

# **Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre**

**Supporting Innovative Research and Evaluation**



## **GIPPSLAND EAST YOUTH PROJECT - YOUTH-LED BUSHFIRE RECOVERY**

**EVALUATION 2022 - 2024**

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FEDERATION UNIVERSITY  
COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION &  
RESEARCH CENTRE

SUPPORTING INNOVATIVE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

**GIPPSLAND EAST YOUTH PROJECT -  
YOUTH-LED BUSHFIRE RECOVERY  
EVALUATION 2022 - 2024**

DECEMBER 2024

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC) Federation University Gippsland acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land, sea and nations and pays our respect to elders, past, present and emerging. The CERC further acknowledges our commitment to working respectfully to honour their ongoing cultural and spiritual connections to this country.

The CERC would like to thank the State Government of Victoria for funding the activities of the Gippsland Youth Spaces Inc. (GYS) and the Federal Government through the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants program for funding the Gippsland East Youth Project (GEYP) to undertake their activities and services. CERC would also like to thank GYS for their support and contribution to the activity of the evaluation of the GEYP and also the team at GEYP for their support and assistance with project activities throughout the evaluation. The ongoing commitment and support from GYS and GEYP for the project has ensured a robust evaluation of the role and its functions to date.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC) Federation University Gippsland is an innovative initiative that aims to build evaluation capacity and expertise within Gippsland. As a local provider, the CERC understands the value of listening to the community and has the ability to deliver timely and sustainable evaluations that are tailored to the needs of a wide variety of organisations.

Professor Joanne Porter is the Director of the CERC. Joanne has led a number of successful research projects and evaluations in conjunction with local industry partners. She has guided the development of the CERC since its formation in 2018.

The CERC team that evaluated the Youth-Led Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Project included:

- Professor Joanne Porter
- Dr Elizabeth Miller
- Dr Megan Simic
- Kaye Borgelt
- Dr Daria Soldatenko
- Dr Nicole Coombs



*Professor Joanne  
Porter*

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Gippsland East Youth Project (GEYP) was established by Gippsland Youth Spaces Inc. in 2022 with funding received from the Australian Government Black Summer Bushfire Recovery (BSBR) Grants Program. Communities in East Gippsland were seriously impacted by the Black Summer bushfires that burnt over the 2019-20 summer, followed almost immediately by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in multiple lockdowns throughout 2020. While these major and long-lasting disasters impacted the health and wellbeing of all members of the community it was particularly hard on young people, who were considered especially vulnerable to feelings of being overwhelmed alongside strong physical and emotional reactions<sup>1</sup>.

The purpose of GEYP was to provide social activities, rebuild relationships and improve the mental health of young people aged between 12-25 years, who had been negatively impacted by the Black Summer bushfires. The model included employing youth workers and/or social workers, purchasing two buses and travelling to communities throughout Wellington and East Gippsland local government areas to engage with youth and offer a range of activities in a safe and inclusive environment. A grant of \$3.18 million was received with the project originally planned to operate for two years which was subsequently increased to three years, concluding by March 2025.

Central to the success of the project was the youth-led councils based in Wellington and East Gippsland who decided upon which activities would be conducted and how best to engage with the youth in the area. The Youth Programs Committees were supported by the GYS staff, with some support from Local Government staff, learning skills in governance, decision making, planning and implementation of events and physical activities.

The Collaborative Evaluation and Research Centre (CERC) was commissioned to evaluate the project, aiming to capture the process, outcomes and impact of the program from its commencement in 2022 through to the end of November 2024. This report details the findings and includes quantitative and qualitative information, including interviews with youth, staff and parents.

## 1.2 KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Gippsland East Youth Project (GEYP) provided young people in East Gippsland and Wellington local government areas with a safe and inclusive environment, drawing in a demographic that included youth disengaged from school and employment and others struggling to make social connections and those for whom cost and distance were significant and sometimes insurmountable barriers. Key strengths were identified as being fun, free, accessible, a supportive environment and an opportunity to spend time with friends.

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<sup>1</sup> NSW Government. (2020). *The impact of bushfires on student wellbeing and student learning*. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/cese/publications/research-reports/impact-of-bushfires-on-student-wellbeing-and-learning>

A total of 8,161 young people interactions were recorded across 546 different activities in the three-year period. Participation increased substantially, from 1,113 interactions in 2022 to 4,460 in 2024, as the project became more widely known and activities were able to be tailored to meet the needs of the youth, including offering activities that appealed, at an appropriate time and in the right location.

The extraordinary flexibility of the project meant there were almost endless possibilities. This enabled activities to be continually refined depending on need. Noting that each community had individual needs, *“one size does not fit all”*, it was important to build relationships with the young people and other organisations in the region working in the youth mental health and wellbeing space to ensure no duplication of programs and strengthen referral processes between organisations.

Many positive outcomes were reported because of being part of the project:

- The number of participants involved in some form of physical activity 3-4 days per week increased from 31% to 40%.
- 86% of participants reported increased motivation to engage in activities.
- 82% of participants were motivated to become more active.
- 73% of the youth reported increased social interactions with other young people and 75% of participants reported increased social interactions with adults.
- 35% of participants had been attending activities for more than six months, highlighting the program’s staying power.
- Two out of three young people (66.7%) reported feeling healthier.

Young Peoples, as users of the services, identified a number of barriers which had acted to reduce participation in sports and physical activity, including accessibility and cost, the type of activity and playing with friends, with 50% of young people reporting that ‘playing to win’ was not important to them at all. GEYP introduced youth to activities other than traditional sports which proved incredibly popular and empowering including learn to surf, water play at aquatic parks, splatball and boating.

The tyranny of distance was identified at the outset as a challenge, given the large geographic area and number of small townships in East Gippsland and Wellington. Purchasing and outfitting two buses to travel to rural and remote locations was a key component of the project. It took time to purchase and then outfit the buses which delayed the commencement of the hands-on component of the project. Occasional maintenance and compliance issues meant that buses were sometimes sidelined for long periods. As the project expanded and became more focussed on offering excursions and adventures outside local catchments, larger coaches had to be hired to transport the young people. Regularly, travelling to and from activities was extensive, with program officers often working more than a standard eight-hour day.

Over time it became apparent that young people and program officers preferred to have a physical site for activities, rather than the original premise of using the buses as mobile activity centres. Locations in Bairnsdale and Sale were rented and together with locations such as community halls and neighbourhood houses were utilised for youth groups and other drop-in activities.

Recruiting and retaining appropriately skilled and qualified staff was a challenge throughout. Program officers noted while it was important to engage with participants and provide a safe and inclusive environment it was important not to overstep the mark in providing therapeutic care. To this end, having a Social Worker or qualified mental health practitioner on staff, which had been the original intention, would have been beneficial.

Regardless of these challenges, the youth, parents and program officers all see the need, and a future, for the Gippsland East Youth Project. Previously disengaged young people in East Gippsland and Wellington have been provided with and embraced the opportunity to build community connection, find new friends, re-engage in school or employment, try new activities and increase their level of physical activity.

*“The enjoyment from this project is seeing young people who were previously completely disengaged and isolated and really struggling with their own sense of identity, start to find people who are like them, starting to find ... their tribe which is really nice.”*

To accurately measure the impact of any youth engagement project there needs to be adequate time provided to see long term impacts such as a reduction in school absentees, increase in TAFE enrolments or youth employment. The true impact of the project on the lives of those young people who have attended the activities and events throughout Gippsland may not be visible for many years. It is evident that this project addressed a need in rural and remote communities which supported the growth and resilience of young people across Gippsland.

### 1.3 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Gippsland East Youth Project should continue to be funded to provide services to the young people of East Gippsland and Wellington local government areas building on the current success of the program to continue to provide diverse, safe and inclusive activities to promote community connections for vulnerable youth. Future funding may come from state government agencies or local government.
2. Continue to build and expand those activities that were successful and empowering such as special youth groups, school holiday programs and school outreach.
3. Replace the buses with smaller vehicles for use by program officers travelling to rural and remote townships and use infrastructure/buildings already in towns, such as community halls and neighbourhood houses, for activities.
4. Be cognizant of the challenges surrounding the recruitment and retention of appropriately skilled and experienced staff in rural and remote areas and how this may impact the success of similar projects.
5. Work collaboratively with other organisations working with young people in East Gippsland and Wellington to strengthen referral processes and information sharing.

# GIPPSLAND EAST YOUTH PROJECT (GEYP) YOUTH-LED GIPPSLAND BUSHFIRE RECOVERY PROJECT EVALUATION 2022 - 2024

8,161 youth interactions



4,845 from East  
Gippsland

3,316 from  
Wellington

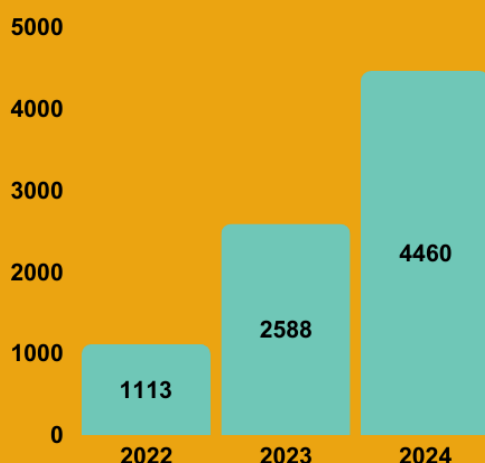


546 activities



22 towns from Heyfield  
to Mallacoota

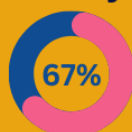
## Activity Participation



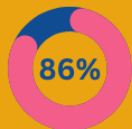
91%

of participants found  
the activities 'fun'

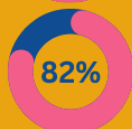
## Survey results (78 program participants)



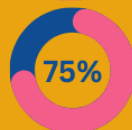
reported feeling healthier



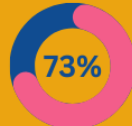
felt more motivated to engage in  
activities



were motivated to become  
more active



reported increased social  
interactions with adults



reported increased social  
interactions with other young people

## Comments from officers:

"The enjoyment from this project is seeing young people who were previously completely disengaged and isolated and really struggling with their own sense of identity, start to find people who are like them, starting to find ... their tribe which is really nice."

"Making friendships can be really hard, seeing the change in the youth and the friendships that they're making with others, that's always very rewarding just seeing different kids interact together that wouldn't know each other if they weren't coming here..."

"It feels rewarding that we have a consistent group of young people from across the region who are now engaging who otherwise wouldn't have done that."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue **funding the Gippsland East Youth Project** to provide services to the youth of East Gippsland and Wellington.
2. Continue **expanding successful and empowering activities**.
3. **Replace the buses with smaller vehicles** for rural travel.
4. **Utilise existing town infrastructure** for activities.
5. **Address challenges** in recruiting and retaining skilled staff.
6. **Collaborate with other organisations** to improve referrals and information sharing.

## 2. INTRODUCTION: THE GIPPSLAND EAST YOUTH PROJECT

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The bushfires that severely impacted many communities throughout eastern Victoria and New South Wales became known as the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020. The fires impacted many regions of eastern Australia, this Report will focus on the impact communities of East Gippsland faced as a result of widespread bushfires across the East Gippsland region. Bushfires that began on 21 November 2019 due to lightning strikes on a day of a statewide total fire ban rapidly developed and continued to burn over the following weeks. Authorities broadcast warnings to residents and visitors to leave high-risk areas in a 15,000 square kilometre area stretching from Bairnsdale to Cann River and the New South Wales border, resulting in an estimated 60,000 people being evacuated from the East Gippsland and Hume regions. By the end of December 2019, approximately 130,000 hectares of combined fires remained active across East Gippsland. On New Year's Eve, Mallacoota was cut off, leaving an estimated 4,000 people gathering on the beach and at least 60 homes destroyed. Approximately 2,000 people were rescued by air or sea<sup>2</sup>. Multiple emergency warnings across East Gippsland during this period affected more than 80 communities<sup>3</sup>. The state government declared a State of Disaster for some parts of Victoria on 2 January 2020, including East Gippsland and Wellington Shires, remaining in force for 10 days<sup>4</sup>. In February 2020 after most of the fires had been contained, 1.1 million hectares had been burnt across the East Gippsland LGA<sup>4</sup>.

#### 2019/20 Bushfire Burnt Area with Local Government Areas

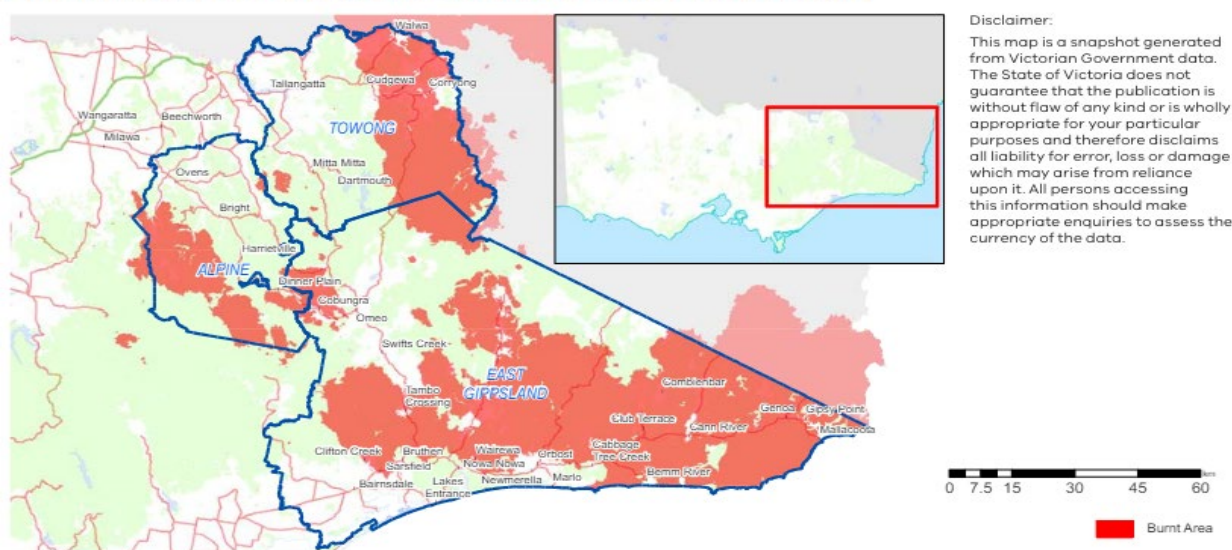


Figure 1: Map of burnt area in East & North Victoria 2019/20 - BRV State Recovery Plan

<sup>2</sup> State Government Victoria (August 2020). *Eastern Victorian Fires 2019-20 State Recovery Plan*. [Report] publisher- Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Accessed 9 May 2024 from: [https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/BRV\\_Statewide%20Recovery%20Plan.pdf](https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/BRV_Statewide%20Recovery%20Plan.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience [AIDR] (n.d.) *Victoria, November 2019-February 2020. Bushfires – Black Summer*. [website]. Accessed 9 May 2024 from: <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/black-summer-bushfires-vic-2019-20/>

<sup>4</sup> State Government Victoria (August 2020). *Eastern Victorian Fires 2019-20 State Recovery Plan*. [Report] publisher- Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Accessed 9 May 2024 from: [https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/BRV\\_Statewide%20Recovery%20Plan.pdf](https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/BRV_Statewide%20Recovery%20Plan.pdf)

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## Fire threat looms again over East Gippsland

East Gippsland residents and holiday-makers have been told to leave, ahead of another day of "very dangerous" fire conditions, with soaring temperatures and gusty winds.

 **Aneeka Simonis** [Follow](#)

 @AneekaSimonis  2 min read January 9, 2020 - 3:31PM  **Herald Sun**  2 comments



Victorians are bracing for dangerous fire conditions over the next few days. Picture: Damien Traynor/Getty

Residents and holiday-makers in East Gippsland have been urged to leave as fire authorities brace for "very dangerous" conditions on Friday.

District Chief Fire Officer Beth Roberts said [three-quarters of East Gippsland had been scorched by bushfires](#) and there were still large patches of unburnt land that could ignite tomorrow.

Sourced from: <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/fire-threat-looms-again-over-east-gippsland/news-story/b684be8aaffabfd7d06ad8febe3c754b>

**Figure 2: Media Reports about Black Summer bushfires**

Bushfires such as those experienced during December 2019 and January 2020 inflicted severe damage on the natural habitats, destroying plants and animal life and degrading soil and air quality<sup>5</sup>. Short-term consequences were immediately observable, while longer-term effects on individuals and communities residing in areas affected by the bushfires may remain hidden for several years<sup>5</sup>. The repercussions of bushfires extend beyond environmental damage, impacting the mental, physical, and emotional health of those directly affected by the disaster and displacement from their communities<sup>5</sup>. Research shows that people exposed to damage or loss of their homes and the surrounding physical environment, disruption to health services and infrastructure and displacement are vulnerable to mood and anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, family conflict or domestic violence<sup>6</sup>. Financial

<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing [AIHW]. (2020). *Australian bushfires 2019-20: exploring the short-term health impacts*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/environment-and-health/short-term-health-impacts-2019-20-bushfires/contents/summary>

<sup>1</sup> NSW Government. (2020). *The impact of bushfires on student wellbeing and student learning*. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/cese/publications/research-reports/impact-of-bushfires-on-student-wellbeing-and-learning>

hardship is also experienced, not only by those whose homes and businesses are destroyed but by communities who lose trade and tourism income<sup>7</sup>. Those directly affected by bushfires, especially in the light of climate change anxiety, may have existing mental health conditions exacerbated<sup>8</sup>. While the majority of people affected who suffer a psychological distress response to the disaster will improve over time<sup>6</sup>, others may develop long-term mental health disorders<sup>9</sup>.

Young people are especially vulnerable to the trauma of bushfires and may feel overwhelmed and experience strong physical and emotional reactions<sup>1</sup>. Their schooling may have been interrupted due to dislocation, they may have difficulties concentrating and may avoid school, affecting their grades. Additionally, they may withdraw from social activities and hobbies, have conflicts with family and friends or participate in antisocial behaviour<sup>1</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic which commenced immediately following the bushfires impacted recovery efforts as services, agencies and community members were required to socially isolate. Young people in the East Gippsland region directly or indirectly affected by the fires were separated from their support networks and usual routines.

In July 2021 the Australian Government announced the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery (BSBR) Grants Program. The objectives of the program were to support the recovery and resilience of those communities impacted by the fires and build stronger communities through social economic and built environment recovery. In February 2022 the Government announced 524 community projects would be funded with a total cost of just over \$390 million, and a completion date of 31 March 2025.

Gippsland Youth Spaces Inc. was successful in receiving funding to implement the Gippsland East Youth Project (GEYP). The purpose of GEYP was to provide social activities, rebuild relationships and improve the mental health of young people negatively impacted by the Black Summer bushfires. The Gippsland East Youth Project received a grant of \$3.18 million.

## 2.2 POLICY CONTEXT

Much has been written about the declining mental health of young people. It is estimated that about 14% of children aged 4-17 years, equivalent to 628,000 people, have experienced mental illness in the previous 12 months<sup>10</sup>. In a 2021 survey it was estimated that 7% of Australians aged 15-17 have a long-term mental health condition such as a nervous or emotional condition which requires treatment, or a mental illness which requires help or supervision, an increase from 2% in 2003. In

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<sup>6</sup> Bryant, R. A., Waters, E., Gibbs, L., Gallagher, H. C., Pattison, P., Lusher, D., MacDougall, C., Harms, L., Block, K., Snowdon, E., Sinnott, V., Ireton, G., Richardson, J., & Forbes, D. (2014). Psychological outcomes following the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires. *The Australian and New Zealand journal of psychiatry*, 48(7), 634–643. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867414534476>

<sup>7</sup> Reiner, V., Pathirana, N.L., Sun, YY. et al. (2024). Wish You Were Here? The Economic Impact of the Tourism Shutdown from Australia's 2019-20 'Black Summer' Bushfires. *Economics of Disasters and Climate Change*, 8, 107–127. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41885-024-00142-8>

<sup>8</sup> Hayes, K., Blashki, G., Wiseman, J., Burke, S., & Reifels, L. (2018). Climate change and mental health: risks, impacts and priority actions. *International journal of mental health systems*, 12, 28. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-018-0210-6>

<sup>9</sup> Zhang, Y., Workman, A., Russell, M. A., Williamson, M., Pan, H., & Reifels, L. (2022). The long-term impact of bushfires on the mental health of Australians: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 13(1), 2087980–2087980. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2022.2087980>

<sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing [AIHW]. (2024). *Prevalence and impact of mental illness*. Accessed 5 November 2024 from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/overview/prevalence-and-impact-of-mental-illness>

addition, 19% of Australians in this age group were estimated to have been diagnosed with depression anxiety or any other mental illness, an increase from 6% in 2009. Across Australia mental health and substance use disorders are estimated to be responsible for 15% of the total burden of disease placing it second as a broad disease group after cancer <sup>10</sup>.

East Gippsland Shire recognised the need to support the emotional, social, spiritual, physical wellbeing and financial recovery of individuals, families and communities following the Black Summer fires including assisting those affected by the disaster with opportunities to reconnect with their communities and reduce risks to public health <sup>11</sup>. The 2019-2020 black summer bushfires, followed immediately by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, had a serious impact on the mental health of young people living in the impacted communities in Wellington and East Gippsland LGAs. The Gippsland East Youth Project provides an innovative approach to addressing the issue of poor mental health and connection to community for young people in East Gippsland and Wellington LGAs, giving young people living in this area of rural and remote Victoria the opportunity to participate in activities and establish and retain connections within their local communities.

A survey of young people undertaken by Gippsland Youth Spaces in May 2023 and reported in the Gippsland Youth Spaces Annual Report 2023, identified the top five concerns young people identified for themselves or their peers as being:

- Mental health.
- Friends.
- Getting a job.
- Body image; and
- Bullying.

When asked what young people wanted a mobile GEYP to deliver, they identified the following:

- Sports.
- Cooking programs.
- Free food.
- Camps; and
- A safe space to hang out.

Information gathered in this evaluation may assist in the development of future programs and wellbeing management protocols, increasing the overall health, confidence and resilience of vulnerable young people, which may then be translatable to other disaster affected regions.

## 2.3 PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Gippsland East Youth Project (GEYP) commenced in August 2022 after receiving funding from the Commonwealth Government's National Disaster and Resilience Agency Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program.

GEYP aims to provide programs, activities and services to young people aged between 12 and 25 in towns and communities where they live in East Gippsland and Wellington local government areas (LGAs). Vehicles were purchased and fitted out with all the gear young people might need to enjoy an after-school or work activity including free internet access, computers, gaming consoles and games

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<sup>11</sup> East Gippsland Shire Council (2020). *East Gippsland Fires 2019-20 Social Recovery Sub-Plan*. Accessed 5 November 2024. <https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/community/bushfire-recovery-plans-and-reports>

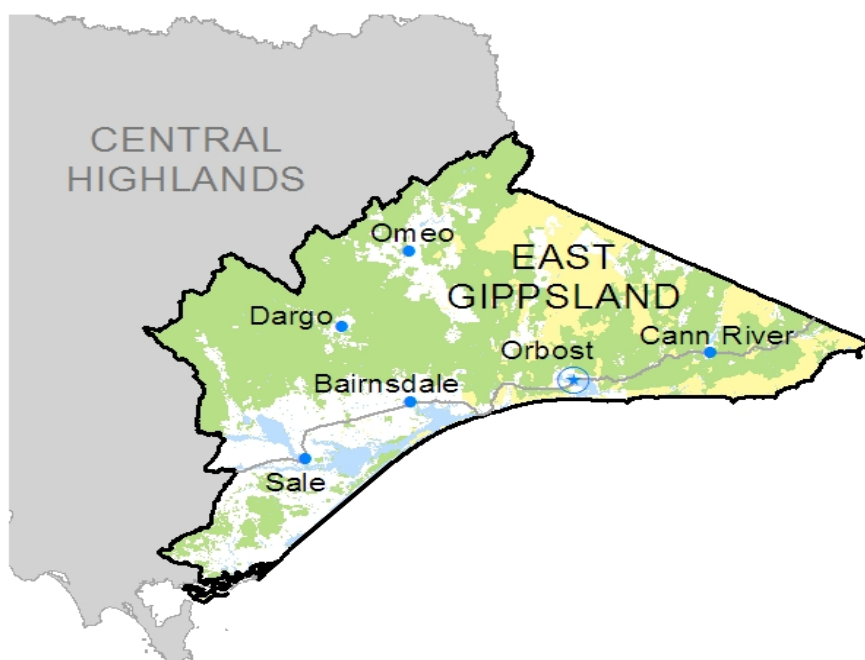
equipment. Project staff travelled to venues in the towns where the activity was to occur, including regular travel to remote towns in each LGA.

The Collaborative Evaluation and Research Centre (CERC) in partnership with Gippsland Youth Spaces Inc. (GYS), then known as Latrobe Youth Space Inc., has undertaken an evaluation to assess the impact and effectiveness of the Youth-led project.

## 2.4 SCOPE

The Gippsland East Youth Project was originally funded to operate for two years, 2022-2023, this was subsequently increased to three years, concluding by March 2025.

The target audience for the project is young people aged 12 to 25 living in the Wellington and East Gippsland local government areas, with a particular emphasis on those living in remote towns including Lakes Entrance, Swifts Creek, Omeo, Orbost, Cann River, Mallacoota, Maffra, Yarram, Heyfield, Briagolong, Rosedale and Stratford. The 2021 Census data notes 7,439 young people aged 10-24 years living in Wellington and 6,736 young people aged 10-24 years living in East Gippsland<sup>12</sup>.



**Figure 3: Map of Wellington and East Gippsland LGAs.**

Sourced from <https://habitatadvocate.com.au>

Lack of access to public transport in rural and remote regional towns in Wellington and East Gippsland Shires has long been recognised as an accessibility barrier. Many small towns, including Omeo, Cann River and Mallacoota, have only two public transport services per day, and these services do not operate every day of the week. This is a long-standing problem having been recognised in 2007 in a Wellington and East Gippsland rural youth transport survey which reported 63% of respondents claiming that a lack of transport stopped them from doing something that they would like to do<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024), *2021 Census* <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area>, accessed 16/11/2024.

<sup>13</sup> Wellington Shire Council (2009). Submission to the Inquiry into the investment of Commonwealth and State funds in public passenger transport infrastructure and services.

Many smaller communities have limited activities and services available to young people. The most recent census data available from 2016 showed that only 65% of households in the Omeo and Swifts Creek area and 60% in Cann River had internet connection, compared to nearly 80% Australia-wide. Access to public library facilities is also limited with many communities serviced by service centres and mobile libraries only.

GEYP had the support of a range of Gippsland-based external stakeholders who signed on as partners. They included:

- Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network (GELLEN)
- Berry Street
- Centre for Multicultural Youth
- Gippsland Centre Against Sexual Assault
- GippSport
- Interchange Gippsland
- Latrobe Youth Choices
- Lifeline Gippsland
- Quantum Support Services
- Wellington and East Gippsland Shires
- Federation University Australia
- TAFE Gippsland
- Gippsland primary and secondary schools

## 2.5 PROJECT DELIVERY / ACTIVITIES

The CERC was commissioned to explore the activities of GEYP, gaining an insight into how the project was viewed by young people living in East Gippsland and Wellington LGAs and the impact the project had on improving their health and wellbeing. This insight was gained from GYS staff, young people and their families, personal observations from researchers attending events and data collected by program officers.

Data was collected from January 2022 to November 2024, capturing information from the commencement of the project using survey tools. Semi-structured interviews with GYS staff were undertaken in the second and third years of the program. Separate focus group interviews were conducted in 2024 with young people and their families. CERC researchers attended activities in multiple locations to make observational notes.

The GEYP provided activities that young people identified as appropriate for their individual communities. Activities were undertaken at many towns across East Gippsland and Wellington LGAs including Bairnsdale, Benambra, Briagalong, Buchan, Cann River, Ensay, Heyfield, Lakes Entrance, Lindenow, Maffra, Mallacoota, Metung, Nowa Nowa, Omeo, Orbost, Rosedale, Sale, Sarsfield, Swifts Creek and Tambo Upper.


The flexibility of the project meant that the type of activities offered changed and were refined as the project progressed. Activities were broadly grouped as follows:

1. Community Outreach / Drop In and Pop Up  
GEYP staff - program officers visited a location and set up the GEYP bus, providing free activities and often free food. Drop in sessions occurred as stand-alone sessions in a park or other central township location or as part of an organised community-wide activity and included youth groups established for special interest groups.
2. School Outreach  
GEYP staff - program officers visited schools, usually at lunchtime, and offered students the opportunity to participate in activities. Schools who opted to participate in the school outreach program were visited on a regular basis.
3. School Holiday Program  
Free excursions, involving youth from both LGAs, were offered to a range of exciting locations, offering youth the chance to try new experiences.

## 2.6 PROJECT GOVERNANCE / MANAGEMENT

Gippsland Youth Spaces Inc. (GYS) was responsible for governance and management of the project. Chair of GYS Inc is shared by the appointment of two co-chairs, one of whom is a young person. The GYS Inc Board comprises five members from the Youth Membership cohort. GYS Inc and the Gippsland East Youth Project's (GEYP) culture is based on the principles of equity and equality where all members were supported to participate fully in all aspects of the project. GEYP operated with the Collective Impact (CI) framework, with the central premise of "nothing about us, without us".

Young people were equal partners in decision making. Youth Programs Committees, comprising young community members, ex-officio members and representatives from nominated youth organisations, were established by GYS in each LGA and tasked with making final recommendations on service offerings and activities of the project. Key partners from youth focussed organisations from the spheres of health and wellbeing, employment, education and sport and social recreation, known as the 'Table of 20', provided advisory board support.



### 3. THE EVALUATION

#### 3.1 AIM OF THE EVALUATION

The aim of the Youth-led Gippsland Bushfire recovery project evaluation was to understand the impact the Gippsland East Youth Project had on its participants' health and wellbeing.

#### 3.2 EVALUATION RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The evaluation of the Youth-led Gippsland Bushfire recovery project addressed the following research questions:

1. What impact did the Gippsland East Youth Project have on the health and wellbeing of participants?
2. How does the Gippsland East Youth Project impact post-bushfire recovery for young people and their communities?

#### 3.3 DATA COLLECTION/TOOLS USED

The evaluation of the project utilised a variety of data collection tools in a mixed methods approach which provided information about process, outcomes and impact (Figure 4). Quantitative data for this evaluation were collected via surveys, program attendance statistics collection, and program officer activity sheets. Qualitative data was collected during one-on-one interview sessions, focus group discussions and researcher observation of activities. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistical analysis, and qualitative data was analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2022) thematic analysis method or content analysis method. Data was collected by CERC researchers, with the support of the GYS and GEYP team. Program attendance statistics were regularly provided by the GYS Manager and GEYP team throughout the evaluation.

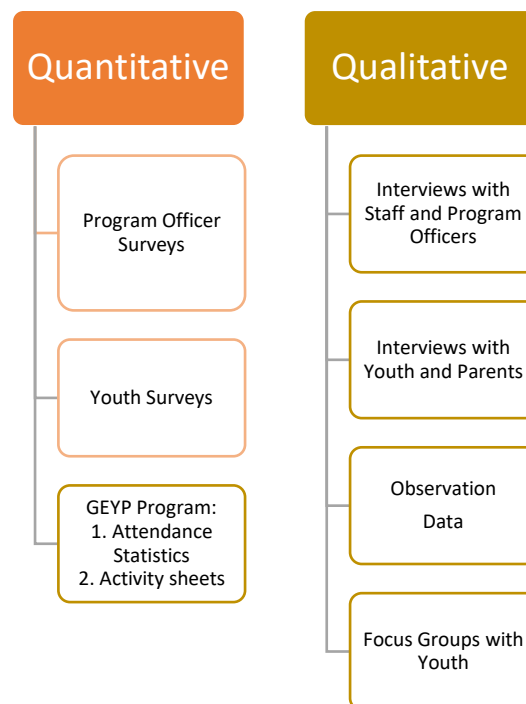


Figure 4: Data collection tools

## 4. EVALUATION FINDINGS

### 4.1 QUANTITATIVE DATA

#### 4.1.1 STAFF SURVEY

##### INTRODUCTION

GEYP staff were invited to complete a survey about their experiences working in the program and providing the service to their community. Data was collected in September 2023 and again in July 2024. A total of eight participants completed the staff and program officer Survey.

##### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

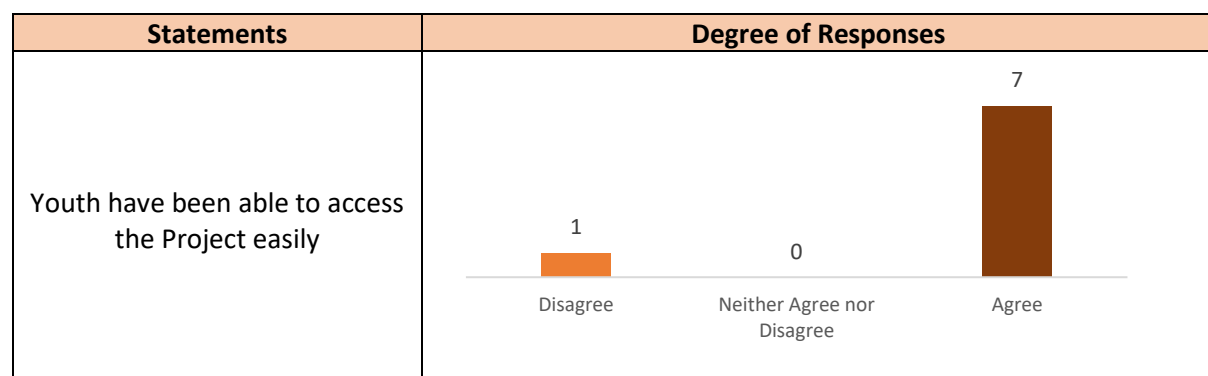
A total of 65% of participants were female (n=5), and 37.5% were male (n=3) were male. No participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander although one preferred not to say. One participant spoke another language other than English at home. Participants were aged between 23-53 years.

Four participants worked at East Gippsland, two worked at Wellington and two at Latrobe Youth Space. All stated they had been employed in their role between 0-2 years. When asked what their position or title was, the response was mixed. One called themselves a facilitator, four described themselves as program officers and three stated their title was staff member. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this survey, all participants will be referred to as GEYP program officers.

##### STAFF EXPERIENCE OVER THE LAST SIX MONTHS

Participants were given a series of ten statements about their experience with clients over the last six months and asked to rate each one from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. For reporting purposes, “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” have been combined in the positive and “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree” have been combined in the negative throughout this report. The results are presented using a 3-point Likert scale. The results are shown in Figure 5 below.

GEYP Program officers were very positive about both the program and their capacity to help and support young people participating in activities. All GEYP program officers believed they had been able to help young people with their concerns and needs, and that young people had made positive connections as a result of participating in activities. A total of 75% reported noticing that young people had developed increased resilience and coping skills. Further, 88% of program officers believed that there had been an increase in young people presenting with concerns for their future, with slightly more than half being worried about young people requiring assistance but not being able to access such assistance easily.



