need with their personal and learning issues. A large number are subsequently diagnosed with depression or anxiety and are no longer able to cope in a mainstream school setting.

A large number of alternative settings have sprung up to cater for this vulnerable cohort. While many find these settings a welcome refuge, the damage has already been done and there has been significant disruption to their learning, often over many years.

Despite their challenges, many of the young people expressed a strong desire to continue learning and many were continuing to do so, albeit in a compromised way. In this regard and many others, they showed remarkable fortitude.

The extent and range of trauma experienced in the home; the extent and harmful impact of bullying; the inability of mainstream secondary schools to address and cope with the complex needs and bullying experienced by these young people; and the number who regularly go hungry were the stand out themes of these troubled lives.

Once again, the need was highlighted for early intervention and prevention measures rather than the current situation of relying too late on clinical and crisis responses.

Recommendations

In light of the above, the following recommendations are made. They are intended for all tiers of government, current community and education services and the Lighthouse Project which has commissioned this report. Some of the findings address specific needs identified directly by the young people. Others are system changes to address issues that emerged as strong themes in the almost 80 interviews with young people.

1. Develop a community lead and endorsed plan that puts young people at the heart of the community.
2. Create a youth hub (haven) to support vulnerable young people in Greater Shepparton
3. Provide mentors and role models for vulnerable young people at risk of disengaging from primary and secondary school.
4. Offer access to free food in all mainstream school settings.
5. Survey secondary school children to assess their wellbeing. "Triage" need and put youth services on site to address the identified need.
6. Develop schools as hubs where a suite of services are available to support the family and child including housing, paediatrics, allied health etc.
7. Improve transitions to secondary school and pastoral care beyond year 7.
8. Develop and institute a whole of community response to bullying in mainstream schools. Adopt an asset-based approach to this work ie frame it in terms of positive relationships or a kindness campaign and involve young people in development and delivery.

9. Adopt a trauma-informed response to education in mainstream settings and train teachers accordingly.
10. Develop a collaborative and aligned response to supporting families and young people in Greater Shepparton based on documented need not government or organisational priorities, funding streams etc.
11. Use community consultation, research and data to inform and help drive the positive changes needed.

¹ *ABS Census Population and Housing 2011*

² *Progress in Australian Regions – Yearbook 2015: Young People Earning or Learning p 96*

³ *ABS ERP 30 June 2015*