Statements	Degree of Responses								
I have been able to help more young people with their concerns or needs	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Degree of Responses</th> <th>Count</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Agree</td> <td>8</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Degree of Responses	Count	Disagree	0	Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	Agree	8
Degree of Responses	Count								
Disagree	0								
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0								
Agree	8								
I believe young people are making positive connections with others in the Project	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Degree of Responses</th> <th>Count</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Agree</td> <td>8</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Degree of Responses	Count	Disagree	0	Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	Agree	8
Degree of Responses	Count								
Disagree	0								
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0								
Agree	8								
I have noticed young people developing increased resilience and coping skills	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Degree of Responses</th> <th>Count</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Agree</td> <td>6</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Degree of Responses	Count	Disagree	2	Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	Agree	6
Degree of Responses	Count								
Disagree	2								
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0								
Agree	6								
I am worried about the young people who need assistance and have not been able to receive it	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Degree of Responses</th> <th>Count</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Agree</td> <td>5</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Degree of Responses	Count	Disagree	2	Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	Agree	5
Degree of Responses	Count								
Disagree	2								
Neither Agree nor Disagree	1								
Agree	5								
There has been an increase in young people presenting with concerns for their future	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Degree of Responses</th> <th>Count</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Agree</td> <td>7</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Degree of Responses	Count	Disagree	1	Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	Agree	7
Degree of Responses	Count								
Disagree	1								
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0								
Agree	7								

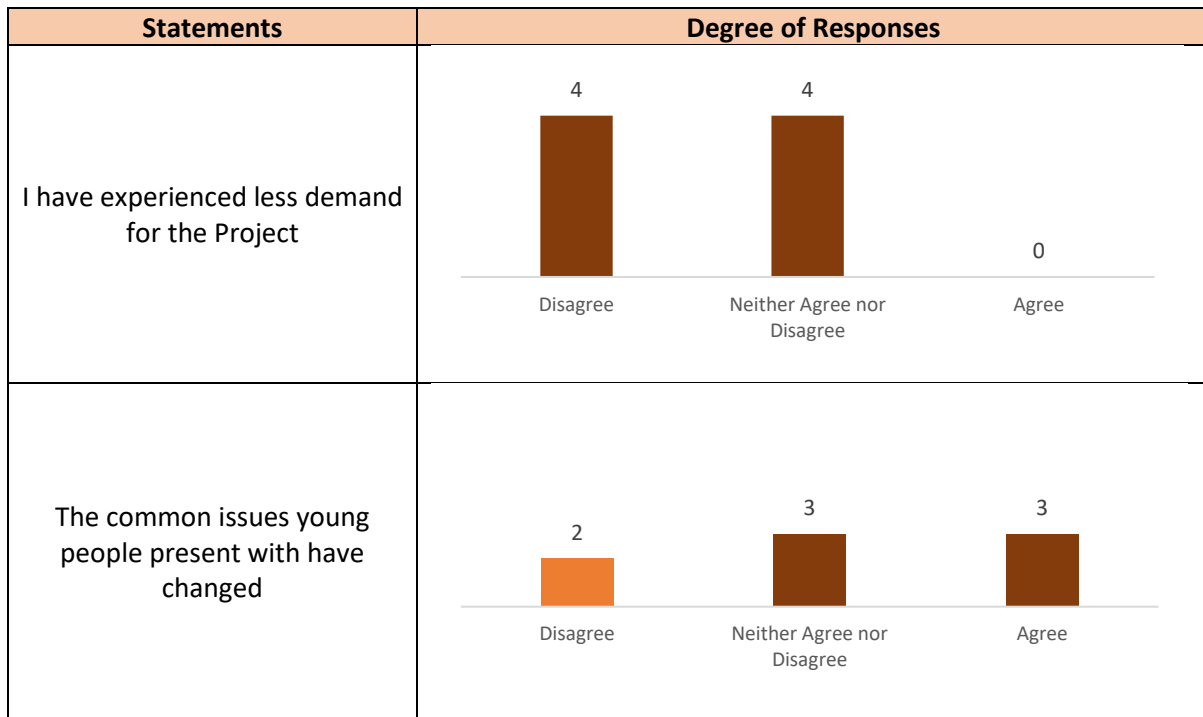


Figure 5: Program Officer experience with participants.

When asked about interaction with young people from vulnerable groups program officers stated that there had been an increase in the number of young people accessing the project who were living out of home, living with a mental illness and who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, refer Figure 6 below.

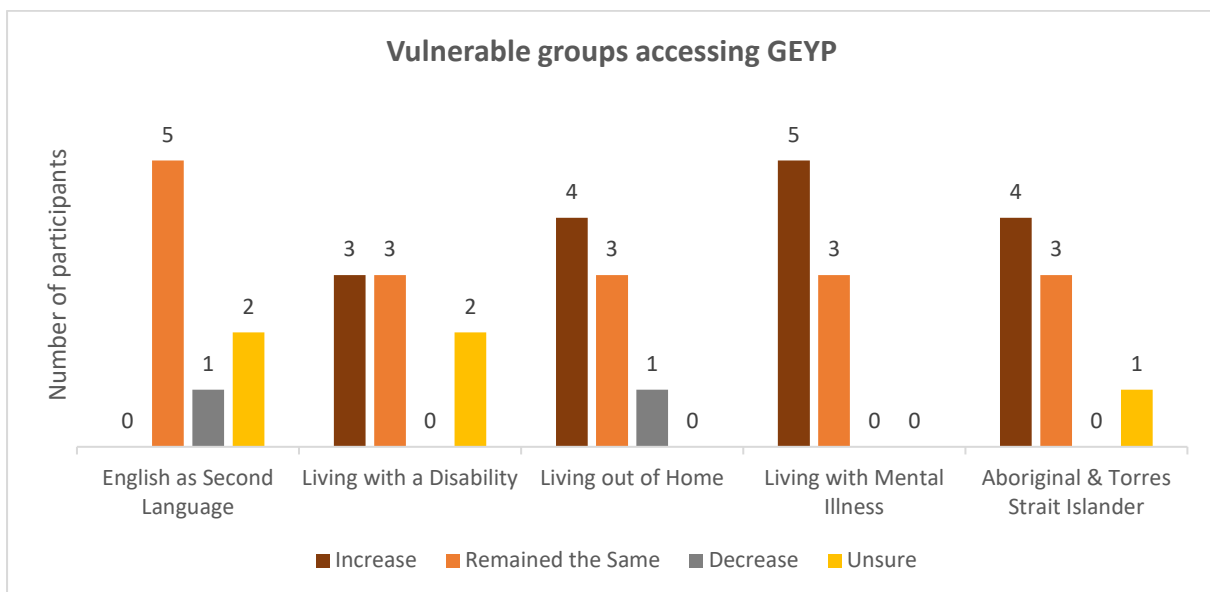


Figure 6: Vulnerable groups accessing the GEYP.

Program officers were positive when asked to reflect on what they thought the next six months looked like for young people accessing the GEYP:

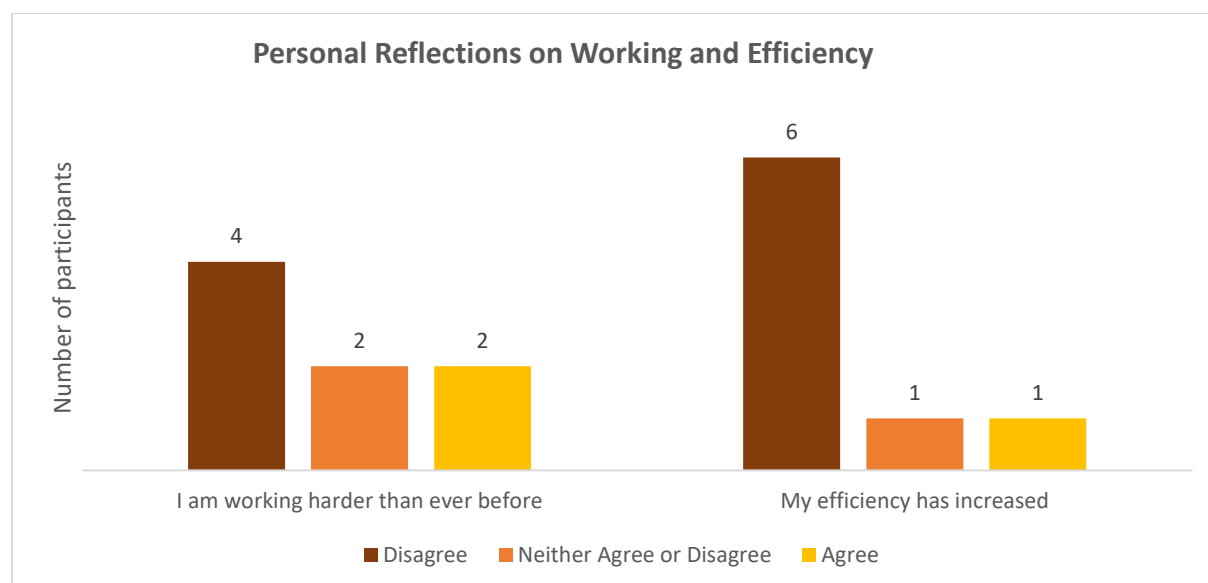
*“Exciting with lots of new pathways and school outreach programs.”*

*“Hoping to connect with more youth through more accessible programs and networks.”*

*“I think we are known now, we are getting out there a lot more, the youth are willing to participate and its free. Its easy for parents to know kids are engaged in programs and not stuck at home by themselves.”*

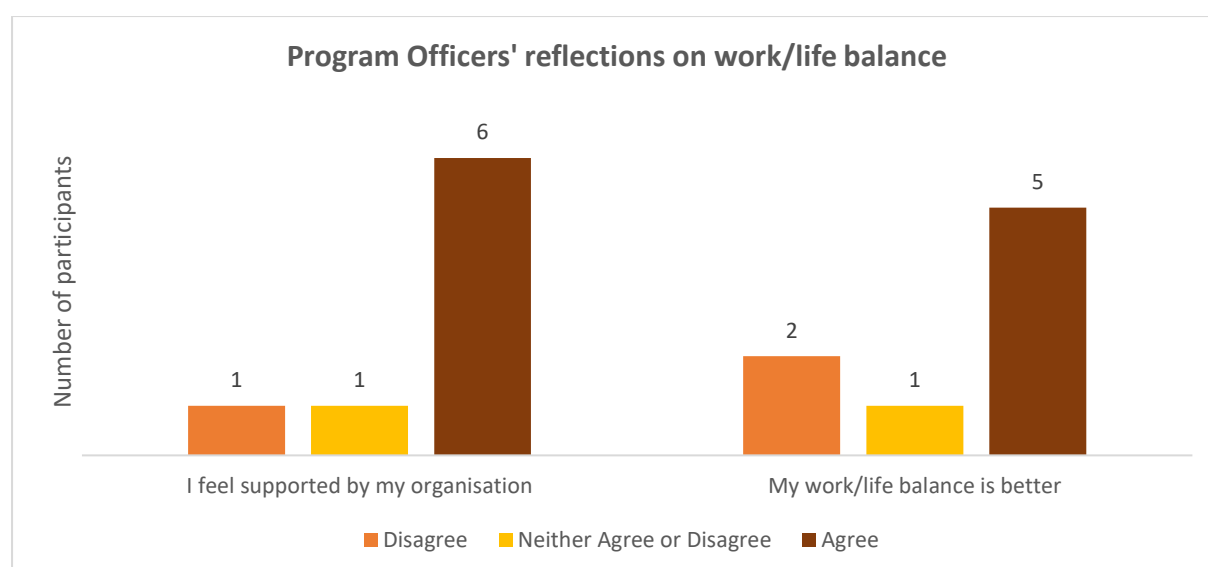
*“I think with the buses being able to access the young people directly, it will make a positive impact on the East Gippsland community. Linking in with other services will help get young the support they need.”*

Survey participants were asked to reflect on their own experiences working in the Project. The first question related to working and efficiency and while participants were divided on whether they were working harder than ever before there was general agreement (n=6) that their efficiency had decreased. While there was no clear rationale as to why GEYP program staff felt their efficiency had decreased, all staff (n=8) did not believe their ability to complete their work had been impacted by COVID-19. The tyranny of distance and a perceived lack of understanding by others about the distances required to be travelled may have contributed to staff perception about their work efficiency.

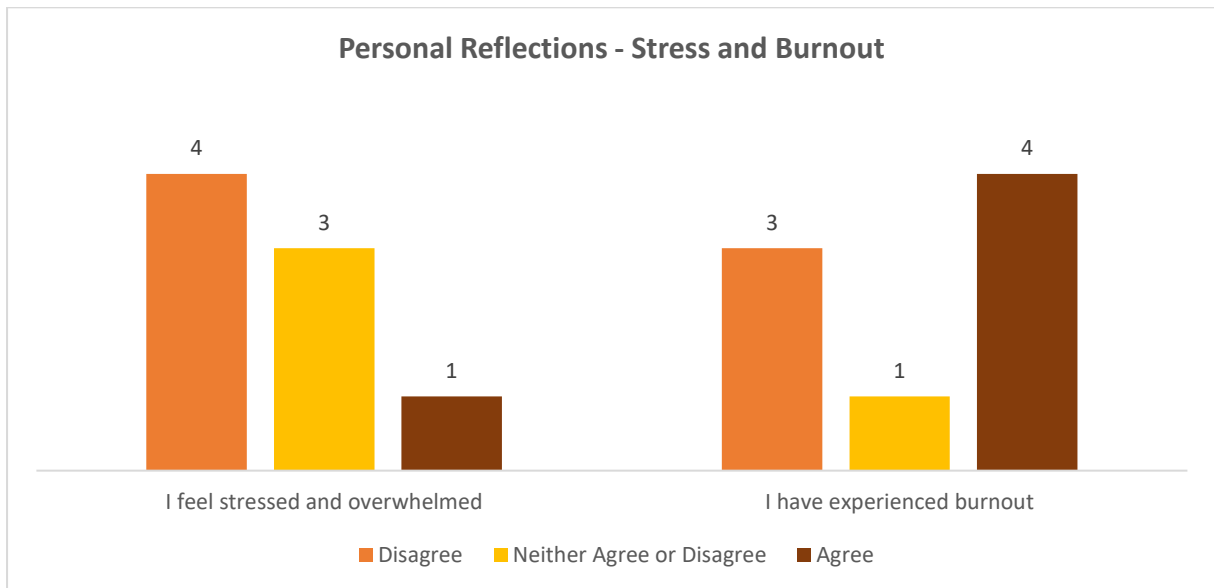


**Figure 7: Program Officer reflections on working and efficiency.**

The second part of the question related to work and life balance. Participants were positive towards the organisation, with the majority (n=6) feeling supported, and a majority (n=5) also believing their work/life balance had improved. While only one participant reported feeling stressed and overwhelmed, 50% (n=4) participants reported experiencing ‘burnout’.



**Figure 8: Program Officer reflections on work/life balance.**



**Figure 9: Program Officer reflections on stress and burnout.**

GEYP program officers were invited to comment on how individual and community engagement in the Gippsland East Youth Project could be maintained into the future:

*“Continue to travel and do outreach at as many townships as possible.”*

*“Have a better understanding of distances travelled in East Gippsland by Facilitators.”*

*“Set up a base for us to work from and offer our services from there, as well as continuing to provide outreach to rural communities.”*

*“Spread the word and continue to do the work we do. Funding that continues to keep us going to support the youth.”*

The majority (five participants) believed they had the required resources to provide young people with the services they need.

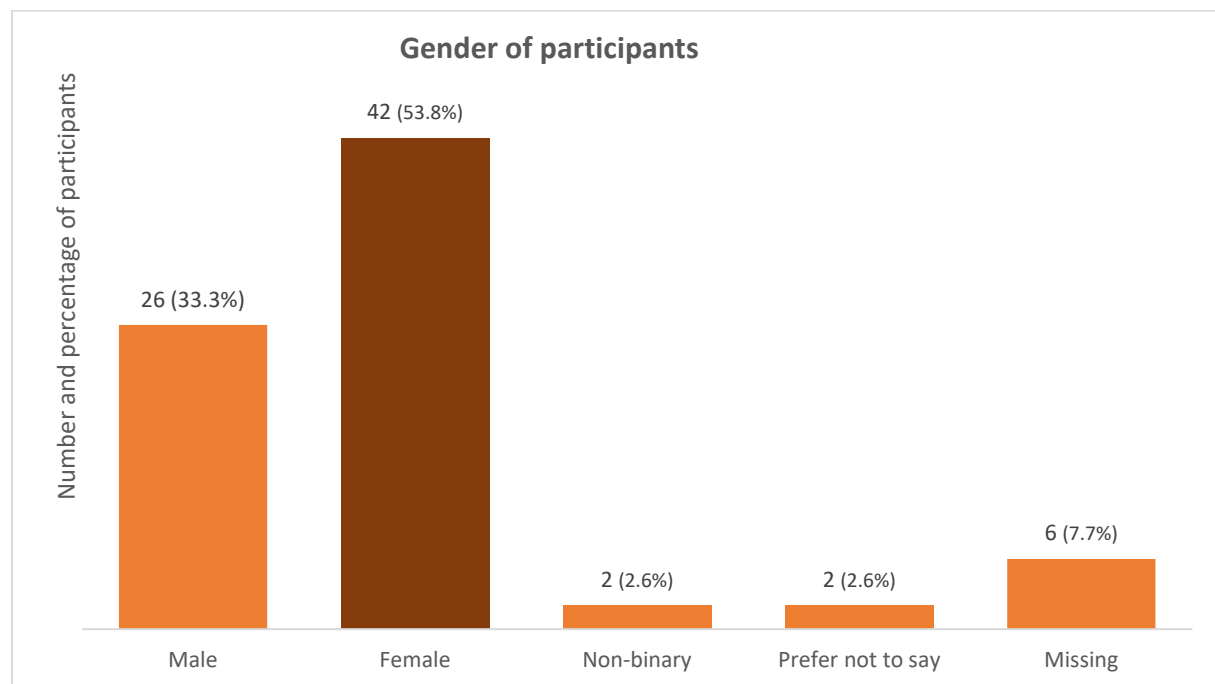
#### 4.1.2 YOUNG PEOPLE SURVEY

##### INTRODUCTION

Presented below are the results of the Gippsland East Youth Project (GEYP) participant survey. A total of 78 completed surveys were collected from September 2023 to July 2024 and included in the analysis.

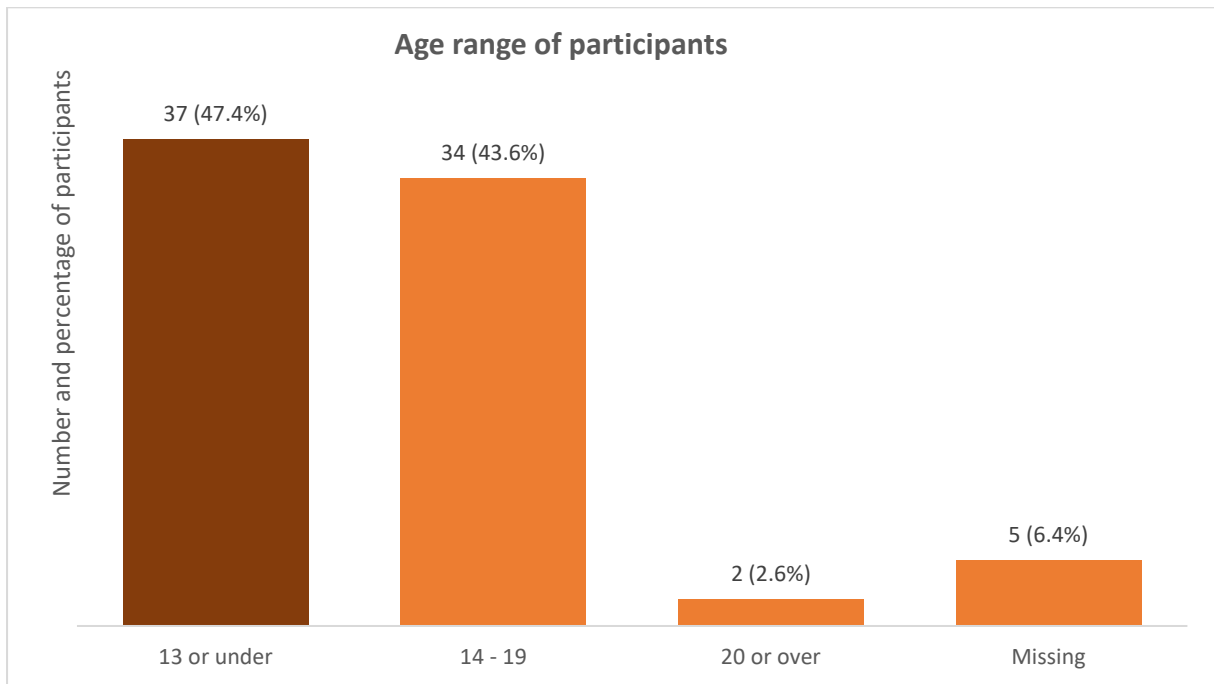
##### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The majority of participants were female (n=42, 53.8%), and 33.3% (n=26) were male (Figure 1). Two participants identified as non-binary, two preferred not to describe their gender, and six did not respond to this question.



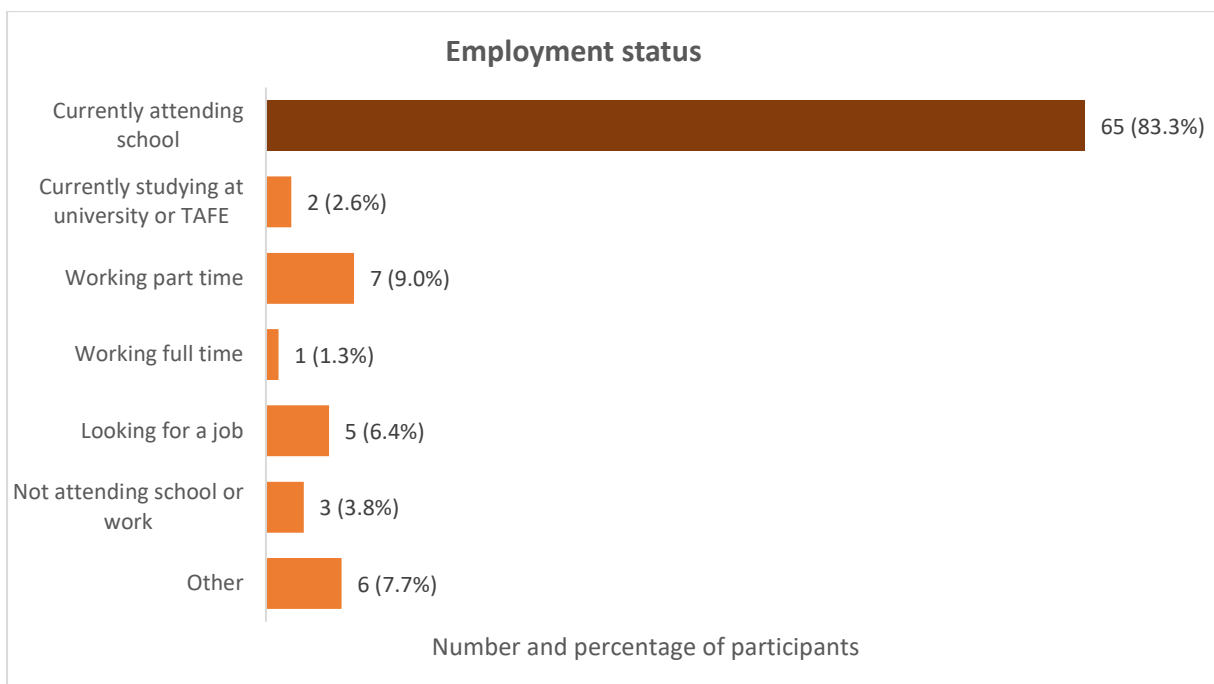
**Figure 10: Gender of participants.**

There were two main age groups of participants: under 13 years old (n=37, 47.4%) and 14-19 years old (n=34, 43.6%). Five participants did not indicate their ages. The number of participants for each age category is shown in Figure 11 below. Nine participants (11.5%) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, three participants preferred not to say and four did not respond. Only two participants (2.6%) reported speaking a language other than English at home.



**Figure 11: Age range of participants**

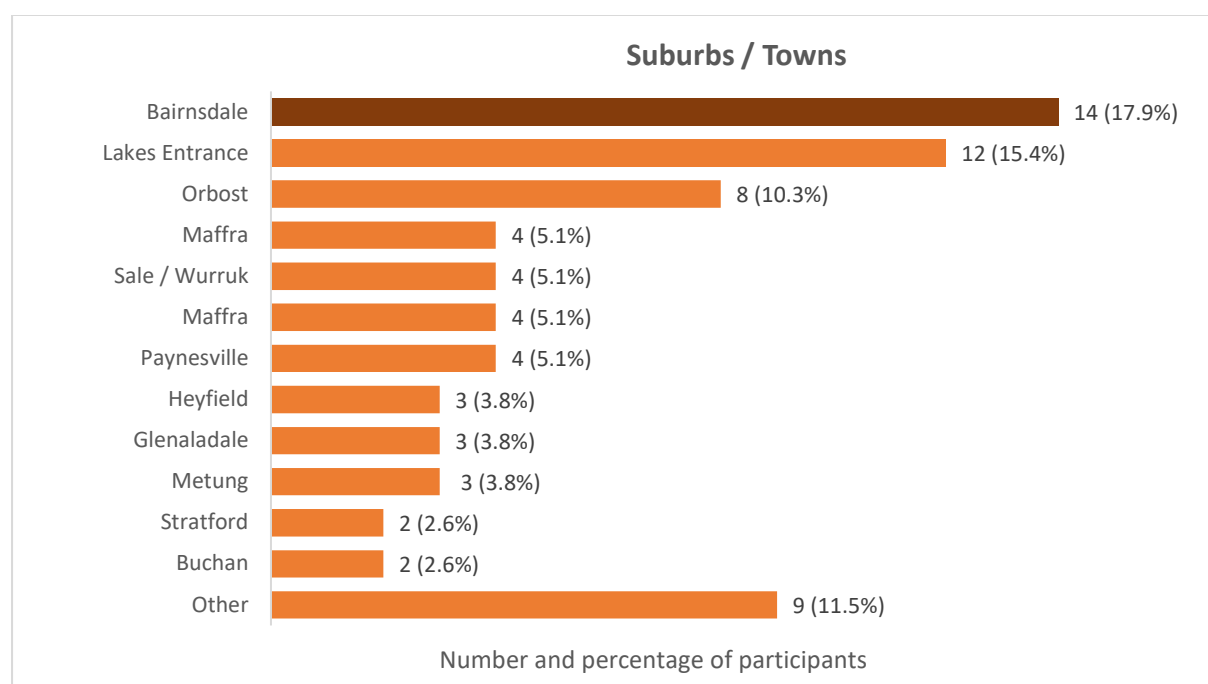
As shown in Figure 12, the majority of participants were attending school (including home-schooled) (n=65, 83.3%), while seven were working part-time (9.0%) and five were looking for a job (6.4%). Six responses 'Other' included homeschooling.



**Figure 12: Employment status of participants.**

The distribution of towns and suburbs where young people reside is demonstrated in Figure 13 below. The majority of participants were from Bairnsdale (n=14, 17.9%), Lakes Entrance (n=12, 15.4%) and Orbost (n=8, 10.3%). Nine participants who selected 'Other' were from Oxley ACT, Cheltenham, the

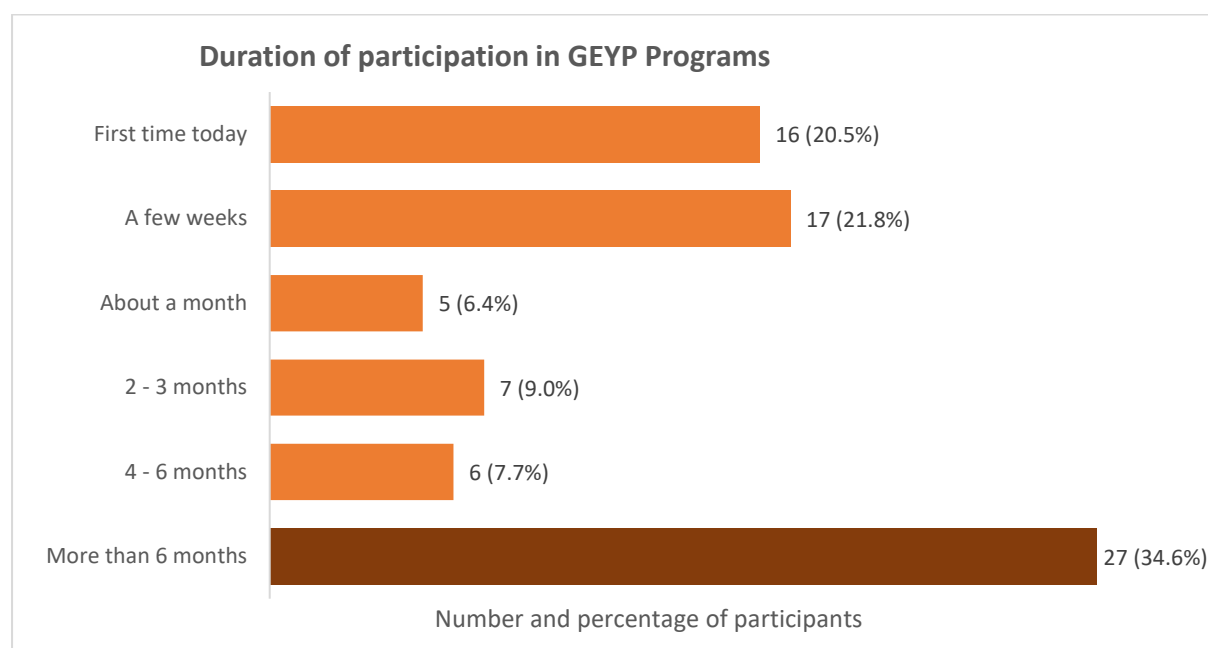
Patch, Eagle Point, Newmerella, Nowa Nowa, Cabbage Tree Creek, Johnsonville, and Swan Reach. Six participants did not state their town.



**Figure 13: Suburbs / Towns where participants live.**

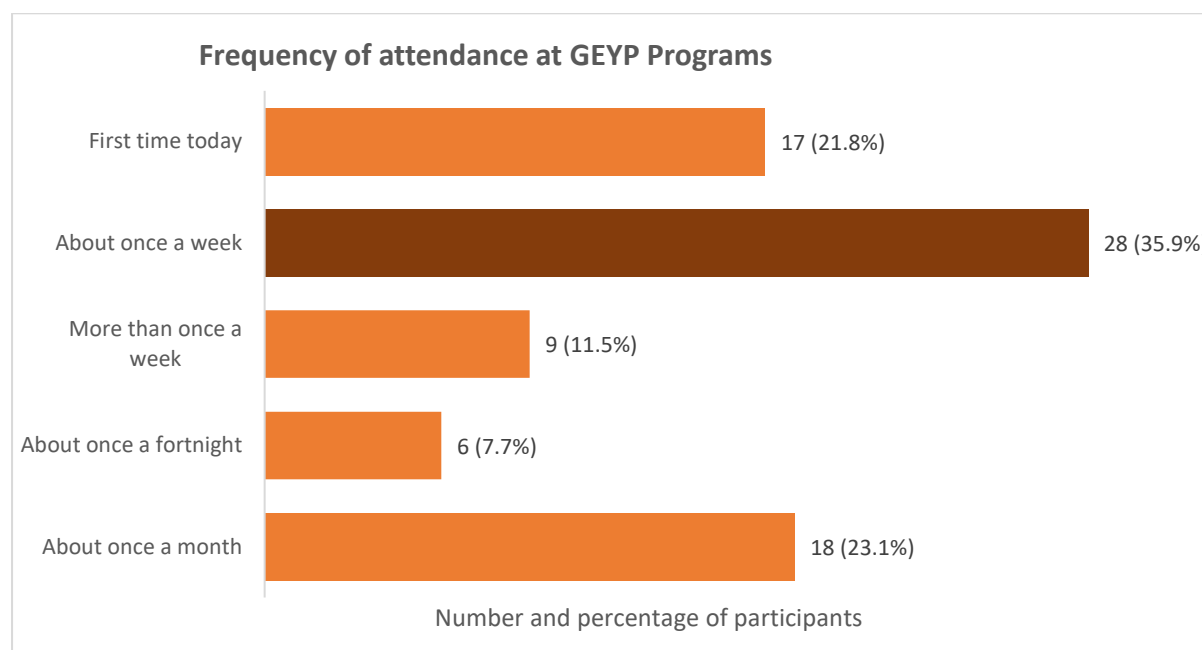
## INVOLVEMENT IN GEYP ACTIVITIES

In response to the question, “How long have you been coming to GEYP Programs?”, the majority of participants (n=27, 34.6%) recorded their participation for more than 6 months (Figure 14). A significant proportion (n=17, 21.8%) participated for a few weeks, while one-fifth (n=16, 20.5%) attended for the first time.



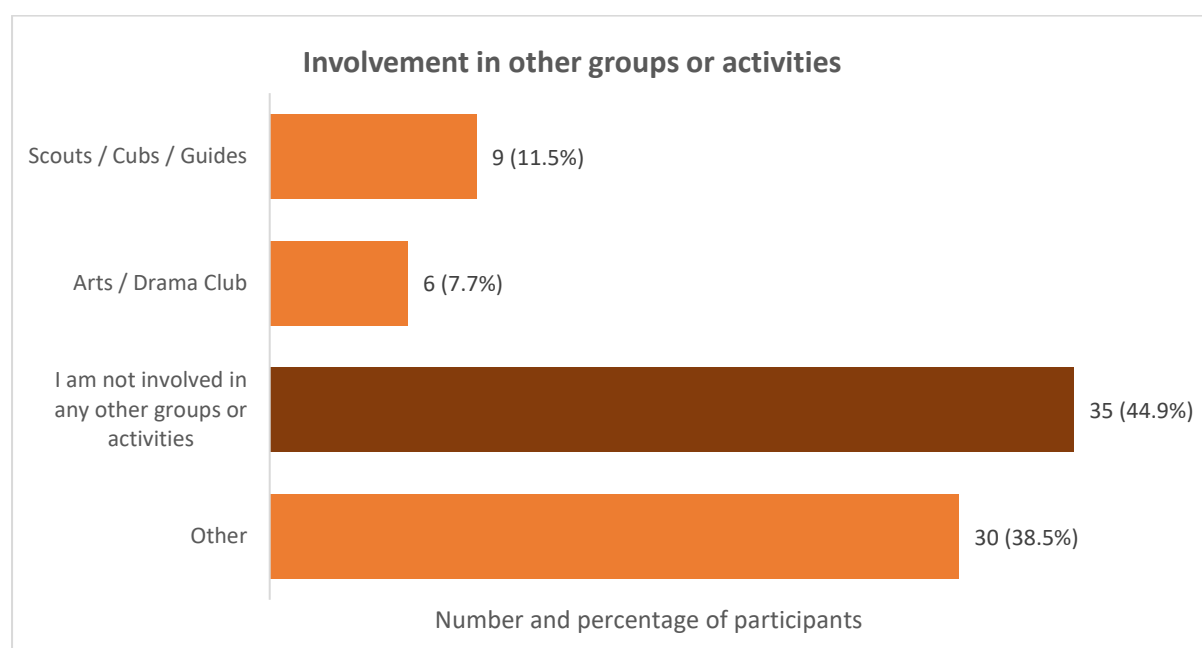
**Figure 14: Duration of participation in GEYP programs.**

Figure 15 shows the frequency of attendance at GEYP Programs. The most common attendance frequency was "about once a week", with 35.9% of participants (n=28) attending at this rate. This is followed by those attending "about once a month" (n=18, 23.1%) and "first time today" (n=17, 21.8%). This suggests that most participants engage in the programs on a weekly or monthly basis.



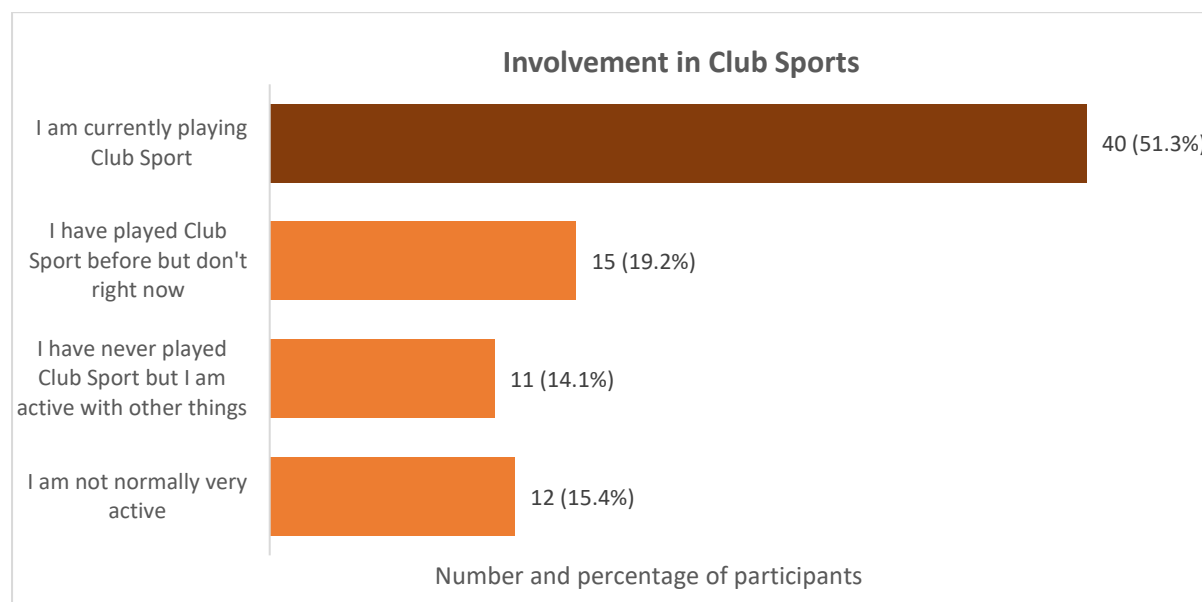
**Figure 15: Frequency of attendance at GEYP programs.**

As shown in Figure 16, almost half of the participants (n=35, 44.9%) were not involved in any other groups or activities. Other activities included Scouts/Cubs/Guides (n=9, 11.5%), Arts/Drama Club (n=6, 7.7%), and various other groups (38.5%). For 'Other' responses, a significant proportion of participants mentioned "sport" (n=9, 11.5%) or specific sports-related activities (n=14, 17.9%) (e.g., gymnastics, volleyball, football, netball clubs, ninja, golf, park run, athletics). In addition, special interest groups, such as the historical re-enactment society, Moogji Youth Advisory Council, Youth Insearch, GenG Youth, Youth Group, the Youth Advisory Council (YAC), and Disability Centre, were also reported.



**Figure 16: Involvement in other groups or activities**

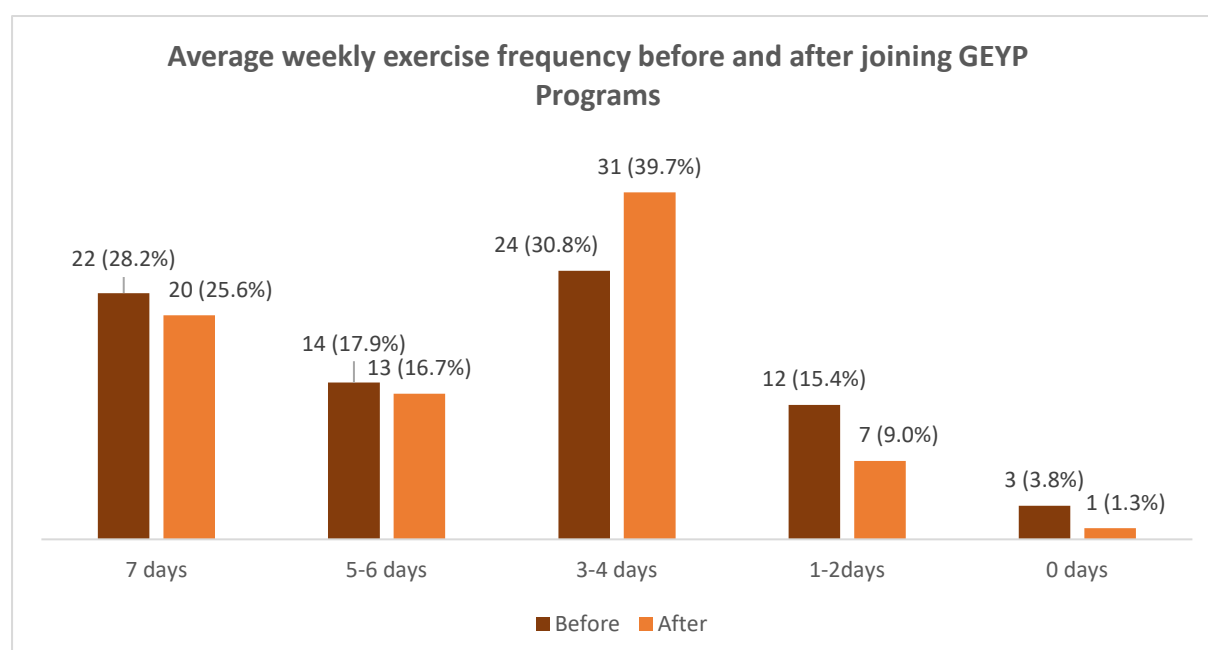
Regarding participant involvement in Club Sports (e.g. tennis, football, soccer), the majority of participants (n=40, 51.3%) were currently playing club sports. A smaller group (n=15, 19.2%) reported played club sports before. Eleven participants (14.1%) had never played club sports but stayed active with other activities, while twelve participants (15.4%) were not normally very active (Figure 17).



**Figure 17: Involvement in Club Sports (eg. tennis, football, soccer).**

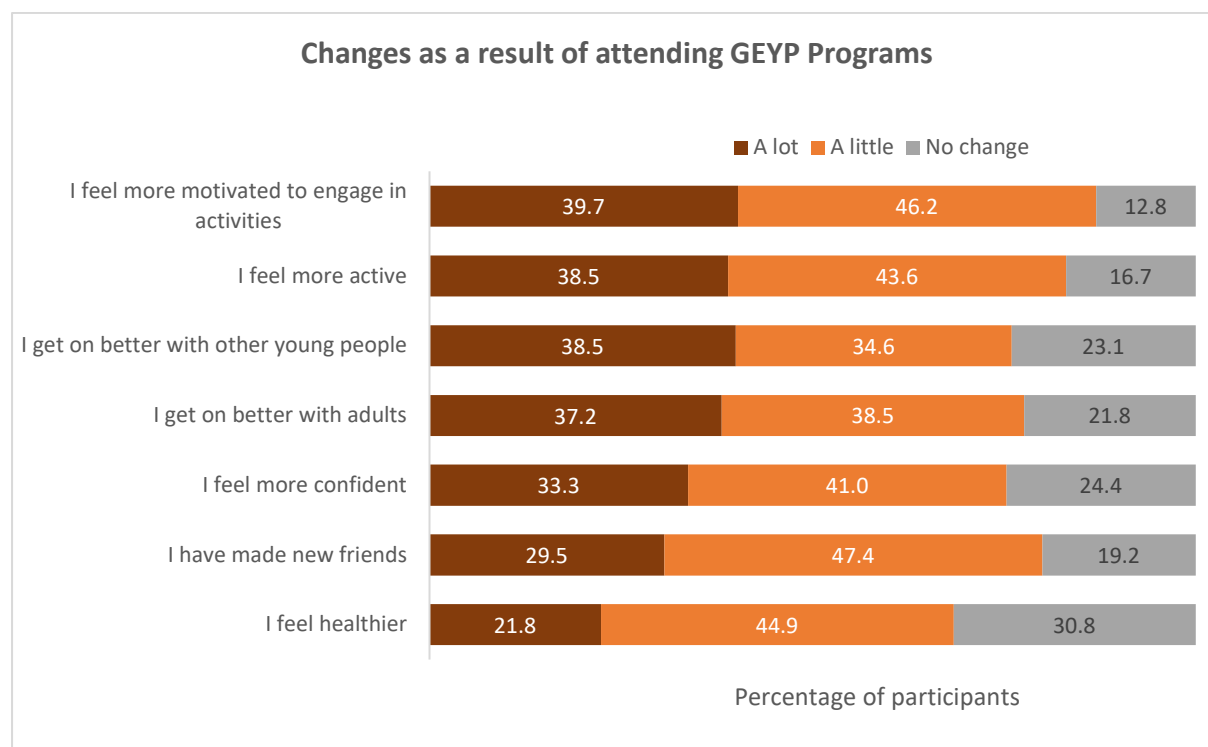
## IMPACT OF THE GIPPSLAND EAST YOUTH PROJECT PROGRAMS

Before joining GEYP Programs, one-third of young people (n=24; 30.8%) exercised 3-4 days per week, and 28.2% (n=22) exercised 7 days per week. As can be seen in Figure 18, overall, there was an improvement in physical activity levels after joining the GEYP Programs, with more participants engaging in physical activity 3-4 days a week (39.7% vs. 30.8%).



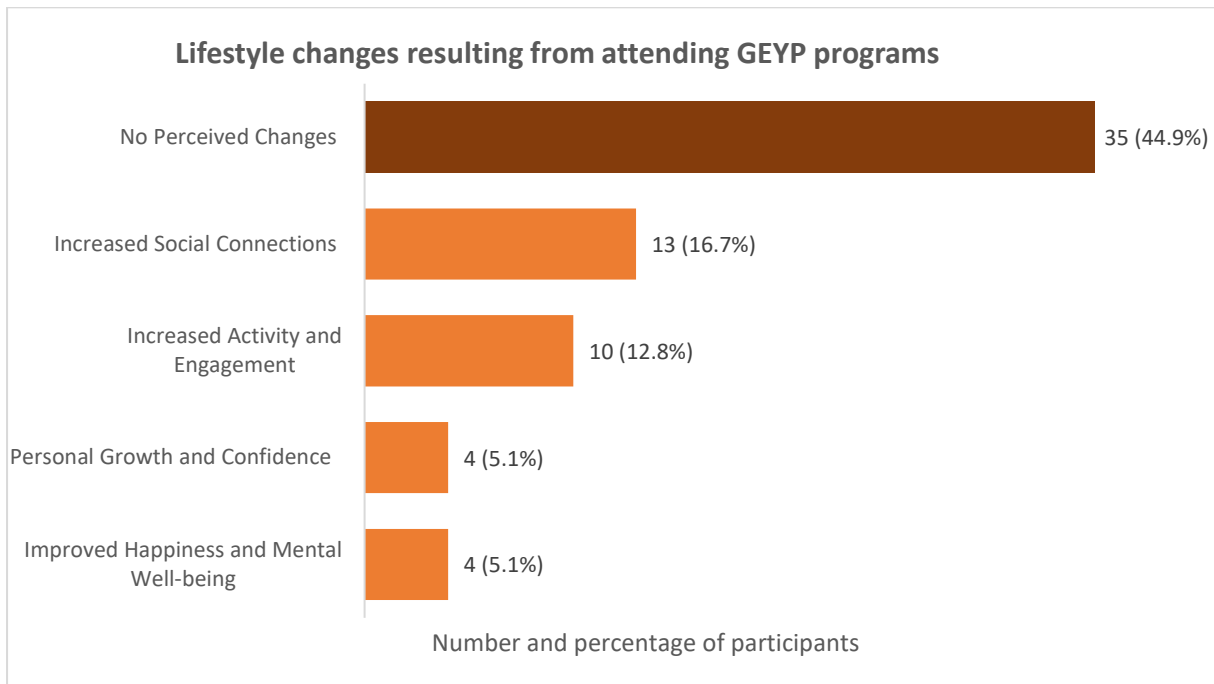
**Figure 18: Average weekly exercise frequency before and after joining GEYP programs.**

As a result of attending GEYP Programs, young people were asked to rate the statements based on a three-point Likert scale ranging from 'A lot' to 'No change'. Figure 19 demonstrates that many participants reported positive changes. Many felt more motivated to engage in activities (85.9%) and more active (82.1%). Significant improvements were also noted in social interactions, with participants getting along better with other young people (73.1%) and adults (75.7%), and 74.3% felt more confident. Additionally, 76.9% made new friends, and 66.7% reported feeling healthier. However, some participants experienced no change, particularly in feeling healthier (30.8%) and more confident (24.4%).



**Figure 19: Changes as a result of attending GEYP programs.**

Sixty-four participants (82.1%) replied to the open-ended question "Has anything changed for you because of coming to Gippsland East Youth Project Programs?". The responses were grouped into similar themes. Some comments addressed multiple themes. Many participants (n=35, 44.9%) indicated that they hadn't experienced noticeable changes or were unsure. Others recorded changes such as 'Increased social connections' (n=13, 16.7%), 'Increased activity and engagement' (n=10, 12.8%), 'personal growth and confidence' (n=4, 5.1%), and 'Improved happiness and well-being' (n=4, 5.1%) (Figure 20).



**Figure 20: Lifestyle changes resulting from attending GEYP programs.**

The explanation of identified themes is presented below, with illustrative quotes as examples.

## 2. Increased Social Connections (Friendship and Interaction)

Young people noted that attending the program helped them make new friends and build stronger connections with others.

*"Engaging more with different kids. Met new people."*

*"My friends—I have made more friends."*

## 3. Increased Activity and Engagement

Responses in this category focused on becoming more active, finding things to do, and stepping out of inactivity.

*"I have done more things."*

*"Gave us something to do instead of doing nothing."*

*"I get outside a lot more."*

## 4. Personal Growth and Confidence

Some participants mentioned personal changes, such as feeling more confident, open, or positive in their lives.

*"I feel more confident around others and have had more time with my friends."*

*"In ways yes. It's changed me because I've opened up more in ways."*

*"I have become more active and positive at school and at home."*

## 5. Improved Happiness and Mental Well-being

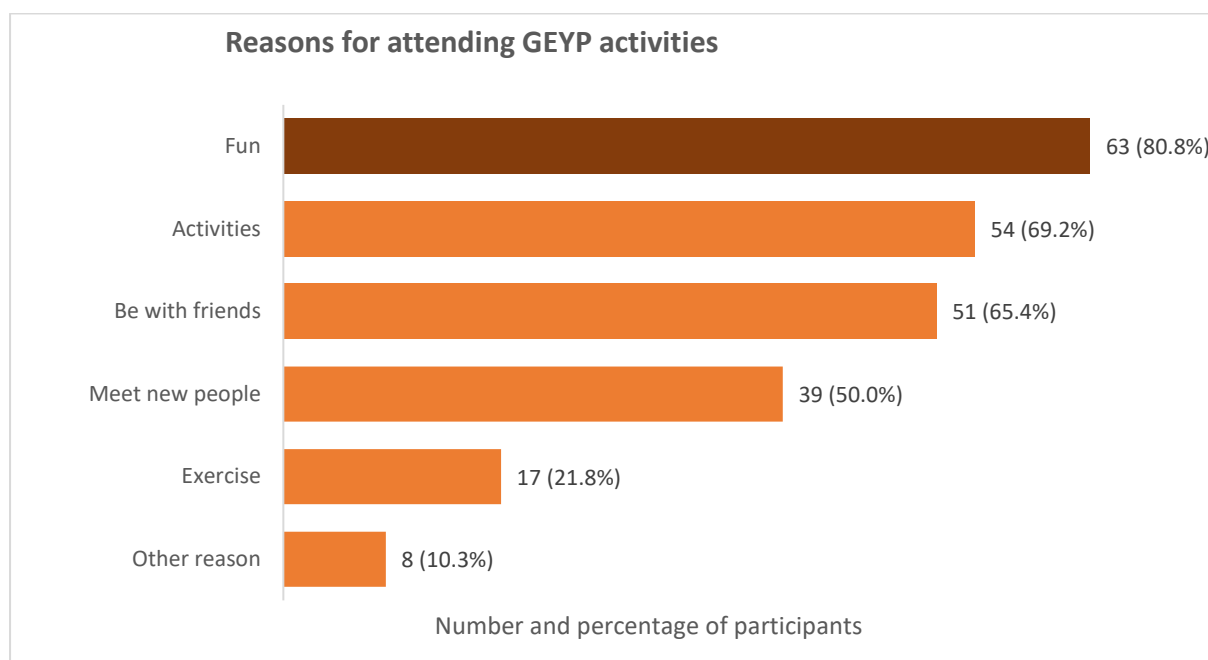
Several highlighted feeling happier or more content because of the program.

*"Closer to a friend, more happy."*

*"I'm happier and made more friends."*

## EVALUATION OF THE GIPPSLAND EAST YOUTH PROJECT PROGRAMS

The main reasons young people attended GEYP events were for fun (n=63, 80.8%) and activities (n=54, 69.2%) (Figure 21). Social aspects were also significant, with 65.4% (n=51) wanting to be with friends and 50% (n=39) attending to meet new people. A smaller proportion came for exercise (n=17, 21.8%) or other reasons (n=8, 10.3%). 'Other' responses included encouragement or invitation from a friend, mother or worker. One participant did not respond.



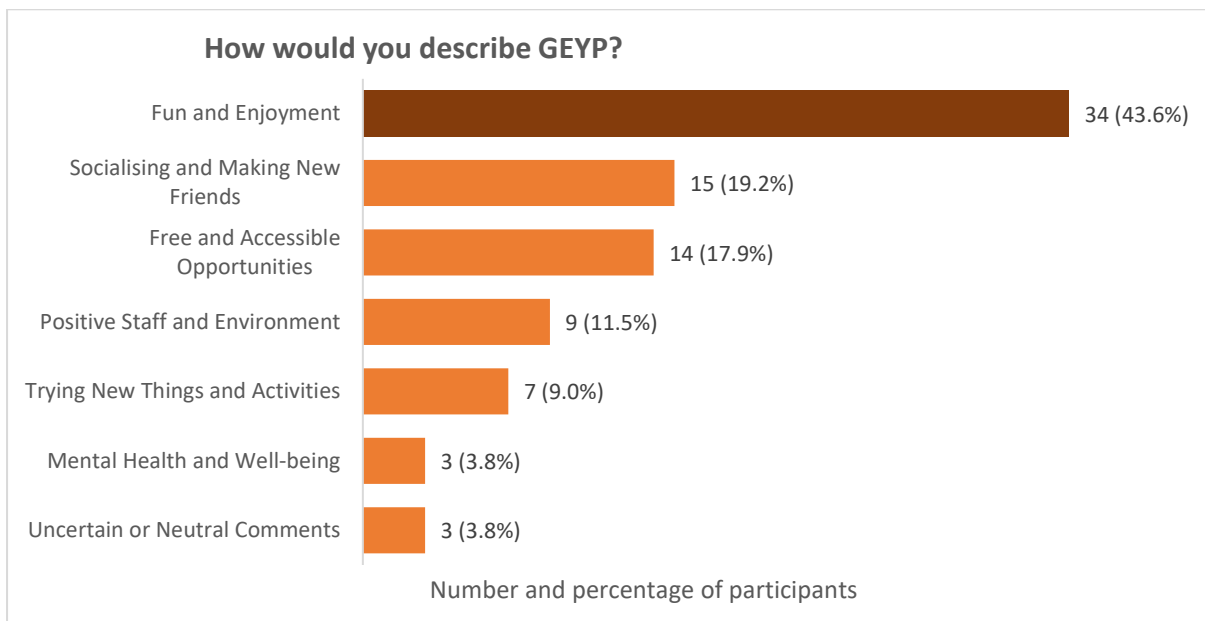
**Figure 21: Reasons for attending GEYP activities.**

Young people were asked to identify the three best things about GEYP programs. As shown in Figure 22, the most frequently mentioned benefit was that the programs were fun, selected by 91.0% of participants (n=71). Additionally, 75.9% (n=59) appreciated that the programs were free, and 71.8% (n=56) enjoyed the sports and activities offered. Feeling safe and supported was important for 59.0% (n=46), while 55.1% (n=43) valued the fun and engaging coaches and crew. Accessibility was also noted, with slightly more than half of participants saying it was easy to get to (n=41, 52.6%) and that the events were held at a convenient time (n=40, 51.3%). Furthermore, 39.7% of participants noted that the programs were held in their local area, adding to their appeal. Overall, young people emphasised fun, accessibility, and the supportive environment as key strengths of the program.



**Figure 22: Best things about GEYP.**

To the open-ended question “How would you describe Gippsland East Youth Project Programs?”, 71 participants expressed various words. The responses were grouped into similar themes. Responses can belong to more than one theme. A large proportion of responses were grouped to ‘Fun and enjoyment’ (n=34, 43.6%), followed by ‘Socialising and making new friends’ (n=15, 19.2%) and ‘Free and accessible opportunity’ (14, 17.9%) (Figure 23).



**Figure 23: Grouped responses to the question “how would you describe GEYP?”**

The explanation of identified themes is presented below, with illustrative quotes as examples.

### 1. Fun and Enjoyment

This theme highlighted the overall enjoyment participants felt, emphasising how much fun the activities were and how they contributed to positive experiences.

*“It's a really fun experience; the workers are amazing, and it's all free!”*

*"Fun and I enjoy it."*

*"It's lots of fun, a great experience, and it's free."*

## 2. Socializing and Making New Friends

Many appreciated the opportunities to meet new people, build friendships, and connect with others in a welcoming environment.

*"It's a great opportunity to meet new people and have fun and free."*

*"It's fun; you get to meet new people; you get to try new things."*

*"Really fun way to get out and meet new people while enjoying it for free."*

## 3. Free and Accessible Opportunities

This group appreciated the accessibility of the program, emphasising that it was free and provided valuable opportunities for everyone.

*"A fun and free day of activities for most young ages."*

*"It's fun and free. They have cool activities."*

*"It's a fun way to make new people, and the activities are free."*

## 4. Positive Staff and Environment

Comments in this category focused on the welcoming, supportive staff and the safe, inclusive environment that the program offered.

*"I would describe Gippsland Youth Programs as a safe, welcoming space for everyone."*

*"The staff are kind and helpful—a safe place and fun to go to."*

*"The crew are very kind and welcoming, and the activities are very fun."*

## 5. Trying New Things and Activities

Young people valued the chance to explore new experiences, step out of their comfort zones, and engage in diverse activities they would not normally try.

*"It's a group that helps get you out of your comfort zone to do things you might not have tried or things you've tried but are scared to do."*

*"You should go to youth group; it is really good."*

*"East Gippsland Youth is fun and has helped me to try new things."*

## 6. Mental Health and Well-being

This theme recognised the program's positive impact on their mental health and overall well-being, helping them feel more energetic and engaged.

*"I feel energetic, and it helps with mental health."*

*"It's a safe, welcoming space for everyone."*

*"It's great for keeping busy and meeting others."*

## 7. Uncertain or Neutral Comments

These comments reflected uncertainty or lack of specific feedback, often from individuals who might not be familiar with the program.

*"I'm not 100% sure, but you can spend time away from inside, and it's free."*

Figure 24 shows the word cloud generated from young people's responses when asked to describe the GEYP activities. The larger the word the more frequently the word was written.

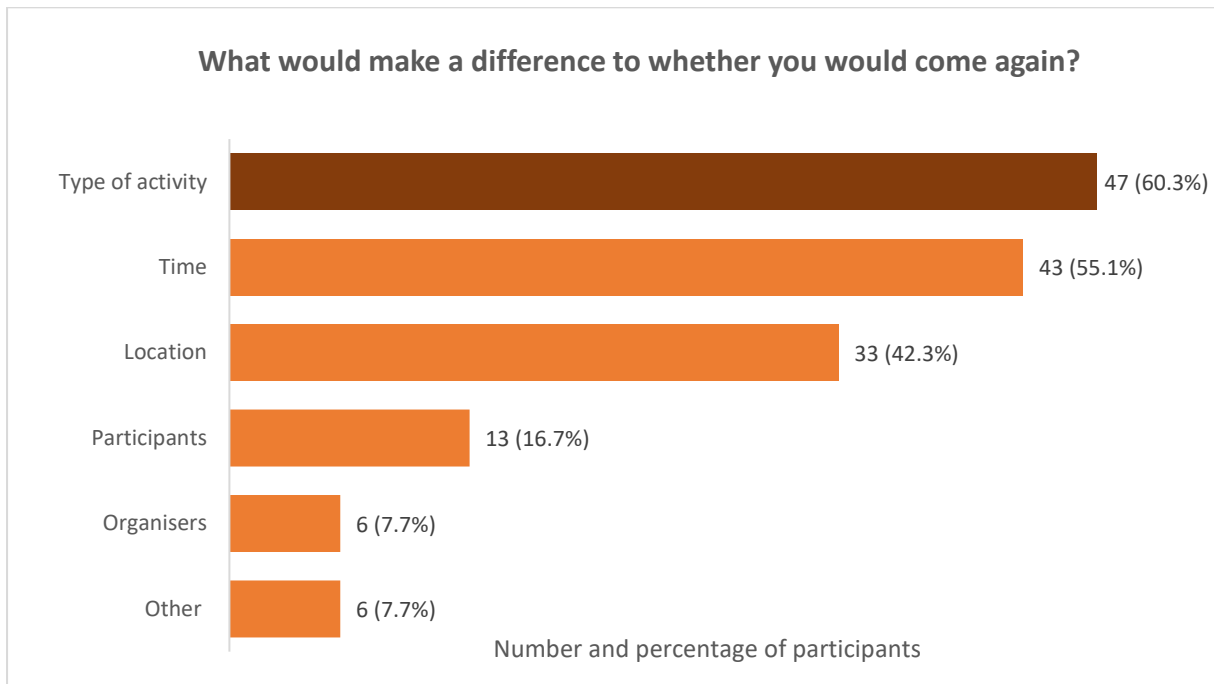


**Figure 24: Word cloud - "How would you describe GEYP?"**

## FUTURE PARTICIPATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

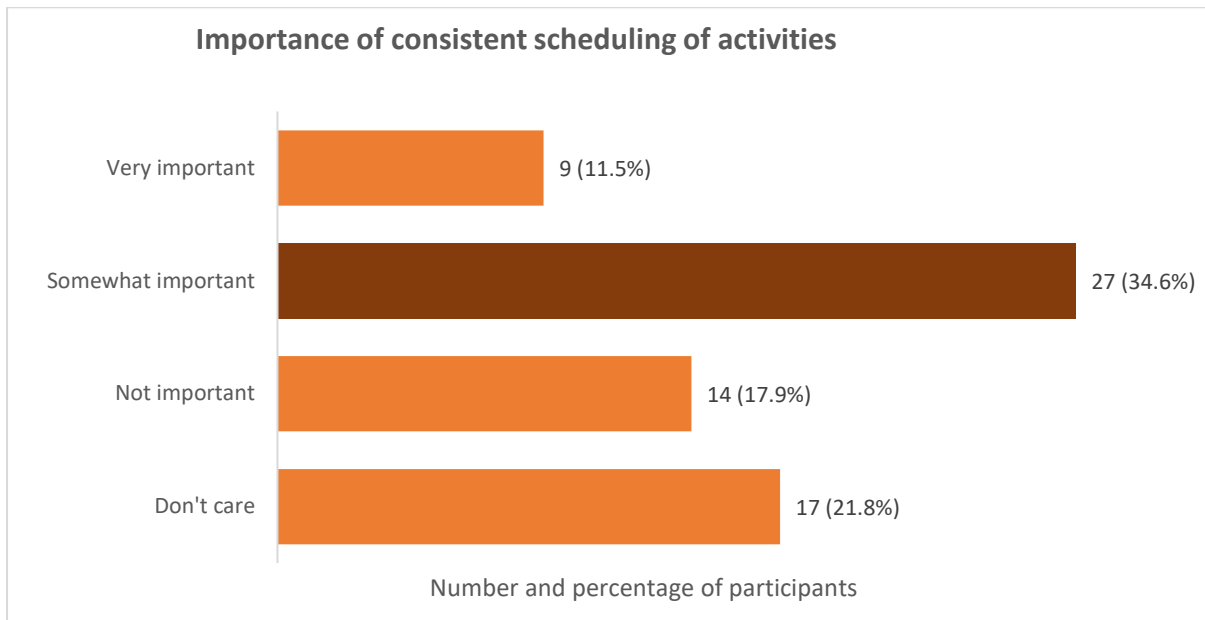
The young people were asked if they would attend a GEYP event again. All respondents (except two who did not answer) said yes. Thirteen participants provided reasons for their response, describing the events as “fun,” “good,” a place where “friends are here,” and something that “keeps me busy.”

As shown in Figure 25, the key factors influencing participants' decision to return to Gippsland East Youth Programs were the type of activity (n=47, 60.3%), time (n=43, 55.1%), and location (n=33, 42.3%). Fewer participants considered other factors like the participants (n=13, 16.7%), organisers (n=6, 7.7%), or other reasons (n=6, 7.7%), including "come along with friends", "nothing", or "I will just come".



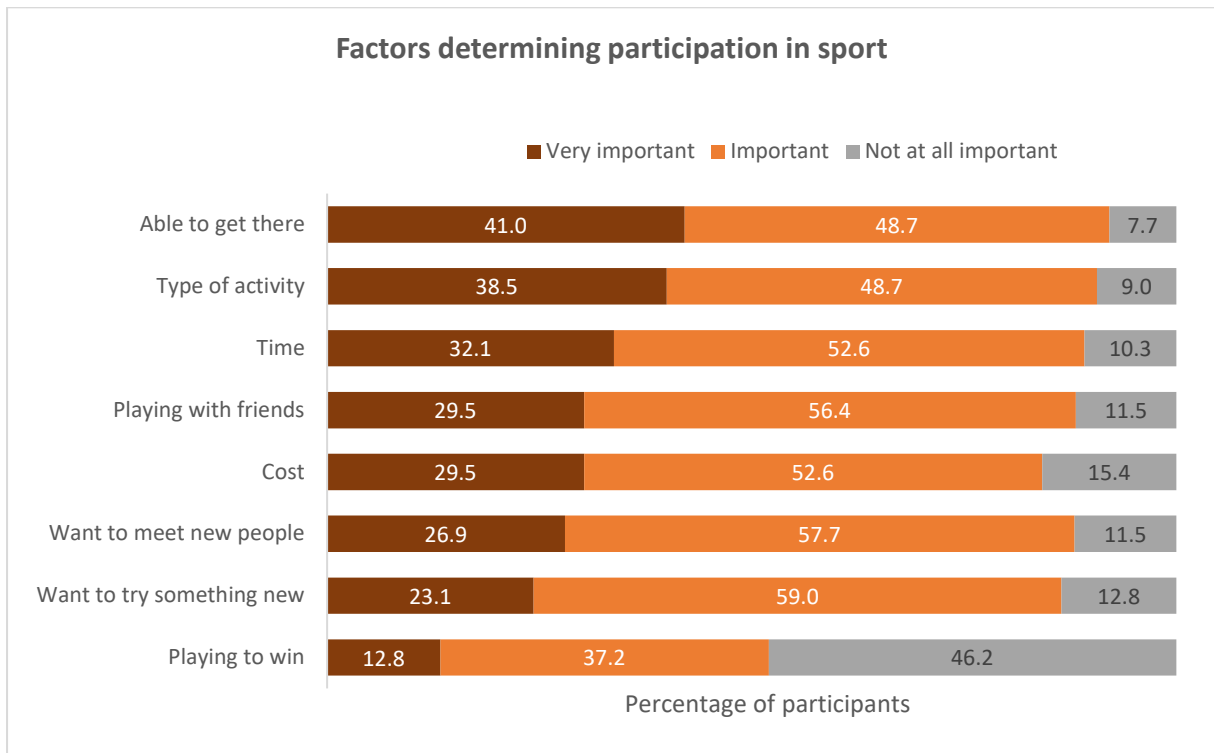
**Figure 25: The key factors influencing participants' decision to return to GEYP activities.**

Regarding the importance of having GEYP programs events at the same time each week, most young people (n=36, 46.1%) considered it important (Figure 26). A smaller proportion of participants (n=14, 17.9%) stated it was not important, while 21.8% of participants (n=17) indicated that they didn't mind whether the events occurred at the same time each week. Eleven participants did not reply to this question.



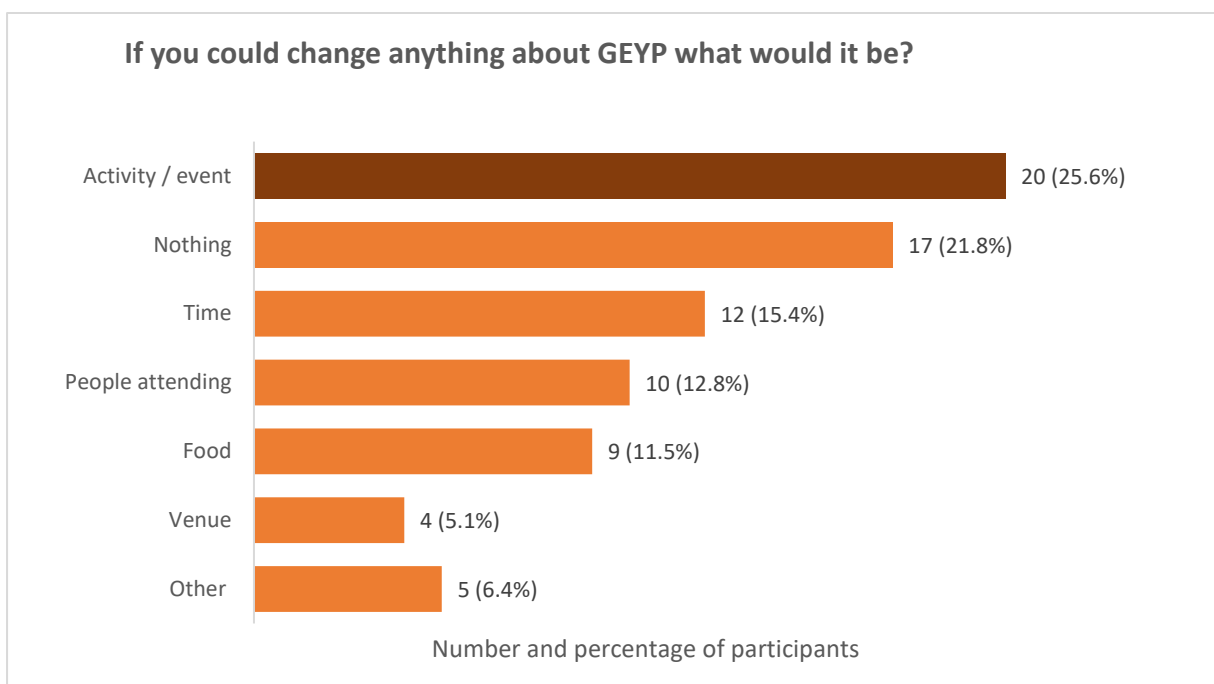
**Figure 26: Importance of consistent scheduling of activities.**

Young people were asked to rate the importance of factors influencing their decision to participate in sport on a three-point Likert scale from 'Very Important' to 'Not at all important'. Accessibility (89.7%), activity type (87.2%), and time (84.6%) emerged as the most influential factors for participation in sport (Figure 27). Other important factors included 'Playing with friends' (85.9%), 'Cost' (82.1%), 'Want to meet new people' (84.6%), and 'Want to try something new' (82.1%). 'Playing to win' was deemed less critical, with 50.0% of participants rating it as 'Not at all important'.



**Figure 27: Factors determining participation in sport.**

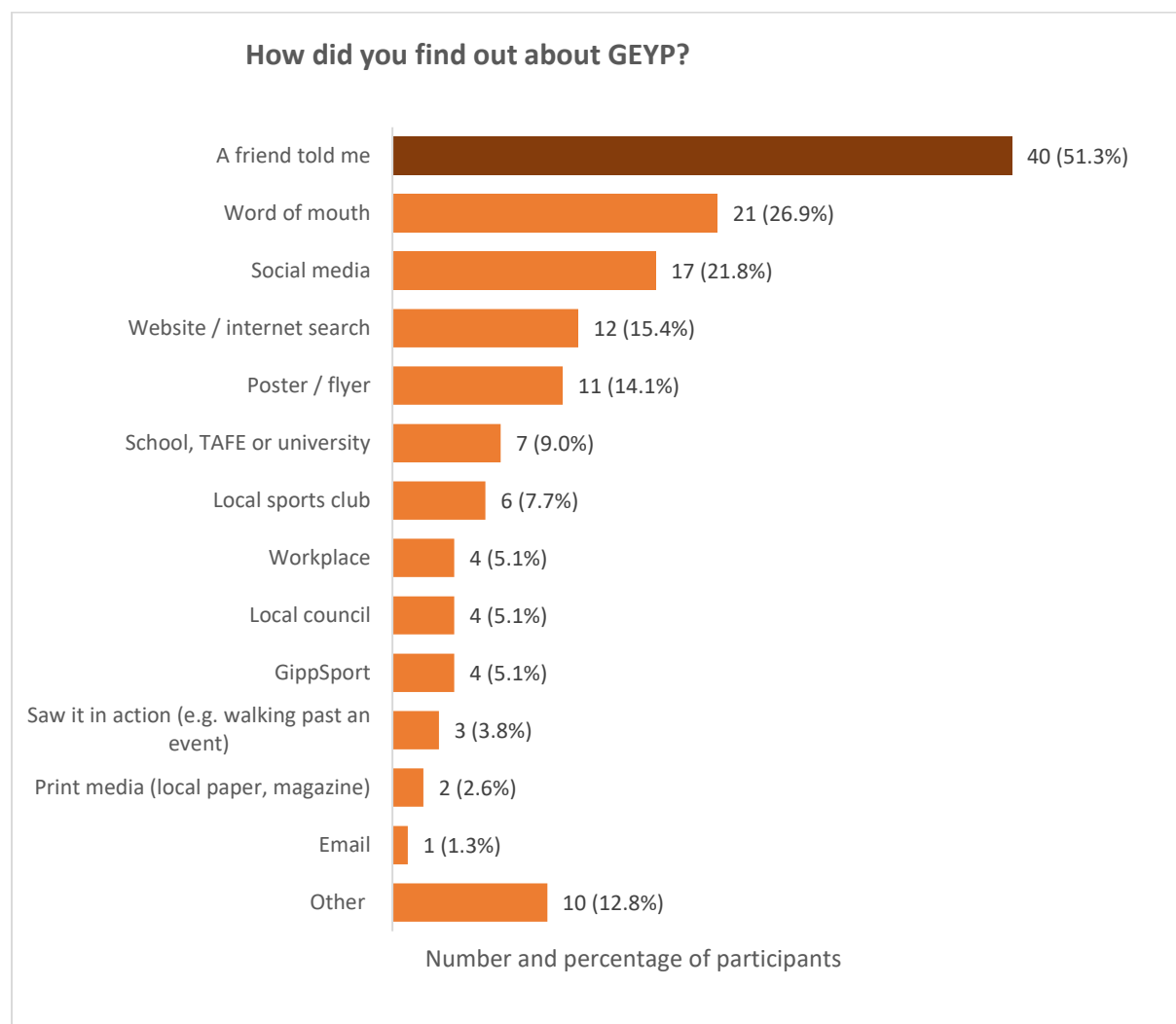
When asked what changes young people would make to programs, the most common response was related to the activities or events themselves (n=20, 25.6%) (Figure 28). Some participants (n=17, 21.8%) indicated that they wouldn't change anything. Other suggested changes included the timing of events (n=12, 15.4%), the people attending (n=10, 12.8%), food options (n=9, 11.5%), and the venue (n=4, 5.1%). A small proportion (n=5, 6.4%) provided other suggestions such as "Have fewer people attend because there are too many kids", "location", "more people", and "more programs".



**Figure 28: Suggested changes to GEYP in the future.**

Forty-five participants (57.7%) reported meeting up with others outside of GEYP events, while 30 (38.5%) did not. Thirty-six participants (46.2%) already knew these people before attending the programs, while 26 (33.3%) met them at the programs.

Young people learned about GEYP through various channels. The most common method was through friends (n=40, 51.3%), followed by word of mouth (n=21, 26.9%) (Figure 29). Social media (n=17, 21.8%) and promotional materials such as posters, flyers, or print media (n=13, 16.7%) were also notable sources. Schools, workplaces, local councils, sports clubs, and GippSport together accounted for 27%. A smaller number discovered the program through events in action (n=3, 3.8%) or email (n=1, 1.3%), with 10 (12.8%) selecting 'Other'. 'Other' responses included family members, staff of GYS and Youth Advisory Council.



**Figure 29: Responses to the question 'How did you find out about GEYP?'**

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Survey data from the GYS young people demonstrated that the majority found attending Gippsland East Youth Project programs to be an interesting and valuable experience. The Gippsland East Youth Programs became a vibrant space where young people come together to play, connect, and grow. With 78 participants sharing their experiences, the survey provided insights into how the program was making a difference in the lives of its attendees.


Whilst the program was targeted to young people aged 12 to 25, the program attracted a diverse group, with nearly half of the participants under 13 and most others in their teenage years. These young people were primarily school students. While some were newcomers, 34.6% had been attending for over six months, highlighting the program's staying power. Weekly attendance was common for most, reflecting the program's regular role in participants' lives.

For many, GEYP came into their lives through friends, with over half of the participants hearing about it this way. Others learned about it through social media, posters, and word of mouth. The most important motivators for attending the programs were fun, engaging activities and the opportunity to spend time with friends.

Young people expressed high levels of enjoyment in the GEYP activities, with the vast majority (91%) describing the program as fun and 71.8% highlighting the engaging activities and sports. Additionally, 75.9% appreciated that the programs were free. Many participants also appreciated the supportive environment and friendly staff, who fostered a sense of safety and inclusivity. Additionally, over half of the participants reported meeting up with others outside the program, building friendships that extended beyond the program itself.

GEYP has had a positive impact on participants' lives. Many shared how the program helped them become more active, with an increase in the number of days they exercised each week. Their motivation surged, confidence grew, and they developed meaningful friendships, enhancing their ability to connect with others and feel better about themselves.

Every participant expressed a willingness to attend a GEYP event again. When asked what kept them coming back, they highlighted the engaging activities, convenient timing, and accessible location. Some also suggested improvements, such as introducing more variety in activities and adjusting timing or food options to further enhance their experience.



### 4.1.3 ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION

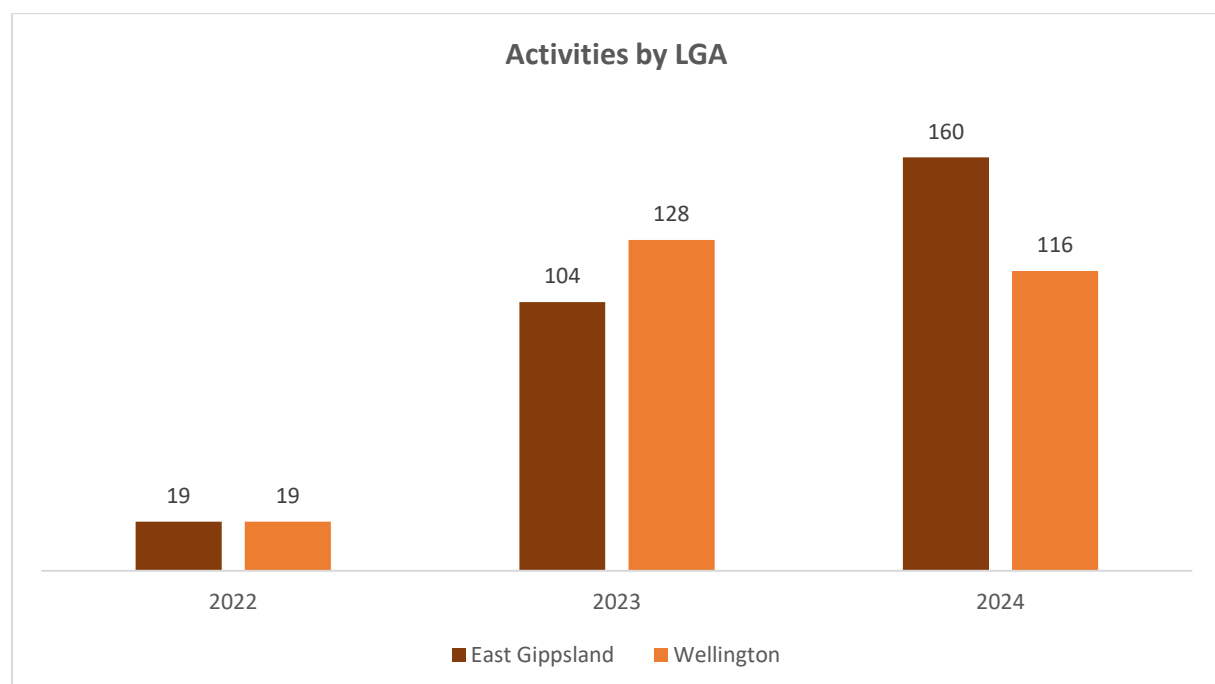
#### INTRODUCTION

Program officers maintained records of activities and participants across the evaluation period. Quantitative analysis was undertaken on activity participation. It is recognised that participant information is a blunt measurement that does not take account of time spent with individuals or outcomes achieved as a result of such interaction. It does however give an indication of the reach of the program.

- For analysis purposes community outreach and drop in /pop up activities have been consolidated.
- Data for 2024 year comprises 1 January – 28 November 2024 only.

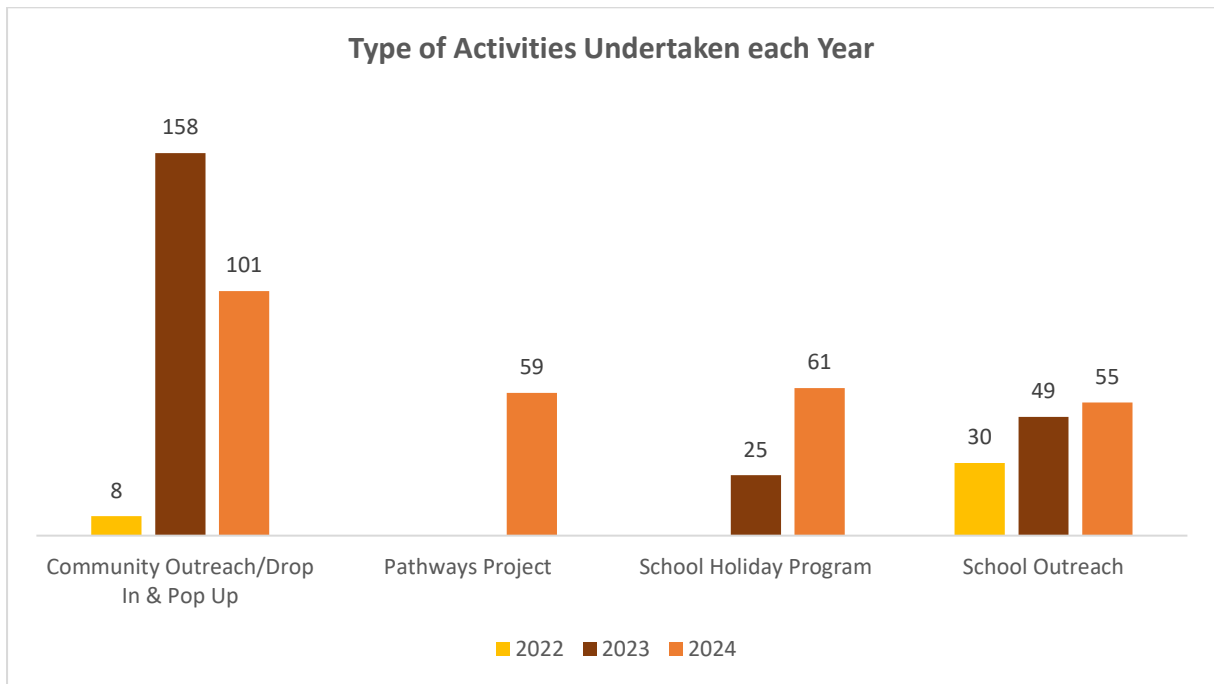
#### TOTAL ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED

The number of activities conducted across each of Wellington and East Gippsland LGAs increased consistently across the three years, refer to Figure 30. As noted elsewhere in the report there was a significant lag time getting the project operational, which resulted in relatively low numbers attributed to 2022. Activity numbers in 2023 and 2024 increased year on year, this was particularly true for East Gippsland with Wellington activities remaining constant. A combined total of 276 activities were undertaken in 2024 and 232 in 2023.



**Figure 30: Activities by LGA by year**

The type and frequency of activities shifted across the three years of the project (refer Figure 31). Community outreach and drop in/pop up activities were undertaken regularly in 2023 and 2024. School outreach activities grew year on year. While not all schools participated in the outreach program a small number participated regularly with program officers reporting many students returning weekly. The school holiday program operated in 2023 and 2024 and proved very popular as it became known. The Pathways program was introduced in East Gippsland LGA only in 2024.



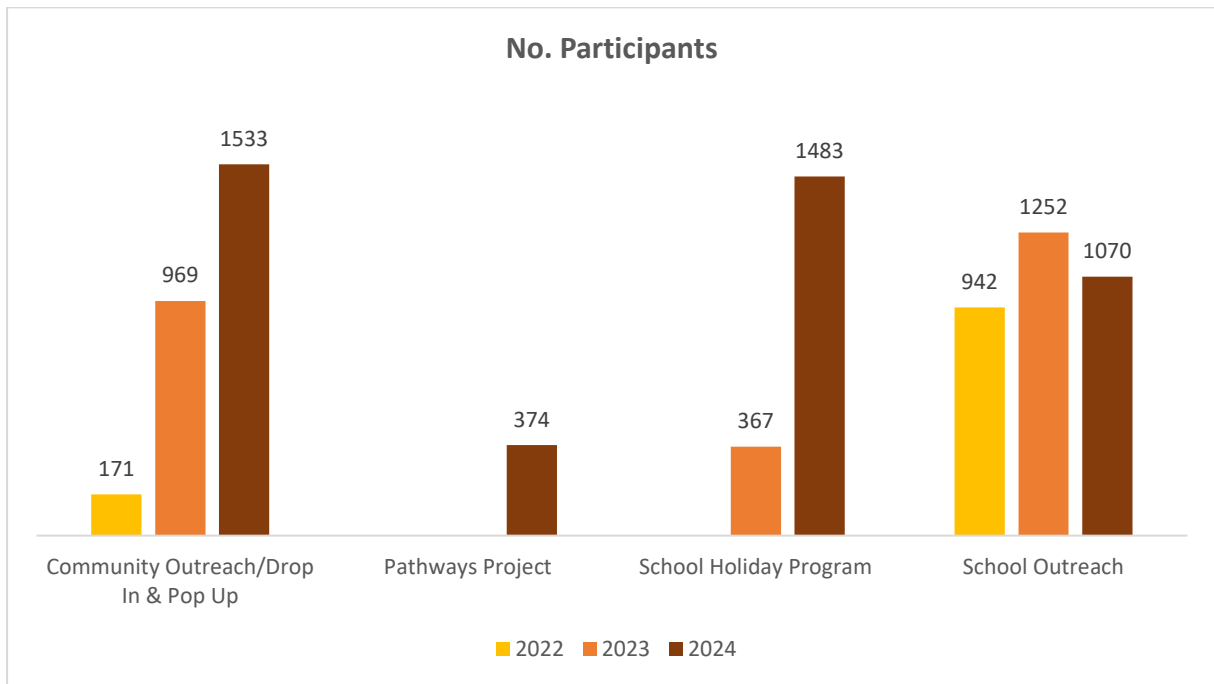
**Figure 31: Type of activities undertaken by year.**

The number of participants accessing EGYPT activities increased each year as the project became better known, and activities were refined to meet the needs of participants (refer Table 1 and Figure 32). In 2022 a total of 1,113 participants attended activities, in 2023 there were 2,588 participants, an increase of 133%. In 2024 this had increased again to 4,460, an increase of 72% (1,872 participants) on the previous year.

The community outreach and drop in and pop-up clinics saw a substantial increase year on year, going from 171 participants in 2022 to 1,533 participants in 2024, an increase of 1,362. The school holiday program when it was introduced was very successful with 1,483 participants in 2024.

Activity – East Gippsland & Wellington Combined	2022	2023	2024	Grand Total
Community Outreach/Drop In & Pop Up	171	969	1533	2673
Pathways Project			374	374
School Holiday Program		367	1483	1850
School Outreach	942	1252	1070	3264
Grand Total	1113	2588	4460	8161

**Table 1: Total number of participants by activity type**



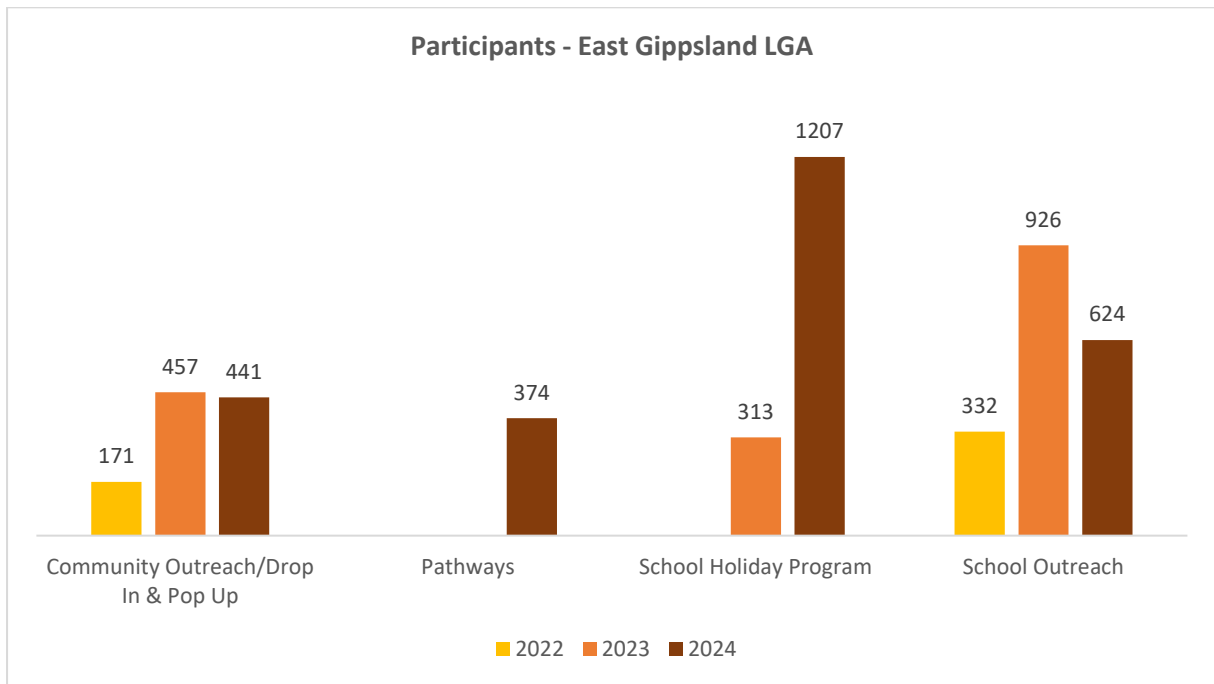
**Figure 32: Participants by activity type by year**

A total of 4,845 participants (59%) were in the East Gippsland LGA and 3,316 participants (41%) in Wellington LGA across the life of the project. The number of participants in each LGA increased year on year, with a total of 8,161 participants in total, refer Table 2 and Figures 33 and 34.

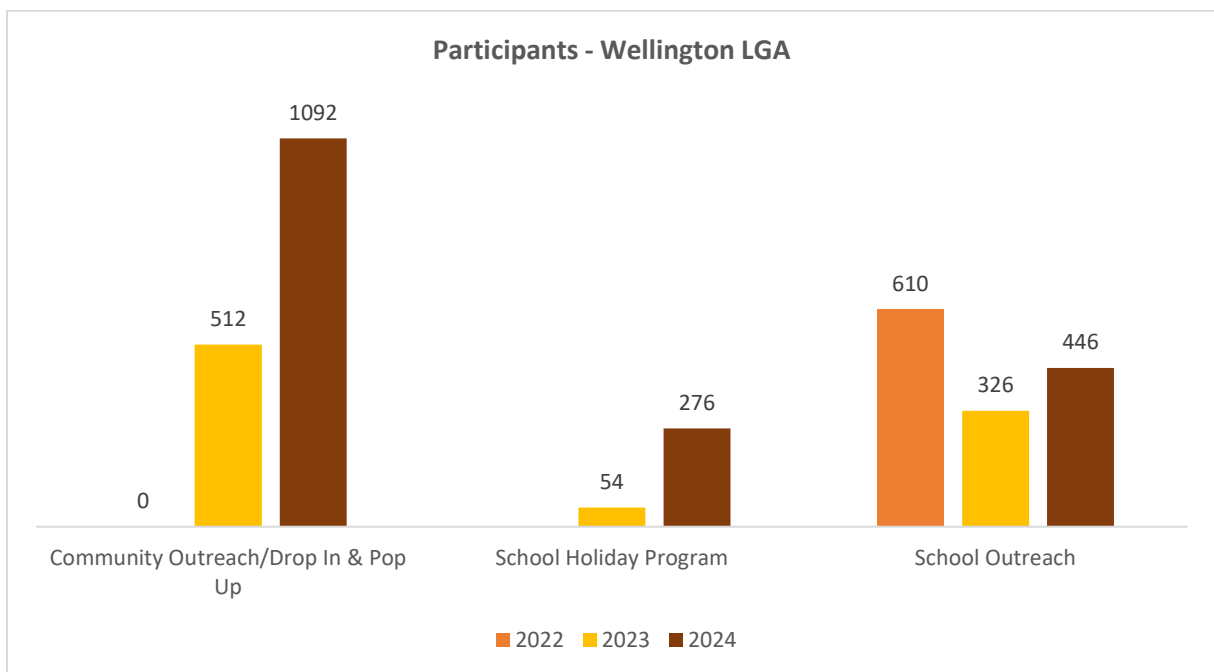
The school holiday (1,520 participants) and school outreach programs (1,882 participants) were the most popular activities in East Gippsland LGA (refer Table 2) and community outreach and drop in and pop up activities (1,604 contacts) in Wellington (Table 2).

Contacts by Activity by LGA										
Year	East Gippsland					Wellington				Grand Total
	Community Outreach/Drop In & Pop Up	Pathways	School Holiday Program	School Outreach	East Gippsland Total	Community Outreach/Drop In & Pop Up	School Holiday Program	School Outreach	Wellington Total	
2022	171			332	503	0		610	610	1113
2023	457		313	926	1696	512	54	326	892	2588
2024	441	374	1207	624	2646	1092	276	446	1814	4460
Grand Total	1069	374	1520	1882	4845	1604	330	1382	3316	8161

**Table 2: Participants by Activity by LGA**



**Figure 33: East Gippsland participants - by activity by year**

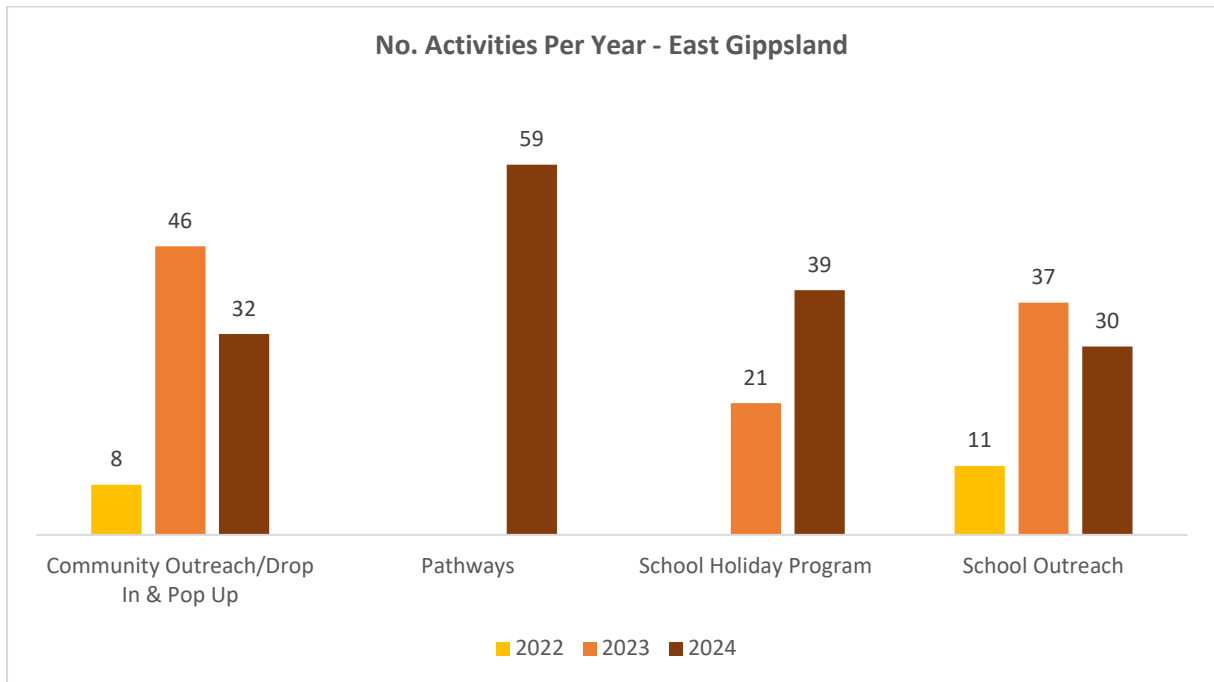


**Figure 34: Wellington participants - by activity by year**

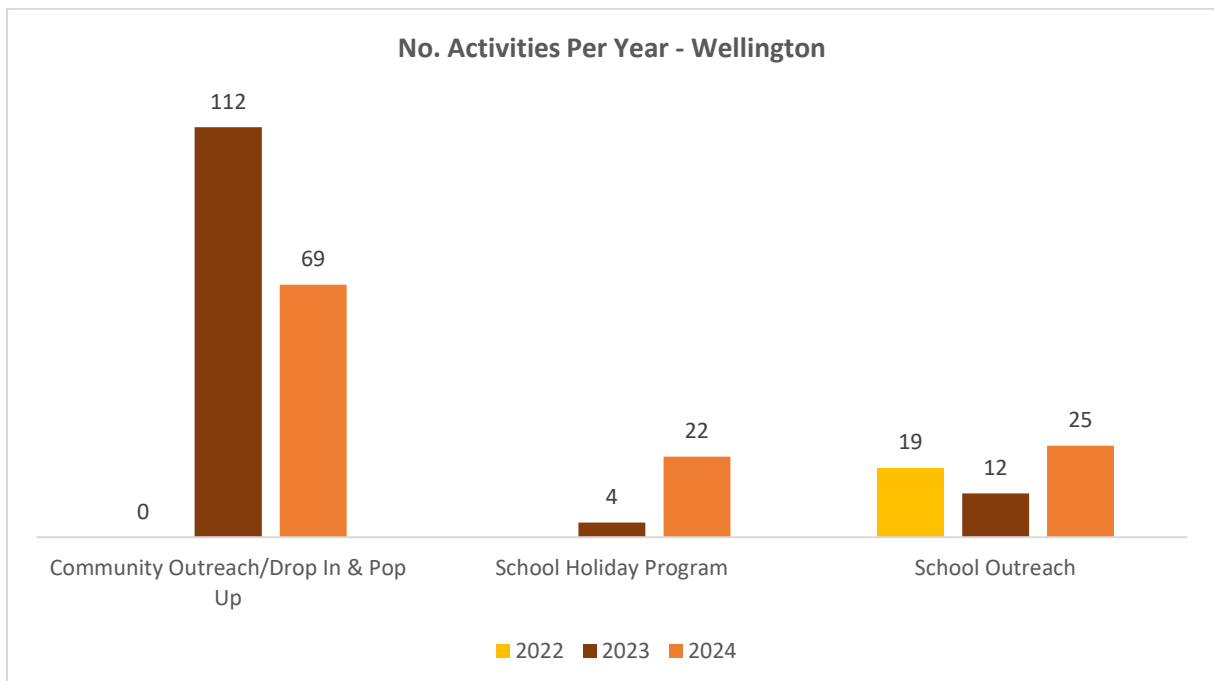
A similar number of activities were undertaken in each LGA across the three-year period, 283 in East Gippsland and 263 in Wellington (refer Table 3). The type of activities were spread evenly in East Gippsland (Figure 35), compared to Wellington which had a focus on community outreach and drop in and pop up activities (Figure 36).

Activities Undertaken in each LGA										
	East Gippsland					Wellington				
Year	Community Outreach/ Drop In & Pop Up	Pathways	School Holiday Program	School Outreach	East Gippsland Total	Community Outreach/ Drop In & Pop Up	School Holiday Program	School Outreach	Wellington Total	Grand Total
2022	8			11	19	0		19	19	38
2023	46		21	37	104	112	4	12	128	232
2024	32	59	39	30	160	69	22	25	116	276
Grand Total	86	59	60	78	283	181	26	56	263	546

**Table 3: Activities undertaken by LGA**



**Figure 35: Activities per year - East Gippsland LGA**

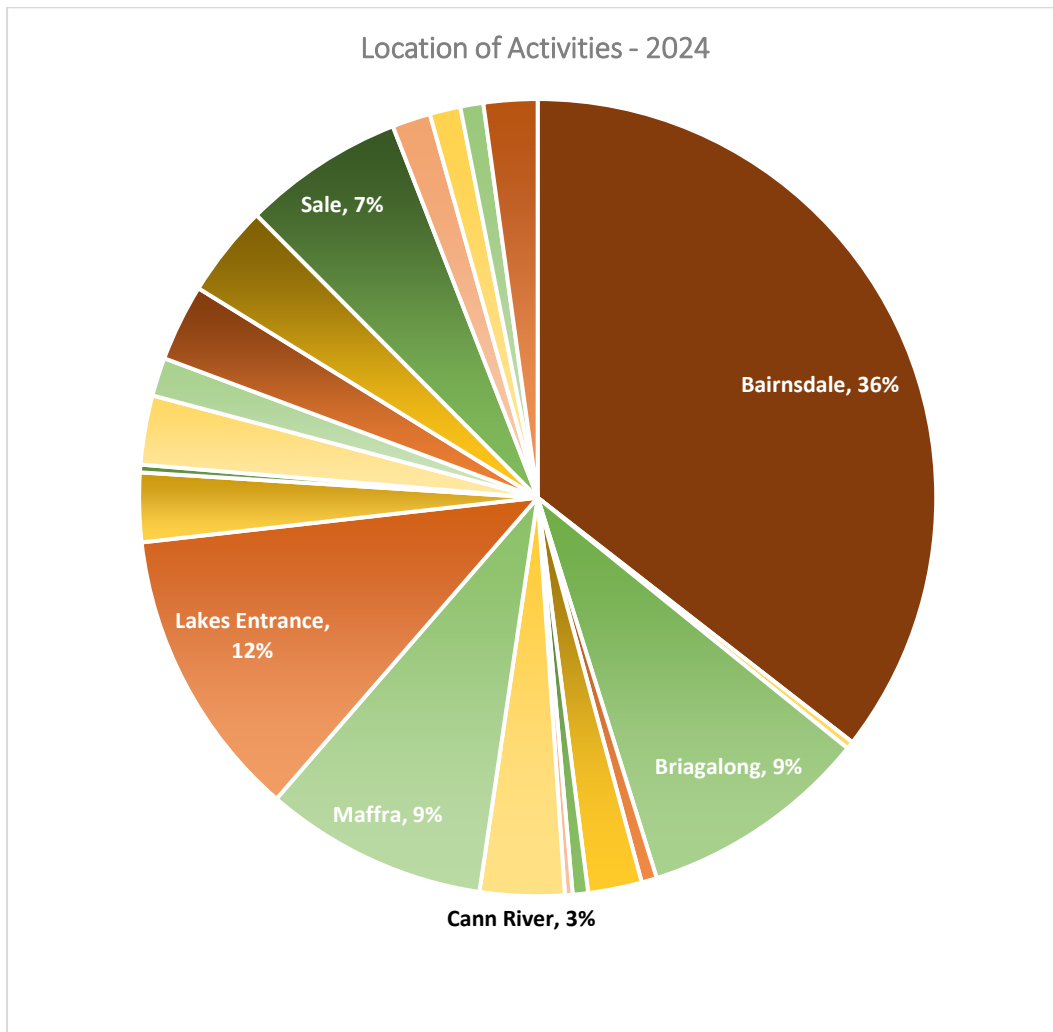


**Figure 36: Activities per year - Wellington LGA**

Activities were held at many locations throughout 2024 (refer Table 4 and Figure 37), with the most popular location being Bairnsdale (36%), followed by Lakes Entrance (12%) and Briagalong (9%) and Maffra (9%).

Town	Community Outreach	Drop In / Pop Up	Pathways Project	School Holiday Program	School Outreach	Grand Total
Bairnsdale	2	20	53	23	16	114
Benambra				1		1
Briagalong	1	29				30
Buchan				2		2
Cann River		1		3	7	11
East Gippsland NOS		1		8		9
Ensay						
Heyfield		9				9
Lakes Entrance	1	2	20	4	11	38
Lindenow				1		1
Maffra	1	2		3	23	29
Mallacoota				2		2
Metung					7	7
Nowa Nowa				1		1
Omeo		2	1	2		5
Orbost	1	1	1	7		10
Rosedale		12				12
Sale		19			2	21
Sarsfield	2	2				4
Swifts Creek		1		2		3
Tambo Upper			5			5
Wellington NOS				7		7
Total	8	101	80	66	66	321

**Table 4: Location of Activities in 2024**



**Figure 37: Location of activities - 2024**

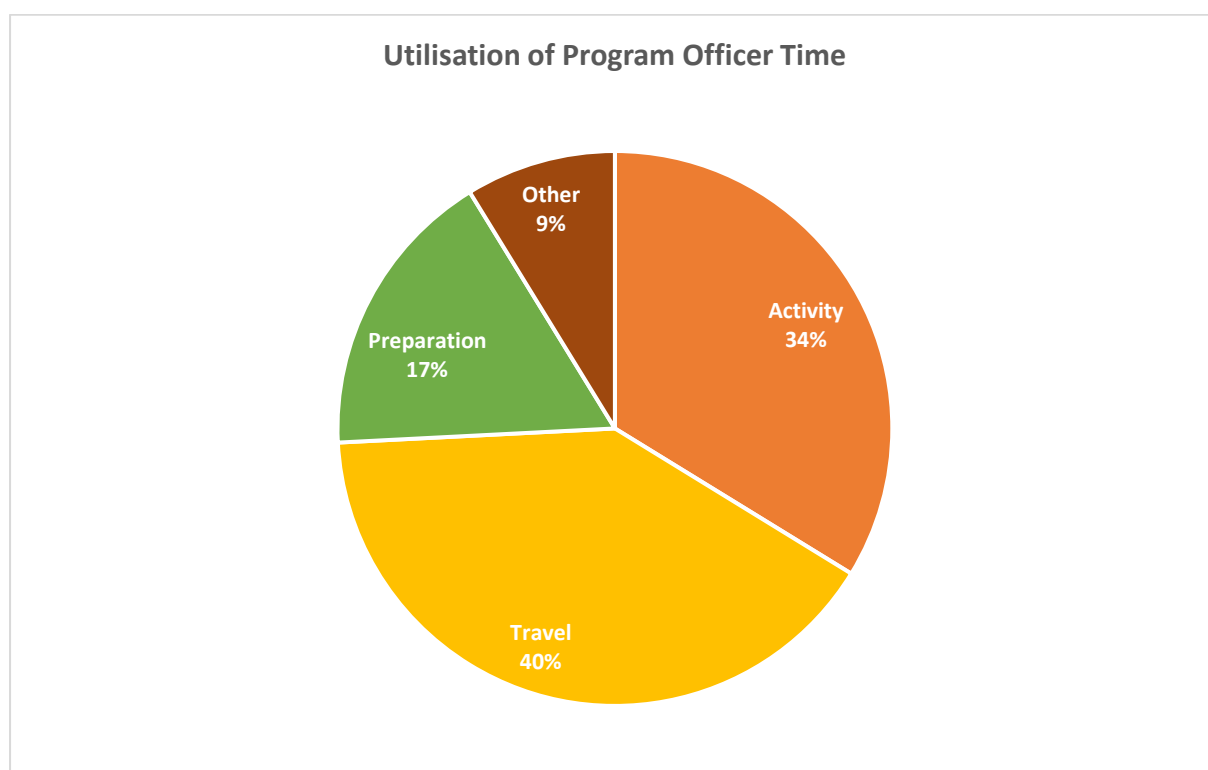
#### 4.1.4 PROGRAM OFFICER ACTIVITY SHEETS

##### INTRODUCTION

Staff Daily Activity Sheets were completed by three program officers between 11 January 2024 to 26 January 2024, showing their daily activities for a five-day period. Two program officers completed these for five consecutive days, while the third officer completed the Daily Activity sheet for two consecutive days in one week and three consecutive days in the following week. These documents were collated and itemised onto an Excel spreadsheet. The activities documented on the individual Daily Activity Sheets were allocated a broad category related to the day's *activity*, *travel*, *pre and post activity preparation*, and *other*, which included unallocated time, administration and break times.

##### UTILISATION OF TIME

The tyranny of distance experienced by people living in Wellington and East Gippsland is clearly illustrated when analysing how program officer time is utilised. Figure 38 shows that for the three workers who completed daily activity sheets 40% of their time was spent traveling, compared to 34% of time actually participating in the activity.



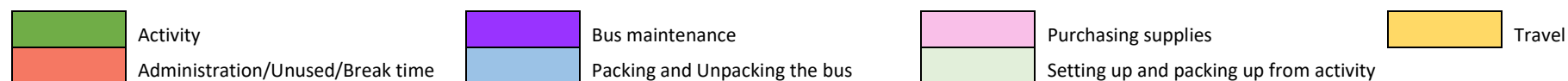
**Figure 38: Utilisation of Program Officer time.**

Colour coded activities are represented in Table 5 as a colour map, with time documented in 30-minute intervals.

On multiple occasions, program officers worked more than an eight-hour day. Activities sometimes occurred after hours and for those activities occurring within normal work hours, the extended travel time pre and post-activity made for some long days indeed. Program officers identified that working such flexible hours created challenges as additional hours quickly built up but there were limited opportunities to take time off in lieu.

Table 5: Colour-map illustrating Program Officers' time distribution.

			Staff 2	Staff 2	Staff 1	Staff 1	Staff 1	Staff 2	Staff 1	Staff 2	Staff 1	Staff 2	Staff 3	Staff 3	Staff 3	Staff 3	Staff 3
	START	END	11/01/2024	12/01/2024	15/01/2024	16/01/2024	17/01/2024	17/01/2024	18/01/2024	18/01/2024	19/01/2024	19/01/2024	22/01/2024	23/01/2024	24/01/2024	25/01/2024	26/01/2024
30 min time slots	6:00 AM	6:30 AM															
	6:30 AM	7:00 AM															
	7:00 AM	7:30 AM															
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Youth attendance			57	52		22	62	62	102	102	27	27		15	4	11	



## 4.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

### 4.2.1 INITIAL INTERVIEWS WITH GYS STAFF / GEYP PROGRAM OFFICERS

#### INTRODUCTION

Interviews were conducted from May 2023 to July 2023 with three GYS staff and four program officers running the GEYP early in the program. One interview was a focus group with two program officers, while the remaining five interviews were conducted individually online. Four CERC researchers thematically analysed the data from these interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) 6-step thematic analysis technique. Three major themes were generated from the data, namely "Getting on the road", "Wheels on the bus", and "A road well-travelled", as shown in Figures 39-41. Quotes from participants have been provided to support the themes. All quotes have been de-identified, and their participant number removed to maintain the confidentiality of interviewee participants.

#### Major theme 1: Getting on the road

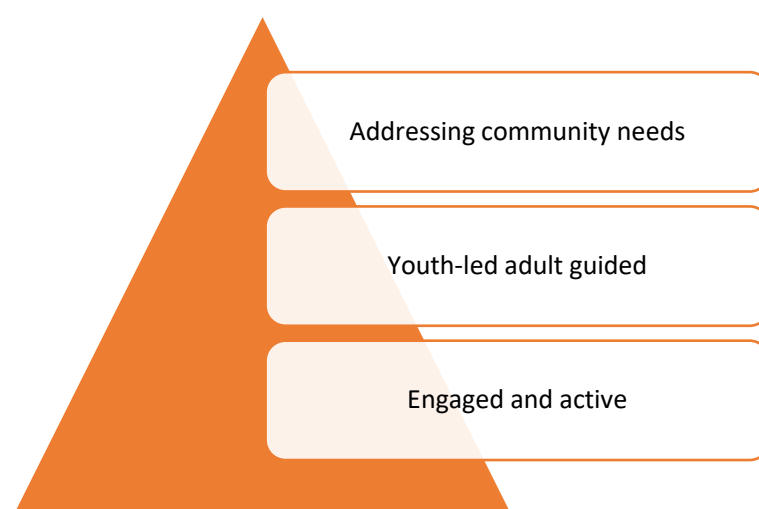


Figure 39: Major theme No. 1: 'Getting on the road' - thematic analysis minor themes.

#### Minor theme 1: Addressing community needs

The first minor theme was around addressing the needs of the many and varied communities within the Wellington and East Gippsland LGAs. Many of the communities, including the young people, "*felt like they were forgotten*" after the 2019/2020 bushfires, as no sooner had the fires been extinguished than COVID-19 appeared. This became an all-consuming extended event with long-lasting repercussions for the youth. Some young people were "*not leaving their rooms, and they're looking at screens*" instead of connecting with their peers. Some of these habits may have developed "*through tragedy or pandemic*" and resulted in school avoidance and lack of community connection.

*"COVID-19 overruled everything, and it also stopped them from going to school. It has had a big impact on the generation of kids ... They didn't have to go to school for two years. So, why would they want to go to school now?"*

The participants reported they were *“trying to recreate some better habits”* because they believed in developing *“a better or stronger engagement from young people into the community.”* Local community needs varied depending on location and landscape:

*“I don’t know if it’s the young people who are different ... maybe some of the isolated areas seem to have a stronger community. So, if they are lacking resources, they seem to have that strong community, whereas in areas that seem to have more resources and more available, maybe [they] don’t need that strong community as much?”*

Another participant confirmed this sentiment between the two LGAs, as they reflected on the needs of the young people as being *“more specific and specialised”* depending on where they lived:

*“The needs of East Gippsland are very different to Wellington. Also, the landscape is very different.”*

One such need the young people reported was the need for recreational activities that were not sports-related *“that young people can engage in”*. While *“there’s a lot of sports stuff and a cinema in town”* within the Wellington LGA, the participants said they were *“hearing from young people that there is nothing to do,”* which became particularly evident in winter. This sentiment was echoed in some of the participant’s comments when they said:

*“In winter, it’s very hard ... There are not a lot of venues; there’s not a lot here for kids to do except for surf or ocean or all the rivers or stuff like that. So, [due to the weather], you’ve got to think of activities that can be done indoors.”*

Delivering the program was difficult in winter and inclement weather without a home base or building in town that young people could drop into, or activities developed that could be delivered indoors.

*“[When] planning a program ...it’s hard to even find places to think of to go, particularly coming into winter. So, not being [in] a building - that can seem difficult at times.”*

Not only did the participants express the need to assist with transporting the young people to the planned activities by bus because *“we’ve got the barrier of travel”*, but they also felt that they needed *“someone to encourage them to get them there”* and therefore had to act as motivators to encourage them to sign up for the events.

*“We went to Omeo, and my thought was that a lot of these young people probably live on farms. I don’t know if they can easily get into town. We’ve been asked to be a bus service, so I’m quite sure the bus has eliminated the transport [issue].”*

Additionally, due to the vast geographical distances between communities in some regions, *“a lot of 18-year-olds living in East Gippsland get their license”* as public transport is limited, and young people want to move forward with their employment or study aspirations *“on their path to what they want to do.”*

To help meet the needs of the young people, it was explained that one of the program’s goals was to support existing programs offering services to young people in the LGAs of Wellington and East Gippsland. As *“there’s a lot of programs that the Bushfire Recovery funds have funded,”* this involved *“avoiding duplication of programs [and] really strengthening those referral processes between the different organisations.”* This was done through *“collaboration with stakeholders and networks, focusing on open communication and transparency around who does what and when.”*

*"I'm really trying to drive and encourage what's there to connect with young people or to connect with their target audiences. .... There are areas of Gippsland that were doing that quite well already. But it's also between the different LGAs and learning from each other's learnings from what has worked and what hasn't worked and why, and why something works in one community and not the other?"*

## **Minor theme 2: Youth-led, adult-guided**

The second minor theme discussed the aims and purpose of the GEYP. The participants were asked to describe the project's aims and purpose by finishing the sentence, *"The Youth-led project is aiming to?"* This resulted in a variety of responses that represented what they believed they were achieving, including *"aspiration building"* to *"connect with young people"* and *"empower young people for healthy connection and growth ... so they can get assistance with their day-to-day concerns and conditions."* The participants explained that the program was guided by the young people and upheld by mottos that represented the way the program was structured from the ground up:

*"Youth-led, adult-guided" is our general catchphrase and 'nothing about us without us' are the two. The other one that we seem to say a lot is, "You can't be what you can't see."*

The program officers needed to be able to connect with the young people, which would then help them reconnect with their communities. To do this, the young people needed to feel accepted and safe.

*"It's aiming to provide a space for the youth that they feel safe and supported in. I feel like it's definitely trying to draw in that demographic of youth that are disengaged from employment or school, struggling to have social connections. Youth that are affected by mental health, or illnesses or disabilities, just an inclusive space for everyone to feel welcome into."*

The participants also observed the young people developing connections with each other that would strengthen their resilience and confidence. Additionally, the program enabled some of the young people to have exposure to new experiences.

*"Having a meaningful and positive impact on the young people that we're dealing with, whether that be their own connections they're making with other youth, or just exposing them to something that might not even have been on their radar."*

Another participant stated that the program's purpose was to *"provide services to the outer regions of Victoria or Gippsland... and engage with young people"*, where many communities were small and without accessible and regular public transport. To achieve this, the program officers created *"programs for engagement in the community out of a minibus... to take the service to them [the youth] rather than [them] trying to get in [to town]"*. To assist with this, *"the idea was to get those services onto the buses with us"*, meaning that other existing programs or services joined in or ran the day's activities, whether they *"be in schools, [or] it could be just getting out there."*

One participant felt overwhelmed at times by the endless opportunities that could be implemented within the program and explained it this way:

*"[The main aim or purpose of the program] seems to be forever changing. At times, it can be overwhelming because there are so many possibilities. So, some days, it feels as if anything could be possible so long as you get the approval, but in a way that can be overwhelming."*

### Minor theme 3: Engaged and active

The third minor theme, “Engaged and active”, describes the various activities the GEYP provided to the young people in the two LGAs free of charge. Experienced outdoor activity leaders or organisations delivered many activities to provide an array of fun and adventurous recreations that many young people would not have access to due to cost or transport. Developing such adventurous activities involves *“a very big risk analysis that we undertake as part of the concept plans”* to ensure all are safe and risks are mitigated. One of the participants said they *“reach out to local businesses”* to run an activity. One such business was called *“Venture Out, and they do paddle boarding, canoeing, bike riding, [and] heaps and heaps of stuff.”*

The program varied throughout the year depending on the school terms, holidays, and seasons, but *“most of the excursions are run over the school holidays.”* The skate parks proved to be a popular venue, so some activities were run around those spaces. A BBQ lunch was also supplied. *“I heard that the skate parks are places they want to be, so we just tried to have some fun at the skate park”*. The following quote describes an Easter holiday program:

*“We’re kicking up an Easter program down here, which will take us right through the East Gippsland region. And that will be bigger than the summer program. We’ll have surfing lessons, stand-up paddle boarding, fishing, and a number of partner activities. Parks Victoria is going to jump on the buses and go into the high country and take us into the caves and orienteering and a number of things. That means that we’re out and about and [will] probably need two buses.”*

*“We had “Learn to Surf” at Cape Conran. That was with Surf Shack. We also collaborated with Parks Victoria, and we came up with the idea of an Amazing Race and learning how to use compasses. We also had Headspace with large games, basket weaving, and a cave tour at Buchan Caves. We also had a “Try Sailing” day at Painesville, and there was a little bit of a brief on how to sail and support going out on the boats on their own. I thought they really enjoyed that ... Lunch was provided at each location, and we also collaborated with Street Games, so they do skateboards and learn to skate [activities].”*

In addition to the above activities, which the young people needed to register in advance for, the GEYP officers ran “pop-up” activities, where the young people could just turn up for activities run out of certain neighbourhood houses. During the school term, activities occurred within certain schools with the occasional excursion in *“the school term to break up the program and make it a bit fun for the kids to do something different”*. In regard to attendance, it was noted that *“we’ve had higher attendance in the excursions than we have in our other pop-up programs.”* The activities were advertised via the *“Facebook and Instagram page”*, which would enable young people to know *“what’s happening [and] where you can find out some information about what we’re up to.”*

*“At the moment, we’ve got 4 pop-up programs happening: Briagolong, Heyfield, Rosedale and Wurruk. We run those throughout the week over the five days, and they are run at community houses in the area. We’ve done a partnered program with the GELLEN, which is the Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network. We’ve been into Sale College and worked with students in that space. We’ve engaged with Maffra Secondary College and Yarram Secondary College with lunchtime activities.”*

Over time, the program gained a reputation for providing enjoyable recreational activities. Thanks to the success of its previous community events, people eagerly awaited the arrival of the program's

buses during the holidays. The program's commitment to delivering high-quality and entertaining activities had made it an event to look forward to.

*“When these buses arrived at the summer program we had the BBQs out, cooking sausages and getting them involved in VR [virtual reality] and the games and everything. And they were waiting for us because they knew that we were going to be back there at the same time on those dates. And it steadily grew.”*

## Major theme 2: Wheels on the bus

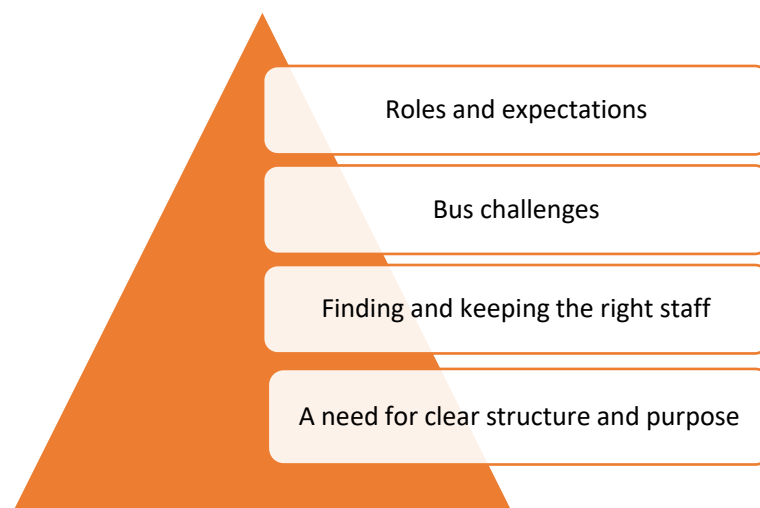


Figure 40: Major theme No. 2: 'Wheels on the bus' - thematic analysis minor themes.

### Minor theme 1: Roles, expectations and challenges

The second major theme was developed around the program's implementation and the challenges that GYS staff and GEYP officers faced. This first minor theme discusses the participants' roles and expectations. Some stated that *“it was made very clear what the role would be,”* but others felt it was *“a lot more than I thought it was”*, which included writing and developing the program and travelling long distances to and from the activities. Another participant described a shift in tasks and responsibilities from face-to-face contact with the young people to a management role:

*“I used to love just getting out there and doing activities with the young people. But in this role, I’m very much now behind the desk, just managing people and saying, ‘Guys, we’ve got to do this, we’ve got to do that’ ... So, it is a little bit of a cultural change for me going from being actively involved to the management side of it [but I’m] totally enjoying that as well, though.”*

The program's commencement took months longer than expected because *“of the big long list of things”* that needed to be attended to, such as *“Working with children's checks, police checks, NDIS Worker Screener checks, food handling, Child-safe and cultural sensitivity”* courses and certifications. In addition, there were complications surrounding the *“purchasing and selection of appropriate buses to do the job”* and getting them accredited for the program; a requirement *“that nobody knew that they had to undertake.”*

*"It was quite lengthy with the Transport Safety Department here in Melbourne to get the accreditation. It was probably about a four-month duration. I wouldn't encourage anybody to go through it. It's very laborious."*

Managing the usable space in the minibuses for the program equipment became a juggling act as decisions made early in the program's development had consequences and restrictions.

*"You've got all this equipment, which is great to go and do the programs, but then if you've got to load the bus up with kids, what do you do with the equipment? And that's why I grab the trailer [but] the bus doesn't have a tow bar. It would be great if it had a tow bar on it, but it's just purely being parked at my place, somewhere lockable; that's vermin-proof."*

The role of the GEYP officers was broad and required flexibility and a can-do attitude. One example was the need to have the equipment cleaned after use, which was potentially done after hours at home:

*"They have [the bus] parked in the yard. But I know XXX keeps a lot of things for the program stored at their house, so they would probably, I'm assuming, take it home and clean it at their house."*

The budget for the GEYP was estimated to be *"about 3.2 million over the two years"*, but as the program developed and was implemented, *"what we originally put forward in our plans has changed a little bit because it's just been pulled into different directions."* This required flexibility and creativity to keep the vision on track. The momentum of the program led one participant to say, *"You've got no hope of trying to manage a service like this because it's just like hanging on to the reins; you cannot just pull it up."*

*"So that's what the buses are about, and it's getting to a point at the moment in East Gippsland that it's about to just explode; we've got that much stuff going on and a lot of agencies that want to participate in what we do."*

Regarding programming, some of the activities required specialist and experienced tour guides or activity leaders with skills and licences that the program officers did not possess. Therefore, others were contracted to help run them:

*"We wouldn't do them [some activities] on our own because we're not experts in that stuff. But we will engage with other people that do. [For example], Parks [Victoria] know about where the snakes are and what to do if somebody gets bitten and all that type of stuff. They know how to get them evacuated and assisted."*

Another challenge that was not originally envisaged when running programs involving other organisations was privacy issues around the *"sharing of information between partners."*

*"To overcome those privacy issues or concerns ... we've had to duplicate how young people sign up. So, they essentially end up signing up for two sets of programs. It wasn't just one, how we originally envisaged. So, we end up having to chase two lots of parental consents and things like that, which has made that challenging, but it's also pushed back timelines."*

The GEYP officers were aware of their limitations when dealing with young people and did not want to overstep their roles. One participant provided an example of seeking permission to mentor one of the young people who attended the program:

*"I think it's just knowing how to navigate the conversation if it does come up and being able to reach out for the right support when you need it. One of our young participants ... contacted me asking if I could be a caseworker because she doesn't connect with hers. [I asked my manager, saying], 'I'd like to support her, but I don't know how that would fit my role?' And [my manager] said, 'Yeah, you can definitely mentor her through your program.' So I said to this young person, 'Look, I'd love to help you out if you ever want to chat or anything, just come along or give me a call and you can come on the bus to our program that day' just to give her that sense of feeling connected to that worker and also me not withdrawing because I am not capable - because I am capable. I think it's just knowing where the line is and not crossing it."*

The GEYP officers understood they were a conduit or intermediary for the young people if they needed professional help. Their role was not to be *"counselling young people"* but to be *"engaging with young people, engaging in conversation, to find out what's going on."* They could say, *'Look, I can't handle the situation, but I am going to do some research. I know some people who can get you the help you need.'*

*"Program officers are all about the activities and getting young people to where they need to go and partners to being overwhelmingly engaging with the community. The Youth InSearch partners share similar roles, but they have the qualifications and a program to be able to address things that are very concerning."*

## **Minor theme 2: Bus challenges**

Before the program could commence, the buses went through the process of accreditation with Safe Transport Victoria in Melbourne, which took approximately four months. This was an unexpected process that was not budgeted for financially or timewise but will require ongoing reporting and they will be *"audited on a regular basis."* In addition, staff that would be driving the mini-bus needed to obtain their Light Rigid licences in Melbourne. Not only did this take *"another few days away from the program"* when staff returned to East Gippsland they then needed *"time to get comfortable with driving the vehicles before they [could] have young people anywhere near them."*

It was only after the bus started to be used that the program officers realised the make, model, and design were not the best fit for their purposes and suggested that [the Toyota] *"would have been more effective for our work"*. One of the participants believed that the cost savings were not worth it:

*"The savings of 30 grand [\$30,000] buying an IVECO compared to the Toyota was just the wrong decision."*

Not only was sourcing the bus *"an issue post-COVID-19"*, but there were *"a couple of mechanical issues with the bus when we first got [it]"*, which occurred *"as soon as it took its first trip."* COVID-19 added to the complexity of bus maintenance as it became difficult *"being able to find people who [could] maintain that particular bus,"* on top of delays due to *"parts not travelling around the world as they [were] supposed to."* An example of a bus issue was explained this way:

*"The front door on the bus, one of the little arms broke, and because they're a European bus, we had to wait. It was off the road for six weeks, just for a little sensor to go on the seat belt to make the airbags work. You know, it's the safety response system. So that was a bit of a nightmare."*

The bus was initially stored in town and *“parked in the yard next to a big paddock”* when not in use. Unfortunately, *“just with the seasons we’ve had”*, the bus was infested with rats, and *“they made a hell of a mess; got into everything,”* which took the program staff *“about a week to get it back to semi-normal.”* The bus was then taken to one of the program officer’s properties where it could be kept in a shed and protected. This proved handy for small maintenance tasks, so *“if there’s anything I can just fix and fix quickly”*, it could be dealt with immediately, for example, *“I had to weld the arm on the door a couple of times, and I’ve spent quite a few hours getting it just right so that everything lines up and everything.”* It was felt that keeping the buses fully serviced and operational was a time-consuming task, and one program officer said, *“I don’t think the management have a real idea of ... what’s actually involved in keeping them on the road, fully serviceable, and all the little bits and pieces.”*

Another challenge the staff had to contend with was driving time. Providing a program that escorts young people to activities and events up to four hours from their home towns results in long days for the program officers. For example, *“from Bairnsdale to Mallacoota and Cann River, it’s about a four-hour round trip.”* When planning the program, driver fatigue laws had to be considered to restrict driving to *“10 hours maximum in the day”*, which, due to the nature of the program and the vast distances to be travelled across the East Gippsland region, was *“very much pushing the limit all of the time.”*

*“I think sometimes the people from GYS probably need to come out and have a look at how difficult it actually is because for me to drive anywhere, it’s at least one to two hours on a bus to get them or to get home.”*

To counteract this, the team would stay overnight where the activity was held, especially when *“a lot of those activities are after school”*, which would otherwise require *“a four-hour drive home”* late at night.

*“So that’s when, with our scheduling, we normally try and be smart about the way that it’s scheduled. On the way up, we can go to Mallacoota, and on the way back, we’ll go to Cann River or something like that and try and make the most of those trips ... With Wellington, everywhere is under an hour from Sale. So, there’s not as much need for overnight stays but for East Gippsland, absolutely.”*

Driving the young people to and from the activities and events came with a high level of responsibility, and one of the program officers said, *“That’s one thing that I stress about a lot, being the only bus driver”* [at the time]. They were concerned that if they *“get injured or I get sick or something happens [during an activity], how the hell are we going to deal with getting the kids home?”* With this *“always in the back of my mind”*, they preferred to take fewer risks or not partake in certain activities, just in case.

When considering the logistics of transporting the young people to and from activities, decisions had to be made as to whether the mini-bus would be big enough or not. The more equipment and program officers that were required, the fewer available seats for the young people.

*“On our bus, it’s got 16 seats, and if I’m sitting in one, then there’s 15 available. So, we can take 15 to 14 [young people] depending on if we have an extra worker. And on a big charter bus, we could fit ... 52 [people].”*

To improve the community awareness of the program, it was suggested that the bus be branded with the program logo, much the same way as the GYS bus was.

*"It's just a white bus, so I think we need to get some signage on that and maybe even put it out there as a competition for the kids, like for the youth to design it."*

The COVID-19 pandemic created a lack of supply of repair items and price rises in goods and services, which *"absolutely is not 100% what we expected"* and, in turn, put pressure on the budget and the planning of activities and events.

*"The cost of even food and catering and things like that has gone up. It's throughout absolutely everything; fuel costs, so everything we've budgeted for and planned for. Obviously, we have to work within what we've got, which we're able to do."*

### **Minor theme 3: Finding and keeping the right staff**

Participants were asked about their experiences and perceptions of what they thought their role within the program would entail. Some of the participants held managerial roles, while others delivered the program. For those in managerial roles, recruitment and retention challenges were a recurring theme:

*"Recruitment certainly took a lot longer than expected for the Gippsland East project. A lot of the partners in the area had told us how difficult recruitment is for East Gippsland and Wellington. We already had a couple of people we thought would apply, and of course, you know, nothing ever works to plan, so we thought we would have people quicker."*

It was a challenge to find staff *"with all of those checks and balances that we need to have and all the other training that we would like them to have before they're operating"*. Another participant stated:

*"Half the battle that we had was that we were looking for six people to be in this program, and I've got to tell you, trying to find those six people was a mammoth task because you can't find youth workers out there just to jump into a program like this... Some of those people have had no youth experience at all."*

Once staff were placed into a role, some found the requirements, hours or unpredictability difficult to get used to and a *"challenge"*. The working hours were often long, started at different times of the day, and the program required staff to be very flexible.

*"If I have personal commitments, I would not be able to do this. It's very flexible; some days, it's 7:00 am until 7:00 pm. Some days it's 12:00 pm to 8:00 pm. You just don't know until the day."*

Working flexible hours meant there was an expectation they needed to work on weekends if a program was organised because *"there are no excuses; they have to be there."* Naturally, the additional hours added up, and they had to *"take their times back out in the form of toil or till."* Taking time off in lieu became *"a constant balance all the time"* because there was not enough staff to fill in the gaps.

Running the program out of buses and without a home base was a challenge for one of the participants, and they struggled not having a base to work from:

*"We're all-over East Gippsland, but we don't have that workplace that we turn up to, or we don't come together as colleagues unless we're in a program. That's probably been a challenge for me."*

At times, *"the overwhelm of the role was perhaps bigger than expected"*, which resulted in the worker leaving, creating a staff shortfall. Despite the program growing at a *"phenomenal rate"*, to prevent running some activities without enough staff, management provided *"support [to] those workers with whatever they need so they can do their job correctly"*. At other times, program officers had to work across both LGAs or *"fill gaps in East Gippsland because we weren't able to recruit in East Gippsland."*

*"So again, there were more pressures with travel and trying to get programs up and running or attending meetings and things like that and keeping that going until we had recruitment in East Gippsland. So, it was a bit of a double-edged sword. We could recruit, but retention was something that was a little bit difficult. We now have a full team, and that took until the recruitment was sort of - it's been ongoing the entire time. We only really got all positions filled as of December [2022]."*

#### **Minor theme 4: A need for clear structure and purpose**

Being a youth-led organisation with input from various committees, such as the 'Table of 20', meant there were many moving parts. Organising meetings became a challenge when *"the passionate people who were driving it ... are no longer in the positions ... or have moved on."* Movement of staff *"among our partners and in the area"* was also occurring at the time, making planning for activities even more difficult.

The participants desired a clear structure and blamed the lack of it on the fast turnover of management. It was stated that *"there's too much reactive-type management rather than proactive-type management. It's just very hard to build structures because they change so quickly."* A lack of structure was also felt to be a challenge when planning activities and brainstorming ideas, as it was difficult to align enthusiastic people with diverse passions and viewpoints toward a single direction. It was believed that a single focus that was well communicated to the program officers was important as all their ideas were basically about *"improving people's lives"*, whether their focus was on *"education"*, ... *"mental health"*, or *"fitness."*

*"One weakness is, everyone's passionate, but their passions are in different directions. There's a lot of ideas thrown around. But to get fixed on the one direction can be difficult at times and no right or wrong everyone thinks they have the best idea, of course."*

The program officers felt that there were some challenges around communication because *"having that distance and trying to get contact when we need contact straight away is quite hard."* There was also a discrepancy between what management understood the needs of the GEYP to be and what the program officers felt was reality. One participant had strong views about a lack of understanding by the GYS management of the difficulties that the program officers faced.

*"I can't remember the last time I actually saw [them] face to face down in this region, and I don't think that [they] would understand. Well, [they've] never been out on the bus with us. So, [they] wouldn't really know what happens out there anyway. [They] only rely on what we feed back to [them] as far as how the program runs, basically."*

The program officers also felt the pressure of high expectations of what they were expected to achieve without management understanding the barriers and connections required to enable certain activities to get off the ground.

*“When they're telling you that they want two programs a day it's very difficult because you can only drive for so long as well. And also, too, they think it's really easy to get into schools down here, but it's not. You've got to have a really good purpose to go to the school. That's where I would fall down because I don't know what my purpose is.”*

Participants also found the irregular scheduling of activities and events hard to keep up with.

*“If they had it in place, where you're going to be, what you're going to do on particular days, and it doesn't change for a whole term. I think that would be a hell of a lot easier.”*

Despite feeling that it didn't “matter how organised I am”, one of the participants felt “that I'm drowning all the time” as their role was a “very big job for one person.” Another participant echoed these sentiments as they continually juggled multiple tasks saying,

*“I'm creating the programs; I'm implementing the programs, and then I'm also driving the bus to do those programs and then also trying to keep up with Zoom calls and shopping for food because you got to do that as well and in maintaining a family on top of that.”*

### Major theme 3: A road well-travelled

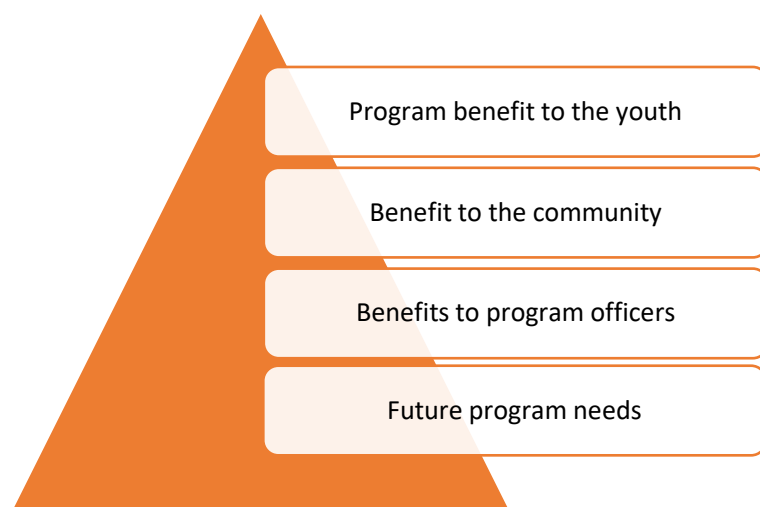


Figure 41: Major theme No. 3: 'A road well-travelled' - thematic analysis minor themes.

#### Minor theme 1: Program benefit to the youth

##### CASE STUDY

*We've done a lot of school outreach throughout Wellington, we've done a little bit in East Gippsland and we've done some community events through East Gippsland and Wellington as well. So often this is partnering with people who already have various things happening and we just go along and just try to get out there in the community and let people know that we're coming, that this is something that's going to be in your community much more often and on a consistent basis.*

The program officers described that in many of the towns, other than participating in sporting activities, there was nothing for the young people to do if they didn't have access to transport. While parks were available for children or a Men's Shed accessible by adults, there was a gap in what was publicly available for teenagers. The program thus provided a safe, free outlet.

*"Out in Briagolong, what do they have out there for the kids? Nothing. They've got a park. Once you hit 12 years old, do you want to go and swing on a swing? Absolutely not. And the Men's Shed at 12? Probably not either ... And even if they did go into Sale, what's in Sale for them to do if they're not a part of a part of a local Sports Club or have money to go and do activities? What are they doing? They're roaming the streets and engaging in risky behaviours and all of that sort of stuff. So, I think it's just giving them something to do and having the option there for them."*

Over time, the program became known and accepted and began to make a difference in the lives of young people. Whether the impact was big or small, participants believed *"there's been an impact on all of the people who have attended the programs."* Gaining *"confidence to come back"* to more activities, *"making social connections"*, or simply being *"willing to try new things"* has been evidenced in the young people. While many of the activities were structured, others allowed space for talking, sharing and gaining support with their personal difficulties.

*"They're sitting in the big circle, and they'll be playing a giant game of UNO. And then one young person might say something about how there was some bullying stuff at school and then the conversation kind of changes, and those workers will go in and talk about that, [and ask] 'What did you do? Who are your safe people at school? Who do you go and talk to?' and really encouraging them to link into their well-being at schools and stuff like that."*

The participants shared many stories during their interviews about the impact that the program has had on the lives of the young people. Positive transformations were evidenced when withdrawn or shy young people were seen *"coming out of their shell"*, becoming more comfortable, and started *"making some good connections with the other kids."* Another story shows the importance of attending the program:

*"We've had a foster child attend one of our programs and she's been expressing that she's super grateful to be able to come to the program and make friends. She's not engaged in any education or employment at the moment. So, for her, that's really the only thing that she has to go to. So, she's expressed that she looks forward to it every week, and that's really the only thing that she's got on her mind, which is really nice. And her foster carers have also been very grateful of our help and assistance in engaging her in the program."*

The program has had measurable impacts on some of the young people, demonstrated by their willingness to engage in future employment. One example of a turnout is explained as follows:

*"It turned out that three out of the five were completely disengaged from school. And one of them had been quite transient and had been disengaged in education for three years. So, they engaged in that program really, really well. And now the florist is talking about putting that young person on for a trial, and potentially linking them to an apprenticeship."*

For some of the young people, it was less important what activities they did, *"they just want someone to talk to and someone to care and spend time with."* It was noted by one of the participants that some of the youth *"don't have positive male role models in their life"*, and so simple activities such as

fishing was *“really good stuff for young fellows to engage in.”* This enabled the participants to come alongside and foster adult-to-adult connections and relationships. The participants also understood the importance of providing a safe space for the young people who may be in a time of crisis. Knowing which service to call or where to refer a young person was also an important part of the role, which may generate a conversation like, *‘Hey mate, I’ve got you. Here’s the phone number you can ring if you’re really struggling.’*

*“How well we engage and work with those young people and make sure they’re safe [is so important]. There are a few that haven’t been safe, and we’ve had to intervene to get them back on track.”*

## **Minor theme 2: Benefit to the community**

The ideas for the program and the various activities were passionately motivated by the community and young people through *“their local networks and their local stakeholders ... It’s really the community driving the growth for the community.”* As the program officers were also *“real locals,”* they had a *“warm and genuine connection, drive and passion for the benefit of their community”* where they also lived. *“In terms of that [passion and enthusiasm for the project], the way that it’s been received by the community, so far, it’s been really positive.”*

The program not only supported the young people but was also *“supporting families as well. It’s just so multifaceted.”* One example of a direct benefit of the program for the communities in the Wellington area was addressing food insecurity through the provision of free meals. The Wellington team ran *“engagement programs at four different community houses”* that involved young people learning how to cook. In addition, the prepared food supported families struggling with food insecurity.

*“The cooking program is around food security and taking some food home, and they’ve even been supportive of the community and putting meals in freezers in some of those community houses as a kind of give back and being a part of your community as well.”*

In some of the regional communities, such as Mallacoota, Cann River and Omeo, the teams have *“formed incredibly good relationships”* through their community engagement activities, so much so that they feel like *“family down there, to be honest with you.”* The program team were -

*“asked if we could volunteer at the Omeo and District Football League Grand Final because they were struggling to have anyone volunteer to help out on the day. So, we said absolutely we would love to do that. We went up, and we cooked a BBQ.”*

Another cooking event was organised after a staff member *“encouraged those young people to do cooking”*. As a result of the word spreading around town *“elderly people from Buchan [came] down who had nothing to do with the football club whatsoever to have tea with those young people on a Thursday night.”*

Another example of the program having a broader community benefit was seen in the way the students in the high schools were engaging with the program and the program officers, which could have a flow-on effect on their behaviour and overall learning.

*“The Principal at the Lakes Entrance Secondary College and the Principal at the Orbost Secondary College are really starting to enjoy it. They see that we’re engaging; they see that it’s working. We’re starting up one in term three at the Lakes Entrance and working with Koori kids on a Friday, which will be really good.”*

### **Minor theme 3: Benefits to program officers**

During the interviews, the participants were asked what they enjoyed about their role within the GEYP. Getting out in nature and travelling around the beautiful regions of Gippsland was a positive sentiment that many shared. Being able to *“get out and have a bit of fun and enjoy it”*, coupled with opportunities to *“do a lot of learning along the way”*, were highly cherished. While there was joy in being able to *“travel”* [and] *“seeing more of Gippsland”*, the priority was being able to connect with *“stakeholders and those networks who genuinely care about their community.”* There was also joy in successfully *“collaborating with our other partners.”* All participants were unanimous in their desire to see *“young people engaging, forming relationships and engaging in each town.”* One of the participants explained that they felt joy in recruiting people who held such passions.

*“I’ve thoroughly enjoyed finding those people who are in the role because they enjoy the role and enjoy the work; they’re not just there for a job, for their pay-check. They genuinely care about their community and the potential of this project. So that’s been uplifting and, in some ways, has driven a lot of my energy behind this work to keep going for that genuine connection and making sure that we can get something established that will benefit this community long-term.”*

For another participant, seeing *“staff working as a synchronised team ... [and] seeing everybody working so well together [and] enjoying it”* greatly impacted them. The staff were genuinely altruistic, as expressed in the following quote:

*“Everything that I’ve done has really been about putting it together for young people and moving them forward in the region.”*

Often the program officers acted as a confidante, due to the sense of connection and trust strong enough that the young people felt confident to express themselves. One of the program officers was surprised that despite *“having never had kids of my own”* felt privileged that they were still *“able to connect well and make a difference in young people’s lives.”*

*“I get texts every day from young people just calling to say, ‘Hi!’ and tell me stuff that’s happening that they can’t talk to other people about.”*

Due to the blend of staff’s expertise, passion and diverse approaches, real connections with the community were made, which provided an added benefit of harmony and collegiality.

*“Often workers know how to connect in different ways. And what we found by luck, passion and the knowledge of different workers, different connections are made.”*

Staff had also learned different things about themselves as a result of their role in the program. For some, they were pleasantly surprised at what they could accomplish:

*"I never saw myself as having strength in paperwork, and that side of it where I've actually coped with that pretty well, so that's been maybe a surprise to me. And sometimes I think, 'Oh my goodness, this will never be done!' but I actually get there."*

Others realised they had grown personally and had developed skills that would be useful in a different capacity in the future.

*"I feel I have the potential to be doing more impactful work in the future in a youth worker role. I feel that's something that I'd like to strive towards doing. I feel like I have the capability for it."*

#### **Minor theme 4: Future program needs**

The participants were asked what they would do differently if they did the project again. As the program was new, there was not a template to follow, so there had been some lessons learned along the way. It was suggested that *"a little bit more lead-in time to develop and prepare those concept pitches and program pitches with the community"* would have allowed more time for review and consultation. Also, because the bus accreditation created an unforeseen delay, the program was delayed in starting. One of the participants felt the start-up was too rushed.

*"Probably to slow it down, I think, would have been good to do at the very beginning. I feel like when we started this project, we already were starting late because we had the green light, but we didn't have everything. We weren't really able to go until everything was formalised and in place. So, it was very much once we were able to start, it was straight away, 'What have you done? What have you delivered? What's happening on the ground?'"*

A social worker from Youth Insearch was expected to travel on the bus to the activities, but there was not a good fit between both services at the time, so the program officers had to *"do more of that engagement on the programs... [which took them] away from [their] other job responsibilities"*. In light of this, one suggestion to improve the program was to have more time to work on the planning.

*"I think it would also be really good if we had the opportunity to take a step back from programs for two to three days, just so that we can really focus on admin program planning, program reports, getting all of that stuff together so that we're on track and not always falling behind. I mean, there's only two of us."*

However, it was believed that there was a need for a social worker who would be able to support the program and provide an additional level of skill and expertise.

*"My advice would be we need a social worker, or a youth worker employed by Gippsland youth for Gippsland Youth, purely to be with us, for all of our hours, not just on the program."*

Another deficit the program officers felt needed to be addressed was the need for a permanent base. They believed this would be beneficial not only to themselves but also to help with their accessibility and provide more effectiveness to the program.

*"Somewhere we can do admin, that we can store all of our resources that we can store all of our paperwork, where people can come and find us and access us if they can't get us on the phone and we're in a program. Somewhere where mail can be sent to so that we can*

*communicate with people. I think it would just be so much more beneficial for us and to be able to be like, 'Hey, we have a building come and drop in and see us and we can sort this out.'*

When it came to ideas to further improve the program, there were a few suggestions around the bus. The first was *"the bus driver needs to be full-time, five days a week"* to alleviate the amount of work that was required with maintenance, upkeep and driving. The second was around sourcing a vehicle that was robust enough not to break down continually.

*"If you had a magic wand, you'd start with the buses: they'd never break down or have any issues would be wonderful. If they were locally sourced, that would have been even better. So, it's little things like that, I think, throughout the project that would have made it a better experience."*

To improve the program going forward, it was suggested it would be helpful to *"strengthen the partnerships and networks"* and improve the detail and speed of communication between all the groups at times. It can be difficult to achieve this when time poor because *"it takes a lot of work to obviously have those relationships and maintain that communication."*

Regarding the program's sustainability, everything rested on the need to secure more funding at the end of the term, and this was at the forefront of their minds. The program officers understood the *"CEO applies for grants, and I'm informed that there should be a reason to continue going .... but that's the elephant in the room that no one really knows"* whether an application will be successful or not. The program officers were hopeful that money would be forthcoming because the value of the program was obvious and could not be denied.

*"I can't see any real challenges for us except the fact that all of a sudden, the funding dries up, and we can't continue with the service because it has been really well accepted. And the service is growing. People treat us now as if we're part of the community and always have been part of the community. So, I'm not looking forward to the day that we go up to them and say, look, guys, as of today, we're no longer with you."*

Not only was the concern about future funding on the minds of the whole team, but it was reflected in comments from the community.

*"There is always that tendency to ask, when will you be back, what else is coming? They want to know about consistency; they want to know about longevity. What happens when this funding goes...? And that's something that we receive a lot of, and we don't know in reality. We don't know what will happen with this project, but we're working as hard as we can to make sure ... if for some reason the funding isn't there, that this is something that can continue beyond our involvement. Obviously, that's not what we'd like it to be. We sort of envisaged this being a long-term program."*

As the program was growing due to *"requests that we're having from vulnerable communities"* and in light of a potential cut in funding, the program officers were *"trying to implement new stuff that can be ongoing"* and produce programs that could be sustainable. They did not *"want this project to finish in March, and then we're back to nothing and no support."*

## 4.2.2 FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS WITH GYS STAFF / GEYP PROGRAM OFFICERS

### INTRODUCTION

The current program officers were interviewed during July and August of 2024. A total of six facilitators were interviewed via TEAMS or in person. The facilitators covered both Wellington and East Gippsland, delivering programs to youth aged 12 – 25. During this time there were difficulties recruiting appropriately trained staff due to funding uncertainty and rural aspects of the program delivery. There were two 16-seater buses purchased and outfitted to accommodate the storage of equipment in addition to transporting young people and facilitators to and from remote locations. During this stage of the project GYS rented two on site buildings one in Sale and the other in the old Fire Station building in Bairnsdale as youth space bases. Program delivery was then divided between the GYS buildings and travelling to remote communities on the buses.

There were eight themes generated during the analysis of the interview transcripts which describe the program delivery, logistics and impact of the program on young people, facilitators, parents and communities.

### Major Themes

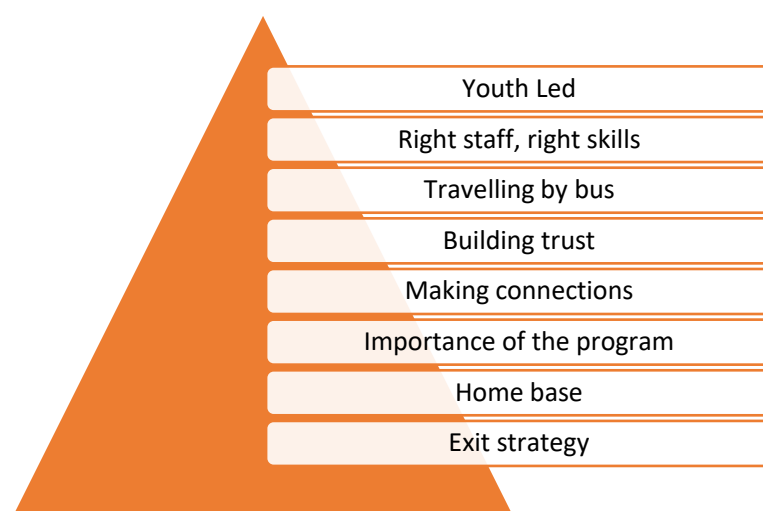


Figure 42: Major themes – follow up interviews with program officers

### Major Theme 1 - Youth led

There were Youth Program Committees (YPC) formed in both Wellington and East Gippsland Shires, these committees decided on the types of activities, locations and assisted with activity planning. The program facilitators would put an idea to the YPC to be considered.

*“We put all our programme ideas to the YPC and then they vote and tell us what they want, then we design it to make it fit with what they’ve asked for”.*

In addition to deciding on program activities the young people learnt valuable skills in activity planning, logistics, event management, risk assessment and financial management. Committee roles and responsibilities included minute taking, chairing of meetings and governance.

*“It teaches the kids how to run meetings, how to take minutes, have great agendas, it’s really good. They talk about all the funding with each of the groups and it teaches the kids financial stuff, like you can’t just go and grab money and go and do something. You’ve got to do safety risks and the amount of effort and the days and hours that get put into building something like the school holiday programme is unreal.”*

The YPC members met monthly, their insight into what is available and needed in the regions was highly valued by the facilitators.

*“The YPC is our youth programmes committee, they meet monthly that’s really supporting young leaders and giving us access to the young local voices about what it is that they really want, where they want it and how they want it. All of those insights into their region and that’s how we decide what our services look like and interest in the YPC, in particular in east Gippsland has absolutely taken off.”*

It was the YPC that recognised the importance of helping young people to deal with frequent natural disasters. The YPC came up with the youth backpack idea which provided young people with a disaster kit ready to go in case of an emergency.

*“Briagolong, Maffra and Heyfield. All those areas were recently impacted, at the start of this year [2024] they had both fire and floods and had to deal with that within a week. That helped us instigate the Briagolong support group.”*

Having youth lead the project delivery, activity and designing ways to support young people by young people has helped to ensure that the program has been able to implement meaningful changes and initiatives that have been well received.

## **Major Theme 2 – Right staff, right skills**

Initially, one social worker and an experienced youth worker located in each area was deemed to be appropriate. Gippsland Youth Spaces, however, found it difficult to recruit and retain appropriately trained facilitators in each regional area.

*“The intention and the vision were to have a really experienced, confident social worker or youth worker who could deal with youth crisis on the spot, there all the time in programming.”*

The recruitment process took up to six months which delayed the ability of the team to deliver the program during that time. Consequently, the team requested an extension to the funding timeline. COVID-19 also impacted on the recruitment and retention of staff particularly the purchasing of the buses.

*“You spend six months of time, effort, energy and money trying to find somebody in the area with the skill set and then you’ve got the probation period of them trying to figure out the role, get them trained and ready to hit the ground running.”*

Additional training was offered to the facilitators to address any deficits in the skill sets, however facilitators found it difficult to attend training either on-line or in person due to travel restrictions and the need to continue to deliver the program activities. There was also a need to consider the staff to young people ratio to ensure that there were enough staff on scene to deal with the complex behavioural issues of some the youth. Thus, it was important to keep staff ratios high and limit the maximum number of young people that could attend each event.

*"Its actually pretty well worked out that 20 is the absolute maximum with two of us and then you still got to have eyes in the back of your head."*

The facilitators described feeling stretched personally and professionally, working overtime that was not paid for or accounted in their workloads.

*"I know that I've done overtime every week. I'm only supposed to be here for four hours and last week I was here for 7.30 hours because there's just so much to do and there's no one else to do it. If I don't do it, it's not going to happen."*

The facilitators recognised that they were significant role models for the young people and that how they responded to situations was observed, how they spoke mattered and how they engaged with everyone demonstrated good communication skills.

*"You really need to want what you say and how you talk because they look up to us and if we're out there swearing and carrying on, they're going to do the same thing. You've got to set a good example."*

Funding continues to be a barrier to facilitator recruitment, training and retention with many staff leaving for more secure, permanent positions.

### **Major Theme 3 - Travelling by bus**

There were mixed feelings about the purchasing of the two 16-seater buses with some facilitators noting they were rarely used, often out of commission or were a lifeline to accessing remote communities and youth. Often the activities attracted large number of young people which resulted in the hiring of large coaches such as the ski trip with had over 70 young people with 20 support personnel. Maintenance, cleaning and driving to the bus all needed to be taken into consideration with each event. One of the buses had to be taken for repairs and was consequently out of action for over 6 months this then impacted on the type of activities and transport that could be offered during that time. Despite this, the buses enabled the facilitators to get into remote communities.

*"Having access to a 16-seater bus has made a high impact I think in the region, being able to take more young people to these opportunities. If we hadn't of had the 16-seater bus there would have been a lot of challenges in being able to deliver in each community."*

Booking a seat on the bus has provided facilitators with additional reasons to contact young people to further encourage them to attend events.

*"We were going round and picking them up and then if somebody didn't turn up, we had his phone number and I'd go 'Mate get ready, we're going to be there in 10 minutes, we'll pick you up, you're on the bus'."*

The time to pick up the bus, pick up the young people and then travel home needed to be factored into working hours. Depending on where the bus was stored each night, added travel time to each day. Initially the bus was stored at the home of one of the facilitators, followed by a yard, however this didn't give the facilitators 24-hour access to the yard to pick or drop off the bus, adding in an extra layer of complexity.

*"We found another yard in Rosedale that we could have it stored at that we could get access to whenever we needed. But we still didn't have a key, I'd have to make a phone call, somebody*

*had to meet me there. It was stored beside a paddock with long grass and no cows in it, we ended up with rats in the bus."*

The rats chewed through the wires which resulted in further repairs of the bus. Travelling in the bus ate into program delivery time however facilitators noted that even with the travel time it was important to gain access into remote communities.

*"You still have to work within those eight hours and half of those are taken up with travel. That's part and parcel of it. If we get into say Cann River Mallacoota, and we're there for two hours, as long as we do what we need to do and make the kids happy. That's all we care about."*

There were mixed feelings about the need for a bus with some facilitators going on to suggest that what was needed was just a car. If there was a large event, then hire a coach with a driver.

*"Even just a car. If we need to go and deliver a programme from a community house, that's half an hour away, just drive out there with a few resources in the back of the car. I think there's only one or two days a week where we transport kids to and from programmes."*

#### **Major Theme 4 - Building trust**

There was a need to build trust with not only the young people, but also their parents and other service providers in the regions. The engagement has taken 18 months to generate partnerships, staff changes have further impacted on the ability to establish initial relationships.

*"The different staff we had and chopping, changing of staff was a bit of a challenge to be able to build those networks and those connections reasonably quickly whilst trying to juggle all the other responsibilities of getting a project like this up and running, that's been quite a journey."*

It was important to build trust among the other service providers in the regions who were delivering and supporting young people in fire affected areas.

*"We found it really challenging trying to work with other services. I don't know if it's a staffing thing and they can't afford to have their staff helping us as well as doing their own jobs or I don't know if they aren't sure of us or if they're threatened by what we do and worry that we're going to take their numbers. I'm not sure what it is, but we've had a bit of push back from other services."*

The facilitators noted that there has been a positive shift in relationships with other service providers with many of them now contacting them to link in with activities and events. Program partners include Youth Insearch, GippSport, Centre for Multicultural youth, GCASA and local Victorian police, Headspace and local shires for example.

*"A lot of people are now coming to us, we're very much out there now. We're getting lots of contact from various organisations that want to jump on board with us. They want to know what we're doing. They want to know where we're getting our youth from. They want to know how they can tap in with us to work with the youth that we've got."*

Although the project has not changed across its duration the facilitators believed there was an improvement in the way in which they were being received in the community and by other services. Testament to the change in how the program was now perceived was evident in the holiday program

which no longer had to advertise, with numbers booked out in two weeks and the establishment of waiting lists to attend events.

It was also important to build trust with parents with many home-schooled youth attending activities.

*“A lot of our youth, especially the home school ones, the children are quite fragile, so the parents need to really trust us well. I think their parents they all seem comfortable when they drop their youth off. They always ask what’s happening or if there’s anything that we need or anything they can support with. They can see what it is that we’re doing, and you can feel they have trust in us.”*

The activities have helped many young people to become active, parents have welcomed opportunities for their children to connect with other young people in the area.

*“The parents, I guess for them, it’s a safety net as well because they know their kids aren’t sitting at home while they’re at work. They know they’re out engaging with other youth, having fun, laughing.”*

Although the buses have enabled the facilitators to gain access to the remote communities it’s the social connection that has been the important element to this project.

*“I don’t think our buses are the lynch pin necessarily to the whole project. It’s the social connection and the ability to build that rapport and engagement with young people through some light activities. Those fun entry level activities which has built up that engagement and that rapport with the staff to then be able to say well actually let’s have a deeper conversation about what sort of support services you might need or what opportunities you might be interested in.”*

## **Major Theme 5 - Making connections**

The project has run programmes in all the listed target areas and have also gone beyond those areas in response to requests. Out as far as Buchan and Sarsfield where there are only a handful of youth activities, and they have continued to be quickly booked out.

*“People are bringing their young people from quite remote areas or from fairly disconnected families who have disengaged with mainstream education. They’ve been bringing them to youth space in Bairnsdale to socialise and to engage.”*

Young people have an opportunity to meet kids their own age which in turn has helped them to establish friendships which is especially important as they transition from primary to high school.

*“They have established a couple of connections and friends, and it wasn’t quite so scary to go to high school which is a really big part of trying to prevent that disconnection and disengagement, the focus has definitely been on that social connection.”*

Home schooled young people were also benefiting from attending the GYS events, enabling for a wider connection with young people their own age across the region.

*“Making friendships can be really hard, seeing the change in the youth and the friendships that they’re making with others, that’s always very rewarding just seeing different kids interact together that wouldn’t know each other if they weren’t coming here and realising there are other kids that are home schooled, there are other kids that are in foster care. There are other*

*kids that go to school and don't have any friends and there's other kids that are just the same as them regardless."*

In addition to attending GYS events and activities these connections also lead to a number of friendships outside of the organised activities, such as sleep overs on the weekends and hanging out together at school. The facilitators are focusing on social connection by creating opportunities for young people to connect with their peers, hopefully making lasting friendships. Parents have commented on how the program has helped their child to be more engaged.

*"We had a parent come and pick up their kid. She said, thank you so much for having him, he really enjoys coming here. He's coming out of his shell so much, he looks forward to coming every week."*

The facilitators mentioned watching young people transition from being quiet and disengaged to interacting and having fun with their peers.

*"At the start they all walked in and they're all quiet and looking uncertain, by the end of the class, everyone's talking to everyone, commenting on their paintings. Some of them don't even interact in the school ground but here they are in a classroom after half an hour, 45 minutes interacting with each other."*

In addition to making meaningful connections the activities have provided young people with opportunities to safely test their own abilities. During surfing lessons young people are engaged to participate, even when they are feeling uncertain if they can.

*"Like surfing, things that they were kind of afraid of and didn't think they could do. We said come on have a go, you know like you only live once. What's the worst that can happen, you're going to fall off a surfboard and get wet. Just give it a go, and they actually found that they can do this and it's given them a real confidence boost."*

The program has been very important for young people, building confidence, friendships and connecting them directly with services and supports that they need.

## **Major Theme 6 – Importance of the program**

There are young people right across the region who would normally isolate themselves rather than participate in activities who are coming out and attending the GYS events, often due to the therapeutic relationships that they have established with the youth facilitators.

*"It feels rewarding that we have a consistent group of young people from across the region who are now engaging who otherwise wouldn't have done that. Would still be hiding in their bedrooms at home, not engaging with anybody, not having great relationships with their families or siblings and having significant mental health issues. Just hiding away and disconnecting, most likely disconnecting from school and starting to fall into some risky behaviour."*

Instead of 'falling through the cracks' in the system these young people have been provided with opportunities to develop meaningful relationship with the facilitators, support services and their peers. Young people coming out of their shells and making better choices for themselves. Advances in technology have created other barriers to social connection, in addition to ways in which people can

be bullied. By engaging in the activities young people are off their devices and are reducing their exposure to effects of social media.

*“They come here now they’re off their devices they’re actually out doing things, they’re not sitting at home getting cyber bullied or bullying someone else.”*

The facilitators have noticed that the young people attending regularly are now watching and calling out bad behaviour among their peers.

*“They’ve become like a real little family, the kids that we interact with. Its their group and they, to a certain extent have taken ownership of it and the other kids. If somebody needs a hand or if one of the other kids is maybe being a little bit bullying towards somebody else, they’ll jump in and nip in the bud themselves.”*

The confidence gained from attending the program has assisted many young people to connect with other young people from the area, assisting with the transition to year seven.

*“The enjoyment from this project is seeing young people who were previously completely disengaged and isolated and really struggling with their own sense of identity, start to find people who are like them, starting to find ... their tribe which is really nice.”*

In addition to supporting young people the program is also indirectly supporting parents. The program has provided parents and carers with another opportunity to ensure their children are getting access to support services and positive role models.

*“The parents are supporting their youth, if they feel that there’s somewhere else that these kids are safe to go, then that’s great. It makes their life easier.”*

Young people have complex needs with many experiencing anxieties which can lead to disengagement from school, families and friends. Providing a safe place for them to reengage with staff trained to enable growth and confidence is essential in remote communities.

*“Anxiety is usually a massive reason why students don’t attend school. Kids want to feel comfortable and the best way to make them feel comfortable is to let them enjoy themselves. By having games, food, pool tables, air hockey they can interact and have those conversations without even realising they’re having those conversations...through play.”*

There were a number of examples where staff witnessed major changes in the young people growing in confidence and aspirations for the future as a result of attending the program. One young girl who is in foster care has had the courage to reconnect with her mother, another who had a history of abuse and was disengaged with school has now decided to enrol in TAFE *“She’s a lot more confident within herself and has got direction now.”* A group of six boys who attended the forestry classes are considering enrolling in the certificate 2 course. Being able to connect with the young people more regularly has provided the facilitator with more opportunities to have meaningful conversations with the young people. The establishment of GYS centres in Wellington and East Gippsland has enabled staff the physical place to further engage with young people.

## **Major Theme 7 - Home base**

The establishment of GYS centres in Sale and Bairnsdale have had a significant impact on the delivery of the program and working arrangements for the facilitators. The buildings have become storage units for the equipment and resources, a place to store the bus, a meeting place / drop-in centre for

young people and parents and a place to hold organised activities and sessions without the travel time. Many young people are now arranging to attend sessions at the centres in addition to the organised events and activities held elsewhere.

*“One place to work from, one office, one base to charge all the equipment and store all the equipment. Then they’re also able to utilise that space to engage with young people as well.”*

The facilitators did need time and resources to set up the centres, with a number of tasks falling to them to complete, such as installing the hand towel holders and making up furniture flat packs. They also sourced out free couches and tables to make the areas even more useable. The staff were then able to remove work related equipment out of their homes.

*“Being able to take everything out of their homes... put in one site and have really firm, solid boundaries of when you work and when you don’t and travel...has really made a difference. For staff morale and for delivery and engaging young people, there’s more time and space to do that.”*

The centres are close to public transport, walking distance to the towns, and close to schools with young people able to walk to the centres. It’s a centre for youth, the facilitators whenever possible have encouraged youth to take ownership and make decisions about the use of the spaces.

*“It’s a place that’s their own. We always tell youth when they get here, this is your space, we’re here to accommodate you, so if there’s something you want to do or something you don’t like or something you think needs to change you tell us.”*

No longer only relying on the bus to access youth, the centres located in Sale and Bairnsdale enabled further engagement with young people to occur more regularly. The project has operational funding until March 2025, staff have considered what ceasing activities will mean to the communities and more importantly to regional young people.

An exit strategy is important to consider the sustainability of services for youth in Gippsland.

## **Major Theme 8 - Exit strategy**

GYS has commenced talks with local authorities and service organisations regarding the continuation of services in Wellington and East Gippsland Shires in addition to ensuring that young people have access to support services. The physical GYS centres in Sale and Bairnsdale have provided youth specific spaces for young people to gather and for services to have meaningful interactions with regional and remote young people. It is hoped that local government will consider continuing to operate these physical spaces with opportunities for multiple services to utilise the facilities.

*“Its going to be terrible if we don’t get funding and everything that we’ve been able to provide for the kids then gets taken away from them. They lose that space that they have found, met in and been able to hang out in, they just love it.”*

The young people will feel the loss of access to the facilitators who have been responsible in gaining trust in the community, with parents, partner organisations and the young people. Not being able to see or communicate with the facilitators will be hard on the youth that have come to rely on having regular engagement with the programme.

*“There is a bit of concern about what happens when we go or if we finish or our staff that the youth have built a rapport with have moved on to something else because that makes a big difference.”*

To accurately measure the impact of any youth engagement project there needs to be adequate time provided to see long term impacts such as a reduction in school absentees, increase in TAFE enrolments or youth employment. The true impact of the project on the lives of those young people who have attended the activities and events throughout Gippsland may not be visible for many years. It is evident that this project addressed a need in rural and remote communities which supported the growth and resilience of young people across Gippsland.



### 4.2.3 TESTIMONIALS

A number of young people and families provided feedback to program officers and Gippsland Youth Spaces about how the project has positively impacted their lives, all names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

*Harry and Daniel are brothers who are disconnected from community and are home schooled.*

*Since attending the GEYP Social Home School Group both youth have found the confidence to challenge themselves by participating in external school holiday programs, from this involvement both have established friendships.*

*Tom attended GEYP for the Grade 6 Big Day Out. Friendships were formed before heading to Secondary School the following year, and through these connections he also started to attend school holiday programs.*

*Tom was provided with supplies including hygiene and food packs to assist during a challenging time.*

*Georgina is from a CALD background and attends one of the weekly youth groups. Her confidence has grown over the past year and she has now taken on a mentoring role – preparing snacks, drinks and assisting young people with games and activities.*

*“Before I started EGYP, I kept to myself and didn’t have social skills. I have made more friends and am more social and talk more. It helps me with my mental and physical health, being able to socialise with people and participate in activities I wouldn’t normally have the opportunity to do.”*

*"I was very anti social till I joined Youth. I hated talking to people because I get nervous but after a while from joining I made new friends and I'm good at talking to people."*

*"Before I started at Youth I had little friends and was very scared to socialise. After starting here I am more social and make more friends I can express how I am more to people and love being here."*

*"From the start of being a part of Gippsland Youth I was not great of talking to people that I didn't know. Youth group has made me confident to talk to others. Making new mates was really good. It's a great program and its made my mental health better and just overall great times here."*

*Jack was referred from the Navigator program (a program to reduce disengagement for students aged 12-17 years whose school attendance has been less than 30%).*

*Jack attended the Agricultural TAFE 'taster' day which was the second time in two years Jack had participated in a group activity. Jack then attended the Carpentry 'taster' day the following week where he displayed more confidence as he engaged with other students and youth. Jack then attended the group for a second time that week, delighting and surprising his parents and case worker.*

#### 4.2.4 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH GEYP YOUTH

##### INTRODUCTION

Focus group interviews were conducted in April, June, and July 2024, with fifteen (15) young people who attended various programs organised and run by GEYP program officers. Focus group discussions occurred at Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale. The focus group discussions ranged from 5-11 minutes in duration. Some young people spoke and engaged more during the focus group than others, however all youth indicated they shared each other's sentiments throughout the interview.

##### Major Themes:



Figure 43: Youth Focus Groups Major themes.

##### Major Theme 1: Fun and excitement

The program provided participants with new activity experiences, which created fun and excitement as the program enabled them to experience different and new activities and places. Trips to Walhalla and Lakes Entrance Aqua Park were eagerly anticipated as *“being fun”*.

*“Doing new things, just anything like going to gymnastics, and playing money tags.”*

Participants were also looking forward to a visit to the cinema and appreciated that the event was free, including treats, which may indicate that for some young people, cost pressures limit their capacity to participate in activities.

*“Yeah, the cinemas. I can’t wait to see ‘Inside Out 2’. Yes, I love you get, like free popcorn and drinks and whatever.”*

The program exposed participants to new physical activities that were not necessarily mainstream sports, such as ten-pin bowling and non-structured water play at an aqua park:

*“It’s a good combination to have. So, it’s saying that it’s good for your friends, but also saying it’s really fun to do because I have a lot of people saying, especially a lot of the people that come to these sort of events, a lot of people I know don’t really like doing sports, but they love doing stuff like this, water courses and stuff like that.”*

The participants felt thankful that the program enabled them to have fun in a safe and welcoming environment:

*"I like about how people in here are kind and support others and I'm really excited for all the events that we have from that."*

The program officers were cited as reasons for participation, being described as "fun" and also considered as adults that could be trusted with one participant noting "I will be in safe hands."

### **Major Theme 2: Making friends**

The second emerging theme from the focus group discussions was "Making friends". While some participants accompanied their friends and/or siblings to the program events, others made friends at the events.

*"We have a friend group. Me and friends and most of us do the youth group.... I have met people and it's nice because you do get to meet people. I've already got some friends."*

Other participants expressed that the program had improved their social skills by interacting with other people:

*"Helped me meet new people and get my personality back the way it was. Yeah, when I was younger."*

For some participants the program provided an opportunity to spend more time within an existing friendship group "Yeah, just getting to hang out with mates. Have a fun time at whatever events are going on.". For others the program meant an opportunity to meet new people and make new friends, in a safe and inclusive environment "I come along because it helps me adjust to meeting new people."

### **Major Theme 3: Being active**

Participants spoke about "Being active", having the opportunity to experience new activities and places and have fun and make friends. Without the GEYP, participants believed they would have been inactive at home:

*"People's health would really be low and unhealthy. It would just be boring. You won't like to walk more often, you won't be able to see your friends and would probably be home, probably watching TV, playing games, you won't be productive."*

Some participants accompanied their friends on excursions and valued the importance of the program excursions in making people more active and improving social skills:

*"Very important because it gets them out, gets them active and it helps them with their friends, and all are in the social aspect".*

### **Major Theme 4: Building confidence**

Some participants found that the program built confidence. For some young people who did not feel like talking to people before the program found that participating in different activities and meeting new people increased their confidence:

*"I thought it would be good for me because I'm not that type of talking person like I talk to... and I talk to my friends, but I don't like talking in front of people...but now because I'm here, you know, it makes me want to talk more. It boosts my confidence."*

Alongside the participation in sports activities, interacting with people their age or younger built participant confidence:

*"It makes me feel way more confident around other people because I get more experience around other kids like my age and older and younger than me, which is good, so makes me feel more confident around school and that so I can talk more."*

In conclusion, the program positively benefited young people in four main ways. The participants *had fun* when experiencing new activities and places. These experiences made them *more active* and enabled them to *make some friends* and *build their confidence*.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT


While focus group participants generally had positive experiences with the program there were some suggestions on improvements moving forward including offering more activities such as *"ball games"* and getting someone with a background in sports to teach other sports.

*"Yeah, maybe they bring in like a sporting person they know to teach kids another sport that we haven't played".*

Some participants expressed negative sentiments that can be used to inform future design and activities. It was suggested it would be good to have access to a facility and programs at night *"because it is closed on some nights"*. The tyranny of distance impacted one participant which may indicate the need to design activities that considers the required travel distance.

*That Gumbaya World [excursion] was one that made me sick, the drive there and back."*

The suggestions that came from participants may be considered for the future implementation of the program. The participants are looking for a variety of activities especially those that they have not experienced before.



## 4.3 CONTENT ANALYSIS

### 4.3.1 INTERVIEW WITH GYS OPERATIONS MANAGER

Interviews were held with the Gippsland Youth Spaces Operations Manager to ascertain her perception of GEYP from a management perspective. The first interview was held in August 2023, three months after she had commenced in the role, with a follow-up interview conducted in April 2024, noting that during that period she had nearly three months on personal leave, limiting her actual time working in the position. Before commencing as Operations Manager, she had worked in other roles for Gippsland Youth Spaces so already had good knowledge of GEYP, its structure and staffing.

The Operations Manager (OM) already had extensive experience working with vulnerable youth prior to coming into this role, which meant she knew some of the young people and was aware of the challenges faced living in rural and remote areas. Living locally, she had first-hand experience of bushfires and was able to use that to assist young people to have positive impacts.

*“So, what our group did was...we got all our young people together and we asked them what sort of things do you think you need when you have to evacuate? So, they came up with an idea that we should make a bushfire recovery backpack because if there’s a fire, the CFA and your local fire stations, they’ve got teddy bears for young people and there’s things for adults but not really anything for youth...We are making a bushfire recovery backpack with essential items that teenagers think that they need in case they’re evacuated and can’t get home...things like first aid kit, fire blanket, torch, a charger for your phone, toothbrush.”*

The GEYP provided an opportunity for young people to explore different pathways and there was a real sense of pride in the positive outcomes that had been achieved.

*“There’s a floristry programme that the East Gippsland guys are doing. They ran that last year. They’ve had to reinstate it this year there was so much interest. It’s really a lot of hands-on work that’s encouraging different pathways.”*

The flexibility of the project and support from management and the Board enabled the OM to gain confidence in her professional abilities that resulted in her being promoted to a management role.

*“It’s like jumping in and having the opportunity and the trust from the other staff and the trust from management and the trust from the Board. It just supported my self-belief and my growth and giving me the opportunity to go and do leadership training.... So, yeah, I feel like this has been an experience that I probably wouldn’t be walking into the Regional Manager’s role anywhere, if I hadn’t had this experience here.”*

As is often the case in rural and remote locations such as East Gippsland, compounded by the uniqueness of the project, issues around staffing, including recruiting and retaining the appropriate mix of skilled staff, was an ongoing challenge that impacted the project, particularly in the formative stages.

*“We’re doing amazing work, especially in East Gippsland where we’ve been able to lock in the right mix of workers. It’s taken a while and that’s been a problem with the project from what I can see – this was a brand new project, this had never been run before. So, it was a lot of trial and error and in the early days there were certain workers that were in roles and maybe didn’t necessarily have the background or the experience....and so it took a long time for us to get our hooks in and for us to get rolling.”*

The OM was extremely proud of what the GEYP had achieved and was optimistic that it would continue to provide positive outcomes for vulnerable youth in the future on condition that ongoing funding was secured.

*“....we definitely need to try and tap into some more permanent funding because this programme is doing amazing stuff for young people.”*



#### 4.3.2 PARENT INTERVIEW CASE STUDIES

Lakes Entrance was the location for one GYS event which invited young people to an inflatable water park event day. Teenagers were invited to spend time swimming and playing in the water park, followed by a free sausage sizzle lunch and snacks. There were several tents set up, music was playing and the staff from GYS were able to interact with the teenagers. Interviews with two of the parents were conducted and are presented as case studies. Parent 1, Kirsty (Pseudonym) a mother of 3 teenage children and Parent 2, Megan (Pseudonym) who attended the event with her two teenagers.

##### **Kirsty**

Kirsty brought three children to the Lakes Entrance water park event; she is a single mother living on a rural property many kilometres from the nearest township. Her teenagers are all active with local sporting clubs there are only a few mainstream clubs available to rural teenagers, cricket, football and netball. Her children catch a bus to and from school which takes over an hour, and if they miss the bus they are stranded. The distance from home to sporting activities limits their ability to engage in afterhours activities and events.

*“They [my children] don’t have access to things, its too far away. They’re the same kids, same events. The only things they really have is either cricket club, or the football club, netball club and what they do through school. The bus to school is an hour every morning, every afternoon. There’s a lot of events they can’t attend to because if they miss that school bus, they’re stuck an hour away”.*

Kirsty mentioned that the free GYS events are affordable for her budget and provide the children with other fun activities to do. She also mentioned her enjoyment at watching her children interacting with other teenagers, having fun.

*“I pay a lot of money for them to do their sports, their schooling, food on the table, a roof over their head, the bills that go with it. There’s nothing left, they sit at home. This way, less then \$10 worth of fuel, they get a couple of hours and I get to watch them have fun”.*

Kirsty has brought her children to a number of GYS events during the school term and especially in the holiday programs. Getting them off technology and out being active has also helped her children to make friends. Transitioning from small single room primary schools to large regional high schools can be overwhelming and daunting, knowing other children you can speak to helps with the transition. Kirsty’s children are used to the space of the farm and adjusting to kids, crowds and routine can be difficult.

*“We were walking across the bridge coming here and they go ‘Oh, we saw you yesterday’ and they realise ‘Oh we actually go to school with them’, because they’ve never seen them before because they’re in different grades”.*

In addition to the children making friends Kirsty also mentioned that these events provide the parents with an opportunity to be social.

*“It [the event] brought the kids from the outlying farms in so they could hang out together because when you’re on a farm, you’re flat out fixing what’s broken, doing other things, putting new infrastructure in. Your day-to-day stuff.... you wouldn’t drive all the way there then drive all the way home. You’d stay there and you’d talk to the parents that are from the same area. The kids would be off doing their own thing”.*

Kirsty mentioned that it was great to also have the mental health support and professionals made available during the events. Her children have benefited from being around people who are trained to support teenagers and their mental health and wellbeing. Making the events a safe and inclusive place for teenagers.

*"They [the staff] get to know the kids and they can look at their body language and facial expressions and say 'What's up with you today?' and in 5-10 minutes they've got him laughing, happy and off the kids go again. It's something that's missing from schools. They pick up on so much. As soon as I say 'Kelly's got this thing on', 'Yep we're going!' but don't you want to know what it is?' 'No'"*

In addition, the staff are very good at making sure that everyone is treated respectfully, picking up bad behaviour quickly and helping to redirect the children's focus making the parents feel like their children will always be safe at a GYS event.

*"You come to these events; the kids are all protected by all the people that are doing it. If they see the kids picking on another kid, they say 'hey, that's not how we do things', and they talk to them and they protect kids. They don't do it angry, they're not nasty, it's like 'come on, we don't do that to people'"*

Kirsty loves that the activities allow her children to just be kids and have fun.

*"These [events] appeal more to their different interests. This gives them a chance to be kids and play. Instead of being out on the farm, doing the fencing and helping us wrangle up the cattle. This gives them a chance to just play, be kids and meet kids their own age"*

## **Megan**

Megan lives in a rural area of East Gippsland with her two children. She was reflective about the impact of the last few years, especially the COVID-19 lockdowns have had on her children, their schooling and opportunity to socialise with their friends. During that time her children were transitioning from a small rural primary school into a large regional high school. Finding friends has been difficult with the adjustment to interacting with large numbers of people coming off the farm has been difficult.

*"We are pretty lucky that we got out of it pretty OK compared to other people, although for my older one, my 14-year-old, I think it was really hard for him because time was taken away from the year six and then going into year seven. Socially speaking it was really hard. He's really struggled in year seven. Year eight, this year is much better, I think. Whether its COVID or not, but I think COVID and all the lockdowns they didn't help, that's for sure"*

Megan identified that specialised youth mental health was important for her children however it is difficult to gain access to professional services in rural areas. The GYS events which includes trained youth workers has helped her children.

*"Its more like professional psychological support that they need, but definitely programs like this are going to help kids to bond again and do things that kids would do these days. But for sure the lockdowns, Oh my God they had such a bad impact on people"*

Interacting with other teenagers has been difficult, Megan spoke about allowing her children to play video games for longer than she usually would just to give them access to their friends. Social

interaction is important for teenagers, to build social connections, and skills and to make friends which in turn helps them to transition in schools and community.

*“It’s been really hard because teenagers, they really need that social interaction with their mates, and it was reduced to nothing. The only thing was like an hour to do video games in the evening so they could actually chat to their mates. But it was just as really hard time”.*


Megan spoke about the friendliness of the GYS staff and how that has helped her children feel welcomed to the organised events. That teenagers especially boys can be shy and need to develop social skills which they get from other teenagers and role models.

*“Well, like very friendly, like we just got chatting. They gave a really nice and warm welcome....it’s a really nice and friendly team”.*

Megan was thankful to the team for organising events and activities that her children can attend. Being from a rural area means that there isn’t as many activities available, making it even more important to provide teenagers with opportunities to interact with other teenagers.

*“Anything to do at the skate park or mountain bike park or even surfing. I don’t know what the surf is like here. It could be borrowing a surfboard with an instructor or a little competition at the skate park. It doesn’t have to be professional, doesn’t have to be something too big, but just interaction with other kids there”.*

Megan and her children look out for GYS events and activities and attend when they can. The water park and large event days give her children an opportunity to interact with a variety of teenagers from all over East Gippsland, making friends that they see at other GYS events.



## 4.4 OBSERVATION OF GEYP ACTIVITIES

### INTRODUCTION

The Program Officers (POs) organised and ran various activities within their own team or in partnership with other providers. Some events required the use of the GEYP minibuses, the hire of larger capacity charter buses, or participants made their own way to the venues. Information about upcoming activities and regular term programs was advertised on term calendars or flyers and posted on social media.

Event Title	Pop up
Location	Cann River park
Date	17 September 2023
CERC researchers	2 researchers

### Introduction

During the Victorian school holidays in September, 2023, a 10-day program of activities had been prepared by the GEYP team to engage young people in East Gippsland between the ages of 12-25 years. The team from East Gippsland and Wellington joined together to run some of the activities. The PO stated that she ran a monthly youth group and fortnightly school program which was well attended and received, but also said that for the last twelve months, it had been difficult to engage the young people in planned activities. GYS staff stated that young people wanted to attend activities like Magic Mountain in Merimbula over the border, but this was not feasible due to cross-border funding and requirements. Two CERC researchers travelled to Far East Gippsland to undertake data collection over two days and observe the activities scheduled for Monday, 18th, and Tuesday, 19th September 2023.

### Activity at Cann River

The first activity to be observed was a pop-up outreach day at Cann River. Although advertised as occurring between 1 and 5 pm on the brochure, the event was re-scheduled to run between 11 am and 1 pm at the park where the Cann River Community and Information Centre was located. The weather was warm with no breeze, and by 10:30 am, when the researchers arrived at the park, small family groups and couples were using the park to break their journeys and relax. The park also had toilet amenities and mature gum trees that provided some shade for the timber picnic tables. The grass was green and manicured. A police station was situated at the rear of the park.

The East Gippsland program officers arrived at 10:50 am and parked on the grass at the rear of the park, adjacent to the police station. They drove the GEYP's large white tourer bus, which was filled with their program supplies, including equipment for outdoor games and food for lunch. The PO complained that the bus was always breaking down. A newly appointed PO had started two weeks ago and had prior connections to another program (unknown). Within five minutes, a police officer came out and told them not to park on grass, as he thought they were campers. The bus did not have any branding or signage, and the PO commented that this was not the first time they were accosted in parks for this reason and needed the GEYP to be advertised on it. The officers explained the program to him, and he replied that he was pleased something was being done for the youth as there was nothing at Cann River for them to do. The police officer allowed the team to stay on the grass and to set up adjacent to the sheltered BBQ and table. The facilitators and researchers went to the Community Information Centre to see who had booked in for the activities, but no-one had. A conversation took place between the program officers and two women in the Centre about engaging the young people, and it was expected that as the young people knew the event was on, that they may still make their way over to the park.

The program officers believed there were 35 young people aged 12-25 in Cann River who they were targeting, and 45 young people in Mallacoota. There was some discussion that being the first day of the school holidays, some families had gone away, or some of the older young people may be working. Concern was also raised by a PO that many young people refuse to come out of their rooms and trying to engage with them outdoors was difficult. There was also concern that some of the families in the region did not have internet and that parents preferred to buy cigarettes than pay for the internet.

The bus was unloaded, and games set up on the grass. There were hoops, the 'corn hole' game, jenga timber blocks and soccer/footballs. Large plastic containers containing food and utensils were placed on the picnic table. A variety of fruits were cut up and placed on a platter and a PO cooked a large packet of sausages. The cooked sausages, bread, sauce, fruit platter and two large plastic containers of snacks, chips, and lollies were all arranged on a portable plastic table. This was so the young people could walk past and help themselves to food. The other PO sat and wrote notes. During this time both facilitators completed the CERC survey on the iPad.

During the scheduled program, there were no young people in the park. One PO walked around and engaged with people and invited people to come to the BBQ area and eat a free sausage and fruit. The first group to come over were two primary-aged children with their father, who accepted fruit on a serviette. Another two older adult couples came over and shared in the food. These travellers were easy to engage, but other people who walked past were wary of the free food and did not want to engage with any of us. The vast majority of people in the park appeared to be travellers.

A PO approached a family with 3 young teens who had entered the park and they came over for food and chat. They were passing through from the outer Melbourne suburbs on their way over the border. They were open and conversant. Two of the boys kicked the provided footballs to each other for a short period of time. They were the only people who engaged with any of the set-out equipment. Another person to engage with the team and eat some food was a man charging his electric car. The PO was passionate and confident to approach everybody to offer them the free food. She approached the police officers, and they came over to eat and talk with the team. They didn't want to step on anyone's toes by introducing any new programs and stated they already had a good relationship with the young people. They were aware of Bairnsdale police running a youth program that captured Cann River young people.

By 1 pm, there were some small amounts of leftover fruit and approximately 10 cooked sausages. The PO stated that the left-over sausages would be donated to the Neighbourhood House, but that location was undisclosed. None of the young people from Cann River attended the event. The PO stated that older people will engage with them on the spot, but young people are very difficult to engage, as they are either on their phones or locked in their rooms. During the Pop-up event only Caucasian families engaged with us. The PO said Far East Gippsland has a community focus not individualist like in Traralgon. She said the officers in Traralgon don't understand the difference in mindset between the regions.

The food and equipment were packed by the Officers and CERC researchers onto the bus at 1 pm and travelled back to Mallacoota for the next activity.

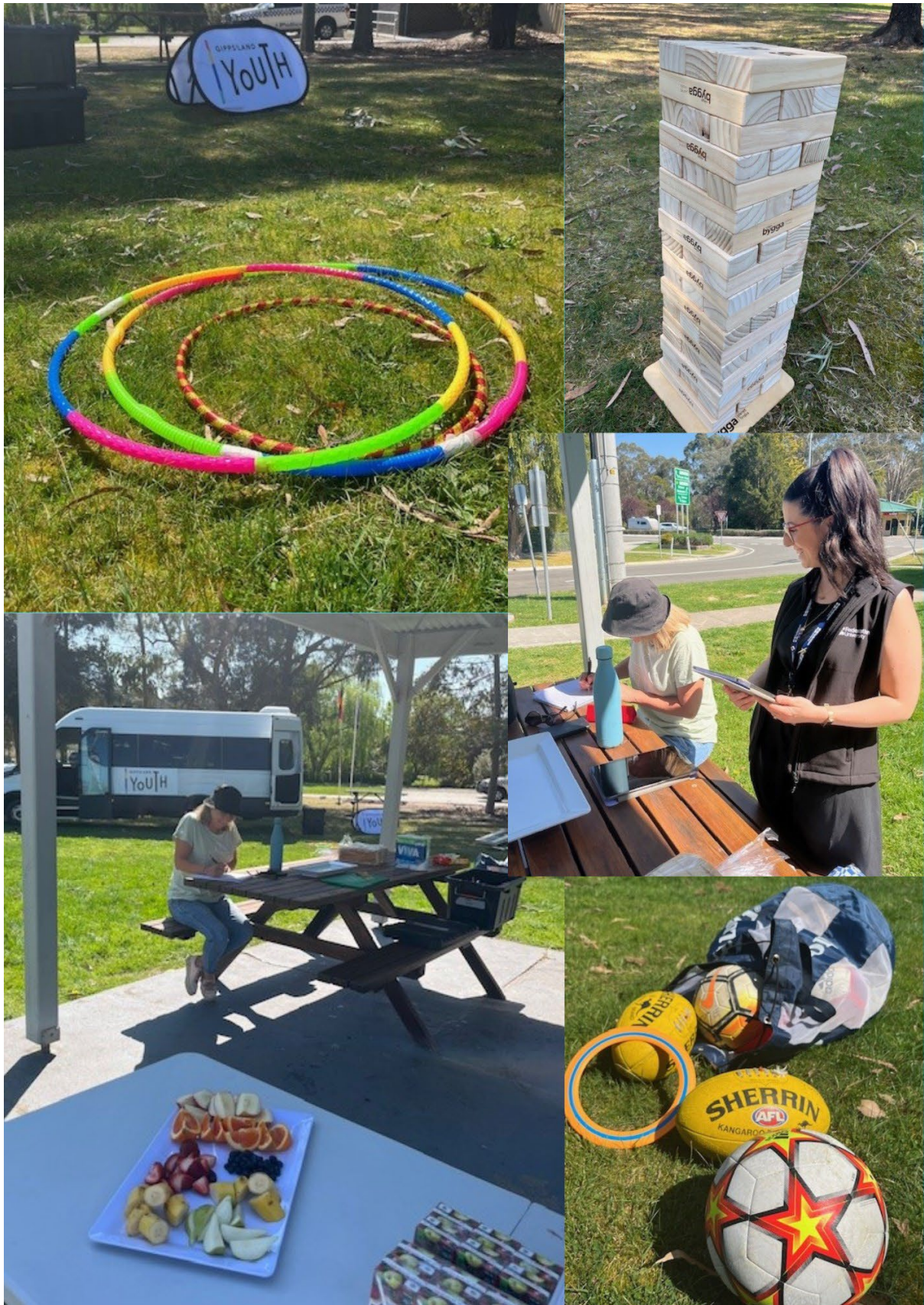


Figure 44: Pop-up activity at Cann River.

Event Title	Pop up activity
Location	Mallacoota skate ramp
Date	17 September 2023
CERC researchers	2 researchers

The CERC researchers drove from Cann River to Mallacoota to meet two GEYP buses at 4 pm at the skate park in the Mallacoota caravan park. The facilitators were unsure of the numbers but were hopeful that some (maybe 10) of the regular young people would approach the bus for some activities and food. A PO had purchased food to make a fruit/cheese platter. Two more facilitators arrived from Sale with their empty tourer bus which they parked at the Mallacoota hotel/motel for their overnight accommodation. Their bus was identical to the Mallacoota bus, and the CERC researchers were introduced to them at the skate park. Two surveys were completed by the Sale facilitators on the CERC iPads. Discussions ensued about the activity which was to occur. Other than a father with his son and four other teenagers using the skate ramps, no other young people were visible in the area. The CERC researchers had walked around the caravan park earlier in the day and noted it was very quiet, with potentially only one-quarter capacity of usual caravans and tents set up, despite the warm weather and school holidays.



The PO phoned the Operations Manager to find out what to do next and was informed that the contact person for the region had taken sudden personal leave a few weeks ago. The role of advertising the events had not been attended to nor been passed on to another team member. The facilitators had expected and were counting on advertising to have been conducted during the prior two weeks, especially for the Metung Hot Springs activity the next day. Although the CERC researchers had been advised that all the events were booked/planned to go ahead, no young people had booked into either of today's activities or the Metung Hot Springs on Tuesday, 19<sup>th</sup> September. During the phone call, the PO advised that

the event be postponed to a future date and to obtain credit for the costs. The PO was concerned about the \$1400 admission costs that had been paid, as there was a 24-hour cancellation policy in place with the Metung Hot Springs. The CERC researchers did not hear the outcome of the potential loss of the \$1400.

The team discussed holding a pop-up in the caravan park over lunchtime for Tuesday, instead of the Metung hot springs activity. This would require the PO to hand out or display in the fish n chip shop, the coloured flyers that had been printed. As the team believed there was a blackboard at the caravan park that advertised the day's events, it was suggested they could advertise the GEYP activities on it. This would require permission from the caravan park owners.

Additionally, the team believed the ongoing events were booked out which included Splatball at Rawson and the Summit at Trafalgar next week. The CERC researchers were pondering the logistics of the Mallacoota bus driving 5 hours each way, plus spending hours at The Summit in one day. This would also apply to the day's activity in Rawson.

After much discussion, the CERC researchers drove back to Metung where their accommodation had been booked. A text message was received from a PO on Tuesday morning that that day's event had been cancelled. It was unknown whether that was a confirmation of the Hot Springs, or the lunchtime pop-up event at the skate park.

It was noted by the CERC researchers that there was no discussion about future funding after March 2024. The staff were optimistic about future work in schools with their networks.

### **Costings of program**

Printing costs of flyers in colour

\$1400 deposit to Metung Hot Springs – potential loss

Accommodation for 4 facilitators at the Mallacoota Hotel/Motel

Fuel for both buses

Food costs for lunch plus snacks bought for Monday's events. Some were not used.

A PO noted they were all contracted staff and reported being paid for a 30.8 hr/week plus overtime.

Event Title	Splatball
Location	Rawson
Date	25 September 2023
CERC researchers	2 researchers
No. Youth	29

In the second week of the Victorian September school holidays, Splatball was an organised all-day free event that young people aged between 12 and 25 years old could attend. This event was held at Phoenix Paintball at Rawson. Three GYS buses picked up the young people from various locations around Gippsland who had been signed up for the event. The weather was sunny, with no breeze, and about 20 degrees.

### **Demographics**

POs brought one bus from Lakes Entrance. They had 16 young people on their bus all under the age of 16 years, which consisted of 12 year olds (n=3); 14 year olds (n=12) and 15 year olds (n=1). One PO commented that she had a headache from the style of music that was played on the bus.

Two POs brought the Wellington bus. They picked up at Stratford and Briagolong and had approximately 13 young people. Two older males were 19 and 23 years old. Two GYS staff brought a third small mini-bus to assist with numbers. They picked up 7 young people from Rosedale and Heyfield. These two facilitators were from Morwell and drove their bus, which was branded with the GYS logo and 'Latrobe'. All the young people on this excursion had a legal guardian/parent, whereas one of the GYS staff stated some of his young people within Latrobe couch-surfed and did not have a parent/legal guardian.

A total of 36 young people attended this event. One PO had suggested capping the numbers at 30 because there were only 30 guns at Phoenix Paintball, but had been advised by a more senior member of staff to sign up as many as possible. The PO was concerned that today, 6 young people would miss out, but the guns were shared during the games. There were approximately 28 males and 8 females, of which 1 male appeared to be Indigenous. There were very few young people aged over 16. There was a vast difference in height between the youngest participants and the oldest.

### Activity

The two researchers had an early lunch with the group at a Rawson park at 11:30. Lunch had been prepared by the GYS team. This consisted of rolls with cheese and ham, packets of potato chips, soft drinks and boxes of small snacks. The young people had finished eating and were chatting in small groups around the picnic table or on the oval. Others were chatting in one of the buses, which a PO complained about, and called out to them a few times to get out of the bus, but she was ignored.

The researchers were introduced to the two program officers from Morwell and asked them to complete the Facilitator survey. While they were happy to do it, they stated that the Gippsland Youth Spaces operated differently from Far East Gippsland.

The group were gathered together and the researchers introduced themselves and the purpose of their visit, after which all boarded the buses and drove into the Phoenix Paintball property. At 12 pm, the group went down to the shed to be kitted up into overalls. The young people were chatty and the Splatball leader yelled at them a few times to keep them quiet so she could explain the rules. As there were only 30 Splatball guns available, none of the leaders or researchers volunteered to play. Nevertheless, all the leaders who were going to spectate had to wear protective headgear and this was given to them by the second Splatball leader. Two POs returned to the buses to rest as they both were feeling unwell. One PO had been physical unwell the day before, and was still taking medication, but still drove the bus so the young people didn't miss out.

At 12:30 pm the group walked down to first playing field onto an open grass clearing with the male Splatball leader. The other female Splatball leader drove down on a quadbike towing a small trailer which held the guns, pellets and bottles of water and other supplies. At this clearing there were multiple timber frames set up to provide barricades from which to shoot behind. The two Splatball leaders set up the guns and loaded the paint pellets and explained the rules to the young people. Each cartridge could hold 120 pellets so after each game, the guns would be reloaded. By this time, they had settled and were more attentive and listening. The pellets could travel at 120 km/hr and the leaders demonstrated this against the trees, additionally they said due to people's individual genetics the pain of being hit by a paint pellet was very subjective. Some people may welt while others would hardly feel it. This was proven correct, as one young male and an older female complained loudly and swore every time they were hit.

The young people were divided into two groups depending on the colour of their helmet and each game lasted about 5 minutes. While one team shot at each other through the barricades, the other group waited to the side, either sitting or standing in small groups. There were 4 rounds of games at this field. The researchers were surprised at how patient and quiet each waiting group was. They were also surprised with the display of honesty, to put their gun in the air and walk off the course every time they were shot. There did not appear to be vindictive or bullying behaviour during the games. The paint pellets were hard but biodegradable and made by pharmaceutical companies. The young people collected the intact pellets around them at the end of each game.

At 1:05 pm a new game was explained and once again only half of the young people played at a time. This enabled no-one to miss out due there being not enough guns. The two researchers sat/stood alongside the six program officers during the games. The researchers noted that the program officers often talked while the Splatball leaders were explaining the rules, were either on their phones, or were not very engaged in the activities, although two POs engaged with some of the females from time to time when they no longer wanted to play. In saying that, the program officers had wanted to shoot also but felt discouraged due to the lack of guns. In hindsight, it would have been possible as the teams were split.

At 1:40 pm the group moved down to a lower playing field for a different type of shooting game. One of the GYS staff chose to play despite not having overalls on. Three females decided not to play this game and sat above the course on the embankment to watch, as did the researchers and some of the program officers.

The games ended approx. 2:15 pm and all walked back up the hill to remove the gear and then to head to the buses. This was the only opportunity for the researchers to approach the young people and ask for the survey to be completed and there was a window of about 10-15 minutes. Only those over the age of 16 years were able to be approached. The young people were distracted and wanted food and drinks which was set out on tables next to one of the buses and there were very few young people over the age of 16 anyway. Two boys completed the survey as one of the POs provided parental consent, but the boys were not interested in completing the survey as they wanted to eat the food and get onto the bus with their friends – but they completed the survey with the researchers anyway. Overall, seven surveys had been completed with the young people. two surveys were completed by program officers.

One of the buses left at 2:45 pm, needing to leave quickly as they had to drop one of the young people at Traralgon to meet his parents. By the time the surveys had been completed the PO had the buses all packed ready to drive away. The two researchers left at 2:45 pm.



*Figure 45: Splatball activity 2024.*

Event Title	Learn to Surf
Location	Cape Conran
Date	19 January 2024
CERC researchers	1 researcher
No. Youth	20



A Learn to Surf activity was organised to take place in Cape Conran. This event was facilitated by the Surf Shack, with 2 instructors (father and son) from the organisation teaching the young people how to surf. Two buses were utilised to collect young people from Wellington and East Gippsland from various locations around Gippsland who had been signed up for the event. The weather was sunny, with no breeze, and about 24 degrees.

### Demographics

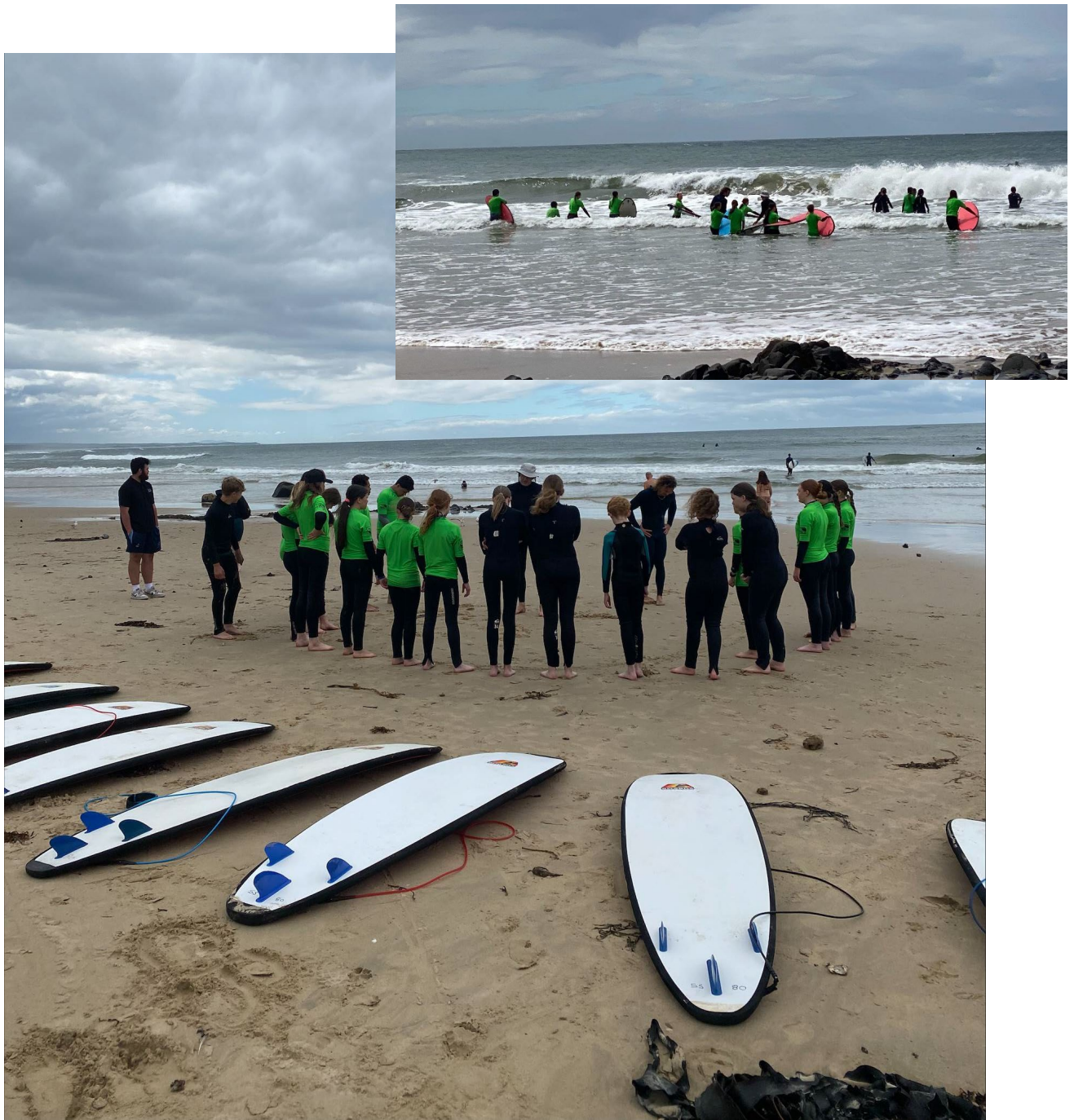
Two program officers drove one bus from East Gippsland and one PO drove the Wellington bus, which was a Hertz hire bus, not the regular GYS bus. Two additional staff from GYS were in attendance. Three lifeguards from Gippsland also attended to provide support for young people in the water. The lifeguards were all within the program catchment age as stated by the PO (approximately 13-15yrs). A total of 20 young people attended this event. A mix of male and female young people were in attendance, aged approximately 10-17 years.

### Activity

The Learn to Surf activity consisted of 2x 1-hour sessions with two groups of 10 young people. The session started at 11am. Each group that was participating in the surfing session got an on-beach education and safety briefing from the facilitators, they were then taken to the water and slowly taught in the shallows how to use the surfboard. The other group of 10 young people played in the ocean until it was their turn to surf. By the end of the session, many of the youth were standing up on the boards, appearing to greatly enjoy their experiences.

Another activity was taking place at the Cape Conran East Beach on this day, a Koori Surfing Competition. A PO stated that the Gippsland Youth program had joined in with the Koori surfing competition. In the East Cape carpark, the Koori surf comp group had organised a number of food trucks, activities and programs (health and wellbeing organisations), which was all paid for. The young people involved in the Gippsland Youth program were allowed to participate in all of the activities.

By 1pm, the young people finished their surfing session, then headed to the food trucks in the East Cape carpark where they enjoyed a range of local food provided for free. During this time, the CERC researcher invited the young people to participate in the Gippsland Youth Program survey, with 17 of the youth agreeing to participate. Although some participants were younger than 16, the PO stated she was happy to act as their support person when completing the survey. No students had concerns or issues with completing the survey. When all surveys were completed, the young people packed up their belongings and got back on their buses to head home. The CERC researcher left at approximately 2pm.



*Figure 46: Learning to Surf, January 2024.*

#### 4.5 GEYP HOLIDAY PROGRAMS 2024

In January 2024, pop-up outreach activities were organised for the young people and promoted through social media via the flyer, as shown in Figures 47 and 48. These pop-up events provided activities, entertainment and free food for the youth at the venues. There was no bus transport for these events, nor a need to pre-register, compared to other organised events and activities.

Many of the January school holiday events and activities were combined between Wellington and East Gippsland but advertised separately on their respective social media platforms. Figures 49 and 50 show the respective flyers.



Figure 47: January 2024 School Holiday excursion flyer for Wellington.

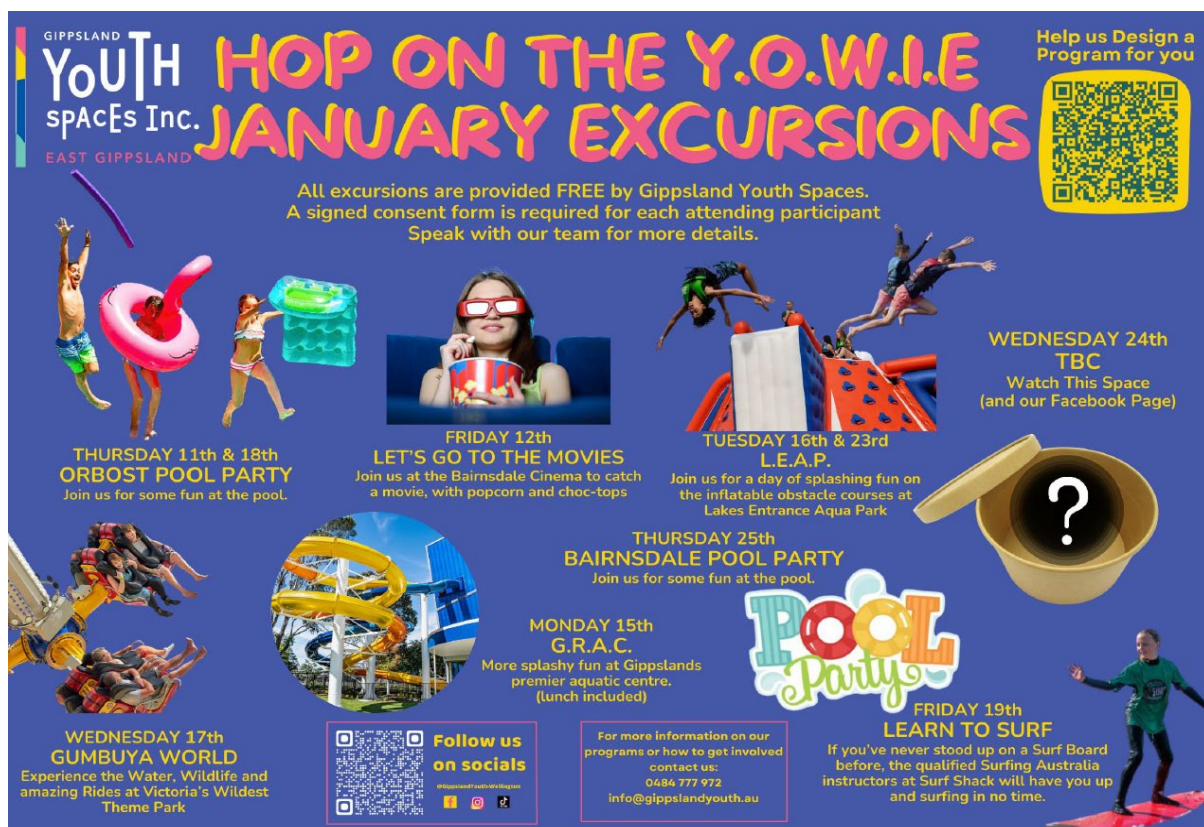


Figure 48: January 2024 School Holiday East Gippsland excursion promotion flyer.

School holiday programs were generally very well supported with 27 young people, comprising 12 from Wellington and 15 from East Gippsland enjoying a visit to the Gippsland Regional Aquatic Centre in Traralgon, and 69 young people having fun at Lakes Entrance Aquatic Park. A day trip to Gumbuya World in Tynong North attracted 83 participants and 52 young people participated in the movie experience at Bairnsdale Cinema.

The popularity of the school holiday programs in 2024 demonstrates how GEYP was able to successfully pivot the type and structure of activities to accommodate what the young people actually wanted to do.

## What's On



Figure 49: Wellington events calendar, Term 1, 2024.

## What's On

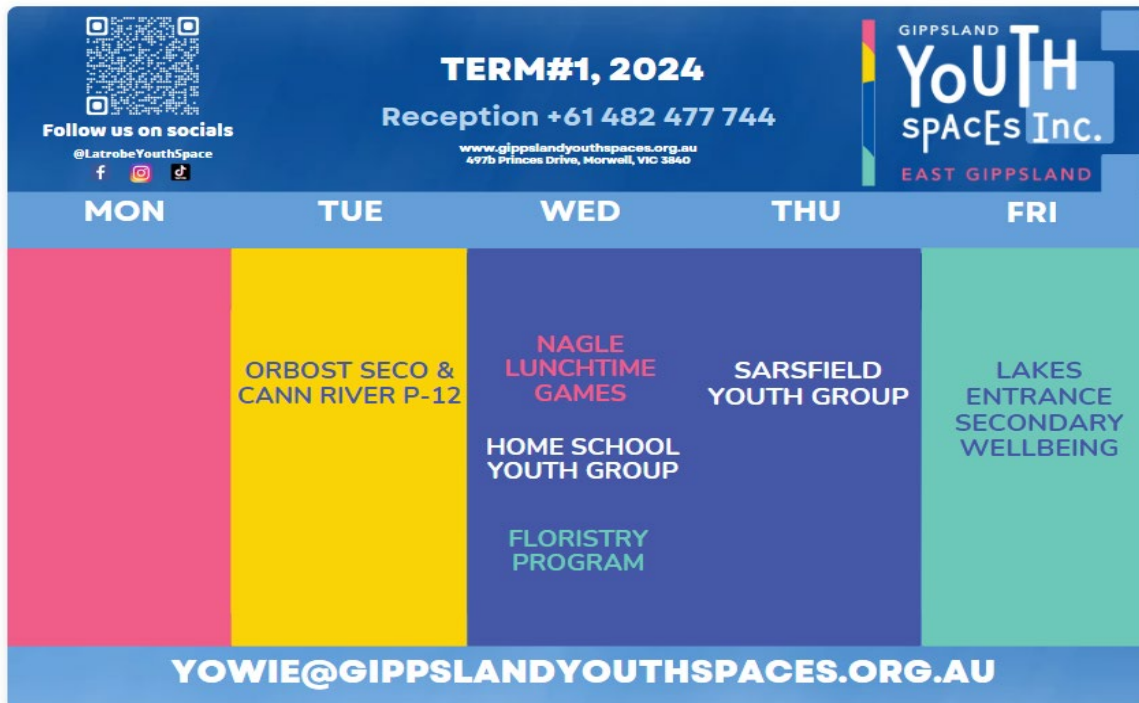




Figure 50: East Gippsland events calendar, Term 1, 2024.




# HOP ON THE Y.O.W.I.E EASTER BREAK.


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**TUESDAY 2nd April**  
Bairnsdale Youth Space  
**DROP INN**  
TACO TUESDAY  
11am - 2pm




**WEDNESDAY 3rd April**  
MALLACOOTA & CANN RIVER ONLY  
Adventure Park Activity  
11am - 2pm  
lunch & snacks provided




**MONDAY 8th April**  
Come join us @  
Bairnsdale Youth Space  
**DROP INN**  
board games, VR,  
Nintendo Switch etc  
plus lunch & snacks  
11am - 2pm




**TUESDAY 9th April**  
Maffra Gymnastic Club  
1.30pm - 3pm  
Snacks provided  
**TRANSPORT AVAILABLE**




**THURSDAY 4th April**  
SWIFTS CREEK & OMEO ONLY  
Omeo Pump Track  
Bring ya scooters & skateboards.  
VR, Nintendo Switch, Games etc  
plus lunch & snacks  
11am - 1pm




**WEDNESDAY 10th April**  
Kayak around Lakes Entrance  
10am - 11.30pm  
lunch & snacks provided  
**TRANSPORT AVAILABLE**



**FRIDAY 5th April**  
Come join us @  
Bairnsdale Youth Space  
**DROP INN**  
board games, VR, Nintendo Switch etc  
plus lunch & snacks  
11am - 2pm



**COMMUNITY EVENT**  
**FRIDAY 12th April**  
Nowa Nowa Reserve  
Open Air Movie Night  
BYO - chairs, blankets & nibbles  
Food Trucks available to purchase  
Gates open @ 5pm  
Movie starts @ 6.30



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Figure 51: GEYP Easter 2024 calendar of events.

Event Title	Maffra Gymnastics obstacle course
Location	Maffra
Date	9 April 2024
Duration	1:30 pm – 3 pm
CERC researchers	1 researcher
No. Youth	16

In the Term 1, 2024 School Holiday program during the Easter break, an obstacle course was organised to take place at the Maffra Gymnastics sports stadium. This event appeared to be facilitated by the Maffra Gymnastics instructors, with 3 instructors from the organisation teaching the young people how to safely attend the course. Two buses were utilised to collect youth from Wellington and East Gippsland from various locations around Gippsland who had been signed up for the event. The weather was cold but sunny, slight breeze, and about 17 degrees. The majority of activities were indoors, with afternoon tea outdoors at a park in Maffra.

### Demographics

Two POs drove one bus from East Gippsland and two POs drove the Wellington bus. The buses appeared to be the two original IVECO buses, however no signage was attached to them. One additional staff member wearing GYS and Youth InSearch attire attended but did not appear to engage a great deal. Their name was not obtained. Approximately 16 young people attended this event. A mix of male and female young people were in attendance, aged approximately 10-16yrs.

### Activity

The obstacle course activity included a number of different set ups in the gymnasium, including fall mats, blocks, beams, bars, vaults and a foam pit. The young people rotated through different activities

with the facilitators, learning how to jump, roll, climb and swing with proper form and safety. The obstacle courses were attended by all but two young people, who chose to sit out of the activities. The youth appeared to thoroughly enjoy their experience, engaging with each other and the facilitators.

By 3pm, the young people finished their obstacle course session, then headed to a park in Maffra for afternoon tea provided by the Gippsland East Youth Project facilitators. Program officers advised that the youth on the East Gippsland bus had completed their surveys on the journey and gave a number of completed surveys to the CERC researcher. The Wellington team appeared to be less engaged with the survey, had forgotten to bring previous copies of the survey, however would bring them to the next attended session. The CERC researcher attended the Maffra park and invited the young people who had yet to complete a survey to participate in the Gippsland Youth Program survey. A total of 17 surveys were collected on the day, a mix of previously completed surveys and some that had been attended today at the end of the activity. Although some participants were younger than 16, as per previous survey collection events, the CERC researcher explained the project, why the survey was being collected, and themselves and the GYS facilitators were made available to assist any young people who did not understand a question or who needed assistance. Two youth required re-phrasing support when answering one question and one student needed help filling in the survey by the research team, otherwise all other surveys were completed independently. No students raised concerns or issues with completing the survey. The CERC researcher left at approximately 330pm.



*Figure 52: Maffra Gymnastics Obstacle Course.*

Event Title	<b>Lakes Entrance Aqua Park (LEAP)</b>
Location	Lakes Entrance foreshore
Date	11 April 2024
Duration	11 am – 2 pm
CERC researchers	2 researchers
No. Youth	57

Two researchers attended Lakes Entrance to collect data between 11 am and 1:20 pm on 11 April 2024. Lakes Entrance Aqua Park (LEAP) owned the inflatable Aqua Park, which was set up on the river for GEYP to access between 11am and 2pm. Other partners had also collaborated with GEYP to put on the day and transport young people. A staff member from GippSport attended and brought 2 additional young people with her who were not already registered with GEYP, she was connected to Wellington and attends GEYP events to provide support and additional supervision. This is because of Child Protection ratios which allow 1:7. To be sure, they do 1:4. They are not allowed 1:1 for any youth age. She only comes if she is bringing kids with her. GippSport has done 6 school holiday periods plus 24 weeks in total in the school terms (1 activity per week).

### **Activity**

GEYP had already set up two branded marquees on the grass area in front of the sand dunes, near the café. One was used for registration of the activity and the other for a photo booth. Moogji drove a bus from Orbost with 12 kids, and organised and paid for the BBQ lunch and the photo booth equipment. 57 kids signed in and wore pink wristbands for identification. Any community young people were welcome to join in; they just needed to sign up. At least two youth were aged under 12, so their parents stayed and watched. Two POs drove the Wellington bus from Sale and brought 13 young people with them. The Bairnsdale bus was not used. Three Pos were present from the East Gippsland team.

The activity started at 11am and at 11:20 am there was a safety briefing for all the young people on the sand. They then were able to explore the inflatable equipment, come back for lunch if they wanted, then return to the inflatable until 2pm. Twenty-two (one was blank) surveys were completed by the young people, which included 5 completed surveys from the kayaking activity the day before, to which 14 kids attended that activity. At least one young person completed a survey twice, but on different days. Two individual interviews with two parents were conducted, as well as two focus groups with the young people. Consents were signed. A staff member from Moogji Orbost signed the consent as guardian of under 16 aged children that were part of her organisation.

Moogji Aboriginal Council East Gippsland Inc. (Moogji) have undertaken a number of activities in conjunction with GEYP with the two organisations commencing joint activities when the GEYP commenced. Program officers noted that they always try and join forces for holiday programs with 'collaboration being the key' to save money and have more leaders.



Figure 53: Lakes Entrance Aqua Park.

# What's On



Figure 54: GEYP East Gippsland, Term 2 2024 calendar.

During Term 2 at East Gippsland, a variety of regular programs were offered. These included programs at local Secondary Colleges or at the Bairnsdale GYS site. To capture a previously untapped demographic, a new program was created specifically to meet the social needs of home-schooled young people living around Bairnsdale.

A new weekly program began at the Bairnsdale drop-in centre for young people living in Bairnsdale who are home-schooled, on Wednesday 15 May 2024. Various activities were organised or available to do if so desired, which included cooking, crafts and VR games. The purpose of this youth group is to facilitate socialisation for young people aged between 12 – 18 years who do not attend regular school. The following flyer was posted on the Gippsland youth – East Gippsland Facebook website advertising the new program.

Event Title	Home school Youth Group
Location	Bairnsdale GYS site
Date	19 June 2024
Duration	11:00 am – 1:00pm
CERC researchers	2 researchers
No. Youth	5

## East Gippsland Youth Space – Home school Youth Group

GYS have recently acquired a physical space in Bairnsdale (East Gippsland) in the old Bairnsdale fire station. This space has a large back room that is filled with activities (basketball, games, couches, craft etc.) and also has a smaller front room with staff offices, a kitchen and dining area. The weather was cold but sunny, slight breeze, and about 15 degrees. Activities were indoors, with homemade lunch being prepared by program facilitators with the help of the young people.

### Demographics

Two POs were in attendance for the home school day. Five young people attended this event, two males and three females aged approximately 12-16yrs. There were two pairs of siblings, one pair playing the PlayStation together, and one pair doing crafts and board games together.

### Activity

The program facilitators informed us that each Wednesday is homeschool day for the East Gippsland Youth Space group. A PO informed us that there were more than one hundred homeschooled youth in East Gippsland, the largest proportion for Gippsland. CERC staff arrived at 11am to commence data collection.

The activities appeared to be very relaxed, with the young people encouraged to access the facilities and services on offer in the space, engage with each other and have fun. Two siblings spent the majority of their time together playing the PlayStation, whilst two other siblings did craft (making earrings) and playing Dungeons and Dragons (boardgame) with the PO. Another young person attended later in the morning and engaged with craft making (earrings) with one of the other attendees.

Four of the five youth were happy to participate in CERC surveys and focus group sessions. Four surveys were collected from the two groups of siblings, then two separate focus groups were attended with each pair. These focus groups were very short and were a continuation from the information they had given in the survey. Although some participants were younger than 16, as per previous survey collection events, the CERC researcher explained the project, why the survey was being collected, and themselves and the GYS facilitators were made available to assist any young people who did not understand a question or who needed assistance. One youth required re-phrasing support when answering one question by the research team, otherwise all other surveys were completed independently. No students raised concerns or issues with completing the survey. Consent for focus groups was completed by the program officer. Once all data had been collected CERC staff left the premises around 1pm, whilst the program facilitators and young people were making home-made sausage rolls in the on-site kitchen.



Figure 55: East Gippsland Homeschool youth group flyer..



Figure 56: East Gippsland 2024 winter holiday program flyer.

Event Title	Drop in session
Location	Bairnsdale GYS site
Date	1 July 2024
Duration	10:30 am – 2:30 pm
CERC researchers	1 researcher
No. Youth	8

### Bairnsdale Youth Space – Winter holiday 2024 drop-in session

An open drop-in day at the Bairnsdale old-fire station location was coordinated by the East Gippsland Youth Space group for young people to attend during the school holidays. This event was a free time session where youth could play games, do craft and meet up with friends. The weather was cold, and about 13 degrees. Activities were indoors, with homemade lunch being prepared by program facilitators with the help of the young people.

### Demographics

Three POs were in attendance for the day. Eight young people attended this event with a mix of male and female young people, aged between 12-16 years. Two boys were diverse in ability, with facilitators outlining one had cerebral palsy and one had autism spectrum disorder.

### Activity

The activities appeared to be very relaxed, with the young people encouraged to access the facilities and services on offer in the space, engage with each other and have fun. Three of the male youth played video games for the majority of the time, whilst two other males played games, then engaged in gem art craft. Three female participants also participated in gem art craft.

Five youth were happy to participate in CERC surveys and focus group sessions. Three surveys were collected from the three female participants, and one focus group was attended with two males.

These focus groups were short, however they were rich in detail about how the young people enjoyed the programs. Although some participants were younger than 16, as per previous survey collection events, the CERC researcher explained the project, why the survey was being collected, and themselves and the GYS facilitators were made available to assist any youth who did not understand a question or who needed assistance. One young person required re-phrasing support when answering one question by the research team, otherwise all other surveys were completed independently. No students raised concerns or issues with completing the survey. Consent for focus groups was completed by the program officers, with verbal consent also gained from parents via phone.

Two additional interviews were undertaken with program facilitators, one focus group with two POs and an individual interview. One facilitator survey was also completed. Once all data had been collected, CERC staff left the premises around 130pm, whilst the program facilitators and young people were making home-made lunch in the on-site kitchen.

Event Title	WYNCITY
Location	Morwell
Date	2 July 2024
Duration	11:30 am – 2:30 pm
CERC researchers	2 researchers
No. Youth	25

### **East Gippsland Youth Space – Winter holiday program 2024 at WYNCITY**

Two CERC researchers met the East Gippsland participants at WYNCITY, Morwell on 2 July 2024 during the first week of the winter school holidays. The 3-hour booking cost \$45 per person which included lunch and commenced 11:30am until 2:30pm. One PO drove a bus with 15 youth, and another PO drove a bus bringing 10 youth. One bus was borrowed from Gippsland Lakes Community Health Centre at no cost other than fuel.

### **Demographics**

Twenty-five young people from East Gippsland attended the WYNCITY event at Morwell on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2024, supported by 4 program officers. The demographics at this event included an equal mix of males/females between the approximate ages of 13-16. Respectful and patient behaviour toward each other was noted amongst all participants, including positive and inclusive behaviour toward three males with disabilities (cerebral palsy, ADHD and autism).

### **Activity**

Four 10-pin bowling lanes, laser tag, bumper cars plus a games arcade was available during the time slot. When the group arrived, the majority of the young people began one game of 10-pin bowling while the rest started playing on the arcade games. As each game finished they participated in the other activities. All the young people were engaged with the activities and each other. Seven youth surveys were completed between an activity change-over or during the lunch break. Five of these survey respondents when first asked did not want their activity time restricted but willingly completed it during the lunch break. Of the respondents, three were 13 years or under and four were between

14-19 years. Only one of the respondents required assistance to explain the survey questions to them. The rest of the young people had already completed surveys previously, and the researchers did not conduct focus groups as the facility was too noisy and the young people were distracted. One of the program officers reported to the researchers that for parents who do not get disability funding, the GEYP provides an opportunity for respite during the holidays.



*Figure 57: Ten pin bowling at WINCITY.*



Figure 58: Wellington 2024 winter holiday program flyer.

Various activities were organised by the Wellington team for the young people in their LGA. Some of the activities, such as the Walhalla Ghost tour on 3 July and the Snow Play on 10 July were combined with the East Gippsland crew. The CERC researchers did not attend any of the events on this calendar.

## 5. LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of the literature review was to explore the impact that bushfire exposure has on adolescent mental health through a systematic review to synthesise existing research on this topic.

### Key findings

A total of 18 papers were included in the final review, which examined the impact of nine separate bushfire events across five different countries: Australia (four events), the United States of America (three events), Israel (one event), Greece (one event), and Canada (one event).

Within the included studies, a range of mental health presentations were reported which included anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, along with psychological processing relating to coping efficacy and post-traumatic growth. Additional behavioural symptoms relating to substance abuse and suicidal ideation were also reported. It was also noted that symptoms may worsen rather than improve over time.

### Discussion

In recent years, bushfires have emerged as one of the most devastating natural disasters due to their ability to destroy vast ecosystems and infrastructure. Driven by climate change, their frequency and intensity are only expected to increase into the future (Brown et al., 2021). This escalation of bushfire events heightens the proportion of individuals at risk of exposure to bushfire and the subsequent health effects that can occur post-event (Cook et al., 2008).

Adolescence is seen as a critical period in human development, where individuals undergo significant physical, emotional, and social changes that encourage interpersonal and personality development that establishes autonomy and individualisation (McElhaney et al., 2009). However, it is also a developmental period associated with higher levels of mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Lewis et al., 2015; Shore et al., 2018). Furthermore, trauma during this period is well known to have long-lasting effects on mental health that can persist well into adulthood (Sawyer et al., 2012).


The findings from the systematic review underscore the need for sustained, long-term interventions for adolescents recovering from bushfire exposure. Given that adolescence is a critical period for identity formation and social development, interventions that focus on developing both family and social supports could be seen as strategies to mitigate the risk of long-term mental health issues.

### Conclusion

The ability to foster resilience and post-traumatic growth through community based social interventions may serve to counterbalance the negative mental health impacts of the initial bushfire exposure. Therefore, it is imperative to consider the impact of programs that enhance family support, peer networks, and community connections in providing adolescents with the resources and relationships they need to build coping skills and regain a sense of stability post traumatic event. Furthermore, a collegial effort involving schools, local organisations, and mental health services may help support adolescents in their recovery journey and reduce the risk of enduring psychological impacts.

*\*Note that an extended literature review has been drafted and will be submitted for publication to a research journal.*

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## 6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 DISCUSSION

The Gippsland East Youth Project (GEYP) came into being after the Wellington and East Gippsland local government areas had experienced catastrophic bushfires, followed almost immediately by the COVID-19 pandemic. Gippsland Youth Spaces Inc. (GYS) recognising the ongoing impact to health and wellbeing for young people living in these areas were successful in obtaining funding from the federal government funded Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program. As it was an entirely new and innovative project there were challenges at the beginning which impacted the rollout of activities, including recruitment of appropriately skilled and qualified staff, purchasing and accreditation of infrastructure such as buses, and perhaps most importantly working out just what the young people wanted. Despite these early hurdles the GEYP has become an important and integral part of life for youth aged 12-25 years with many positive and uplifting outcomes.

The discussion will focus on the two research questions that were addressed in this significant body of work to explore the GEYP evaluation.

#### ***1. What impact did the Gippsland East Youth Project have on the health and wellbeing of participants?***

To accurately measure the impact of any youth engagement project there needs to be adequate time provided to see long term outcomes such as a reduction in school absentees, increase in TAFE enrolments or youth employment. The true impact of the project on the lives of young people who have attended GEYP activities and events may not be apparent for many years.

Young people and their families were very generally positive about the impact GEYP had on their personal health and wellbeing. This became particularly apparent as the project pivoted towards engaging with more vulnerable youth who were less likely to be involved in more mainstream community activities, such as sporting clubs.

Young people surveyed across the duration of the project reported high levels of satisfaction with activities and improved measures of health and wellbeing including 86% who felt more motivated to engage in activities after attending GEYP and 82% who felt motivated to become more active. Some participants mentioned personal changes, such as feeling more confident, open, or positive in their lives *“I have become more active and positive at school and at home.”* Young people who participated in focus group interviews in the later stages of the project reported that the activities created fun and excitement, assisted them to meet new people and make new friends, become more active and build confidence.

*“I thought it would be good for me [to attend GEYP activities] because I’m not that type of talking person like I talk to...and I talk to my friends, but I don’t like talking in front of people...but now because I’m here, you know, it makes me want to talk more. It boosts my confidence.”*

Providing free transport and activities was a significant advantage as for many families cost of living pressures have severely curtailed their capacity to participate in community events. One parent noted that:

*“I pay a lot of money for them to do their sports, their schooling, food on the table, a roof over their head, the bills that go with it. There’s nothing left, they sit at home. This way, less than \$10 worth of fuel, they get a couple of hours, and I get to watch them have fun.”*

The tyranny of distance was evident throughout the project as staff endeavoured to travel to small rural and isolated townships in Wellington and East Gippsland to provide activities close to home or collect young people to travel to an excursion elsewhere. This issue will be pertinent to other organisations in rural and remote Australia who may wish to replicate this project. Staff regularly spent longer travelling to and from a location than undertaking the activity and reported often working more than the standard eight-hour day. This was exacerbated by the strict rules governing rest periods for the person driving the bus, and ensuring staff worked in accordance with occupational health and safety requirements.

The purchase, fit-out and storage of the buses proved more challenging than expected. While the purchase costs had been factored into the project budget, the accreditation process took more than four months, which delayed program implementation. It was initially envisaged that the buses which had been purchased to act as mobile activity centres in small townships would draw young people to wherever they set up, such as a park, however as the project continued it became apparent that this was not necessarily the best approach. Activities such as youth groups or other special interest groups, held at a regular time and in a physical location such as a local neighbourhood house or community hall, proved very popular and provided young people with a feeling of certainty and belonging.

School holiday activities were very popular with planned and pre-booked excursions nearly always booked out. These activities were even more attractive to young people because everything, including travel, food and entry to the entertainment were provided free of charge, affording young people who may not otherwise have been able to attend due to cost-of-living pressures an opportunity to participate and not be excluded due to their personal circumstances.

Young people across the region who would normally isolate themselves rather than participate in activities attended the GEYP events, often due to the therapeutic relationships they had formed with staff. Young people have been provided with opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with facilitators, support services and peers. Young people with complex needs which can lead to disengagement from school, families and friends have been provided with a safe place to engage with staff trained to enable growth and confidence.

*“It feels rewarding that we have a consistent group of young people from across the region who are now engaging who otherwise wouldn’t have done that. Would still be hiding in their bedrooms at home, not engaging with anybody, not having great relationships with their families, or siblings and having significant mental health issues. Just hiding away and disconnecting, most likely disconnecting from school and starting to fall into some risky behaviour.”*

## **2. How does the Gippsland East Youth Project impact post-bushfire recovery for young people and their communities?**

Ideas for the program and activities undertaken in individual communities were driven by local community networks and stakeholders ensuring that there was real enthusiasm for the project. Program officers employed were local to the area and brought with them a *“warm and genuine connection, drive and passion for the benefit of their community.”*

Travelling regularly to remote townships such as Mallacoota, Cann River and Omeo enabled the teams to build solid relationships through community engagement activities. An example of a direct benefit of the program for the communities was addressing food insecurity through the provision of free meals. Engagement programs were held at four different neighbourhood houses that involved young people learning how to cook. In addition to taking food home for their own families, meals were frozen and left at the neighbourhood house for consumption by other families in need. Another time a local sporting club were struggling to find anyone to volunteer to help out on football grand final day, staff and young people from that community went and cooked a barbeque. Another cooking event was organised after staff *“encouraged those young people to do cooking.”* As a result of word spreading around town *“elderly people from Buchan [came] down who had nothing to do with the football club whatsoever to have tea with those young people on a Thursday night.”* Sharing a meal and bringing together multiple generations helps to build community cohesion.

While not the major focus of the project there were economic benefits to communities as where possible food was purchased locally and local businesses were used to run activities, one of the staff noting they *“reach out to local businesses”*.

It is not possible to quantify the short-term benefits of the GEYP for communities other than the value of connecting young people with others in their local communities and building meaningful connections. It is hoped in the long-term these connections will lead to young people remaining in their local communities and becoming useful members of the community.

## 6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. The Gippsland East Youth Project should continue to be funded to provide services to the youth of East Gippsland and Wellington local government areas building on the success of the program to continue to provide diverse, safe and inclusive activities to promote community connections for vulnerable youth. Future funding may come from state government agencies or local government.**

Considerable time and resources have been employed to engage and build relationships with youth, families and other organisations working in youth health and wellbeing in Wellington and East Gippsland. Continuing with the GEYP will enable these relationships to continue to prosper, ceasing funding will likely mean all this good work will be lost. Losing access to program officers who have been responsible in gaining trust in the community, with parents, partner organisations and the young people will impact the young people that have come to rely on having regular engagement with the programme. If local government would consider continuing to operate the rented physical spaces in Sale and Bairnsdale there is the potential for multiple services to utilise those facilities.

Gippsland Youth Spaces, previously known as Latrobe Youth Space, have put in place comprehensive governance processes that includes significant input from young people representatives, which have proven successful in overseeing the GEYP. If long-term funding could be secured, possibly from state government agencies, this organisation would be well-placed to continue the governance of such.

- 2. Continue to build and expand those activities that have proven successful and empowering such as special youth groups, school holiday programs and school outreach.**

The GEYP has refined and adjusted their programme over three years to ensure it continues to meet the needs of young people. Cessation of funding will mean this hard-earned wisdom, local knowledge and connections will be lost.

- 3. Replace the buses with smaller vehicles for use by program officers travelling to rural and remote townships and use infrastructure/buildings already in towns, such as community halls and neighbourhood houses, for activities.**

Travelling to remote townships and conducting activities locally was an important component in the success of the GEYP and continuing to have the means to do so is vital. However, the challenges associated with the purchase, maintenance and repairs of the buses together with the understanding that the young people enjoy having a physical space to gather together in those communities, means that alternate and potentially cheaper options, such as cars, may be a viable option. For large group excursions road coaches would be hired.

- 4. Be cognizant of the challenges surrounding the recruitment and retention of appropriately skilled and experienced staff in rural and remote areas and how this may impact the success of similar projects.**

It took some time to recruit appropriately qualified and experienced staff to fill positions in both Wellington and East Gippsland which delayed commencement of the project. Retention of staff also proved problematic as uncertainty surrounding ongoing funding meant that staff left before the end of their contracts when they were offered permanent positions elsewhere.

- 5. Work collaboratively with other organisations working with youth in East Gippsland and Wellington to strengthen referral processes and information sharing.**


Collaborating with stakeholders and networks already involved in local communities, focussing on open communication and transparency around who does what and when will avoid duplication of services, ensuring that already limited funds are not wasted.

## 7. LIMITATIONS

There were limitations related to this evaluation that must be considered. These include:

1. Consideration for the vulnerable populations represented in this report. Vulnerable Youth suffering from emotional trauma pursuant to the Gippsland bushfires may have chosen not to engage with any part of this evaluation, and therefore experiences shared may not be representative of the entire population accessing activities, programs or events organised by the GEYP.
2. It was not possible to quantify the long-term impact of the project which may involve measuring school retention rates, youth employment and the percentage of young people choosing to remain living in their local community.
3. There was substantial turnover of staff throughout the project which made it more difficult to gather comprehensive information about the entire project. The structure and content of activity data changed over the course of the project creating challenges when comparing data over different years.

Despite these limitations, the evaluation is considered to present a credible assessment of the project.



## 8. METHODOLOGY

### 8.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The approach of the CERC to this evaluation was informed by a Participatory Evaluation and Co-Design Framework.

#### PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

A participatory evaluation framework puts people from the community and those delivering the programs, projects and services at the centre of the evaluation. Participatory evaluation is a distinctive approach based on the following principles:

- That evaluation should be a co-designed, collaborative partnership through 360° stakeholder input including project participants and project funders;
- That integral to evaluation is an evaluation capacity-building focus within and across projects;
- That evaluation is a cyclical and iterative process embedded in projects from project design to program assessment;
- That evaluation adopts a learning, improvement and strengths-based approach;
- That evaluation supports innovation, accepting that projects will learn and evolve;
- That evaluation contributes to the creation of a culture of evaluation and evaluative thinking;
- That there is no one or preferred data collection method rather the most appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods will be tailored to the information needs of each project.

#### CO-DESIGN

Co-design is a process and approach that is about working with people to create ‘interventions, services and programs which will work in the context of their lives and will reflect their own values and goals’<sup>14</sup>. Co-design can be done in many ways but is about collaborative engagement that is bottom-up, creative, and enables a wide range of people to participate and importantly steer decisions and outcomes. Co-design is not a consultation process but a partnership approach where ‘end-users’ actively define and shape strategies and outcomes. The role of the ‘expert’ is to facilitate this process.

### 8.2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of this project utilised a variety of data collection tools in a mixed methods approach, providing information about process, outcomes and impact. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed as described below.

#### QUANTITATIVE DATA

There were four main sources of data as part of the quantitative data collection which included the development and administration of a GEYP officers survey, the development and administration of a GEYP Youth Survey, analysis of GEYP Officers activity sheets and analysis of GEYP attendance statistics. The design of the surveys:

- Allowed for the collection of information from a defined group of participants

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<sup>14</sup> VCOSS (2015). *Walk alongside: Co-designing social initiatives with people experiencing vulnerabilities*. V. C. o. S. Service. Melbourne.

- Enabled a large amount of data to be collected quickly.

The GEYP Officers and Youth Surveys were distributed via hardcopy (paper based) and/or electronic means on CERC owned (Microsoft) Tablets using preloaded software such as Qualtrics or SurveyMonkey. The data contained in the GEYP Officers activity sheets were provided by the GYS Manager (Maree) for analysis. This data was not collected by CERC.

## QUALITATIVE DATA

There were six main sources of data as part of the qualitative data collection which included individual interviews with the GYS Operations Manager and the GYS Chief Executive Officer, the GEYP Officers, a Focus Group with two GEYP officers, and interviews (or Focus Groups) with young people and parents who attended GEYP activities and events.

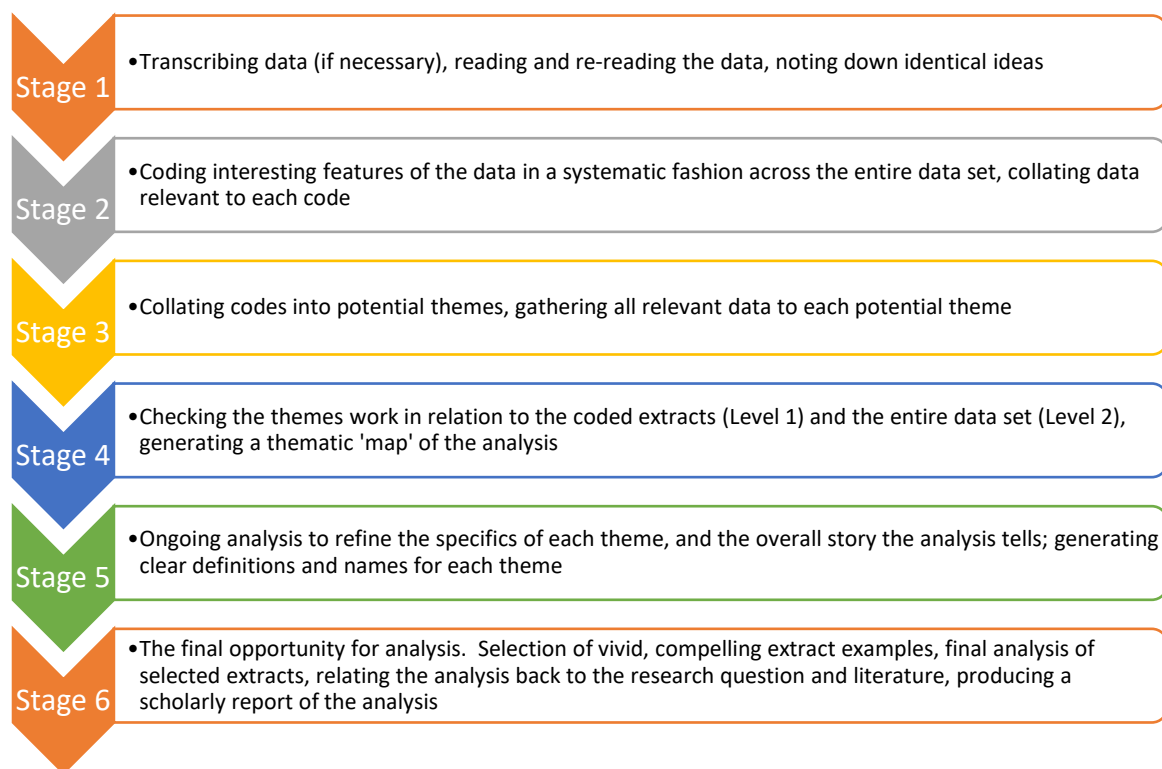
Interviews with GYS staff, GEYP program officers and GEYP youth were invited to participate through a voluntary consent form included in the survey data collection distributed by the CERC staff. Focus group participants were invited to participate through GEYP program officers who organised an appropriate date and time that suited all participants after school hours. Each interview participant was provided with a copy of the plain language statement and was required to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed. Interviews lasted approximately 15 to 60 minutes and were conducted using a semi-structured interview technique. Interviews were visual and/or audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis or content analysis. The transcriptions were completed by the CERC researchers and participants were given a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis, with representation of participant demographics. A thematic analysis technique and content analysis technique were used for the qualitative data with findings presented under theme headings together with participant quotes. The thematic analysis technique utilised Braun and Clarke's six step process, which included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Figure 59)<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. SAGE Publications Ltd



**Figure 59: Six Step Thematic Analysis**

As qualitative analysis is an inductive process, some interpretation of the data was required to create the thematic map. It was actively acknowledged that the researchers' interpretations would inform the results of this study, hence, any prior conceptions of the topic were reflexively bracketed to the best of the researchers' abilities<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Berger, R. (2013). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219-234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>

## 9. ETHICAL APPROVAL AND PRACTICE

Federation University Australia aims to promote and support responsible research practices by providing resources and guidance to our researchers. We aim to maintain a strong research culture which incorporates:

- Honesty and integrity;
- Respect for human research participants, animals and the environment;
- Respect for the resources used to conduct research;
- Appropriate acknowledgement of contributors to research; and
- Responsible communication of research findings.

Human Research and Ethics applications, NAME OF THE PROJECT (*Approval number: XXX*) was approved by the Federation University Human Research Ethics Committee (Appendix XX) prior to data collection and analysis. Consent to participate in the study and for participant's de-identified transcripts to be used for research and evaluative purposes was obtained via signed informed consent forms before commencing the interviews. Participant anonymity was maintained by removing any identifiable information from the evaluation.

## 10. ABBREVIATIONS

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CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CERC	Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre
GEYP	Gippsland East Youth Project
GYS	Gippsland Youth Spaces Inc.
OM	Operations Manager
PO	Program officer
VR	Virtual reality

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## APPENDIX 1: FEDERATION UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA - HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL



**Approval**  
Human Research Ethics Committee

Principal Researcher:	Professor Joanne Porter
Co-Researcher/s:	Michael Barbagallo, Elissa Nicole Coombs, Elizabeth Miller Dabkowski, Michelle Prezioso, Megan Simic, Daria Soldatenko
School/Section:	Collaborative Evaluation and Research Centre (CERC)
Project Number:	2022/157
Project Title:	Evaluation of the Gippsland East Youth project.
For the period:	23/08/2022 to 23/08/2027

HREC has approved your ethics application, titled *Evaluation of the Gippsland East Youth project*, reference 2022/157.

**Approval period: 24/09/2024 to 24/09/2029**

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. The project must be conducted strictly in accordance with the proposal approved by the Committee, including any amendments made to the proposal required by the Committee.
2. The Chief investigator must advise the Committee, via email to [research.ethics@federation.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@federation.edu.au), immediately of any complaints or other issues in relation to the project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of the project.
3. Where approval has been given subject to the submission of copies of documents such as letters of support or approvals from third parties, these are to be provided to the Ethics Office prior to research commencing at each relevant location.
4. **Amendment requests** must be submitted to the Committee **PRIOR** to implementation of such changes. Amendments cannot be implemented prior to receipt of approval from the relevant ethics committee. Amendment requests may include:
  - o Changes to project personnel
  - o Project extension (note, extensions CANNOT be granted retrospectively)
  - o Amendments to project procedures
5. **Annual and Final Reports MUST** be submitted by the following deadlines:
  - o *Annual Progress Reports* - annually on the anniversary of the approval date. Amendment requests will not be accepted for projects with overdue annual reports.
  - o *Final Report* - within one month of project completion, which may be prior to the expiry of ethics approval. Submission of a final report will close off the project.
6. It is incumbent on the research team to keep track of reporting requirements and submit reports on time. Reminders may not be sent by the Research Office and should not be relied upon.
7. If, for any reason, the project does not proceed or is discontinued, the Committee must be advised via the submission of a Final Report.
8. The Human Research Ethics Committee may conduct random audits and/or require additional reports concerning the research project as part of the requirements for monitoring, as set out in the National statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.
9. The Ethics Team must be notified of any changes to contact details for any member of the research team. This may include, but is not limited to address, phone number and/or email address.
10. Failure to comply with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 and all updates, and/or with the conditions of approval, will result in suspension or withdrawal of approval.

If you require any further information, if something is not clear or you would like to provide feedback, please contact the Ethics Team via email at [research.ethics@federation.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@federation.edu.au) or call +61 3 5327 9765.

## APPENDIX 2: PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### GYS STAFF AND GEYP OFFICERS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you please tell me what your role in the program was?
2. Tell me about some of the experiences and observations you made during the program.
3. What did you learn as a part of this program?
4. What did you enjoy most about the program? (discuss strengths and weaknesses)
5. Were there any challenges faced during the program?
6. In your view, did this program make a difference?
7. Thinking about your experiences, what benefit, if any, did this give to you?
8. What would you like improved/what was a weakness of the program? Discuss
9. Are there any other comments or thoughts anyone would like to share about their experience of the program?

### YOUTH AND PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What did you enjoy most about the *Gippsland East Youth Project*?
2. Were there any activities that you didn't like as much?
3. How did the *Gippsland East Youth Project* help you socially interact with others?
4. What impacts did the *Gippsland East Youth Project* have on your physical exercise?
5. Do you think the *Gippsland East Youth Project* helped you in other areas of your life? (i.e school)
6. Is there anything you could suggest that would have helped improve the *Gippsland East Youth Project*?
7. What were your thoughts about the people running the Project events?
8. Are there any other comments or thoughts anyone would like to share about their experience of the program?



## Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC)

Office 1E219 | Building 1E | Gippsland Campus  
PO Box 3191 Gippsland Mail Centre Vic 3841  
T 03 5122 6508 M 0412 142 055  
[CERC@federation.edu.au](mailto:CERC@federation.edu.au)

CRICOS Provider No. 00103D | RTO Code 4909 | TEQSA PRV12151 (Australian University)

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