

MERRI-BEK KEY WORKERS PROJECT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

October 2023

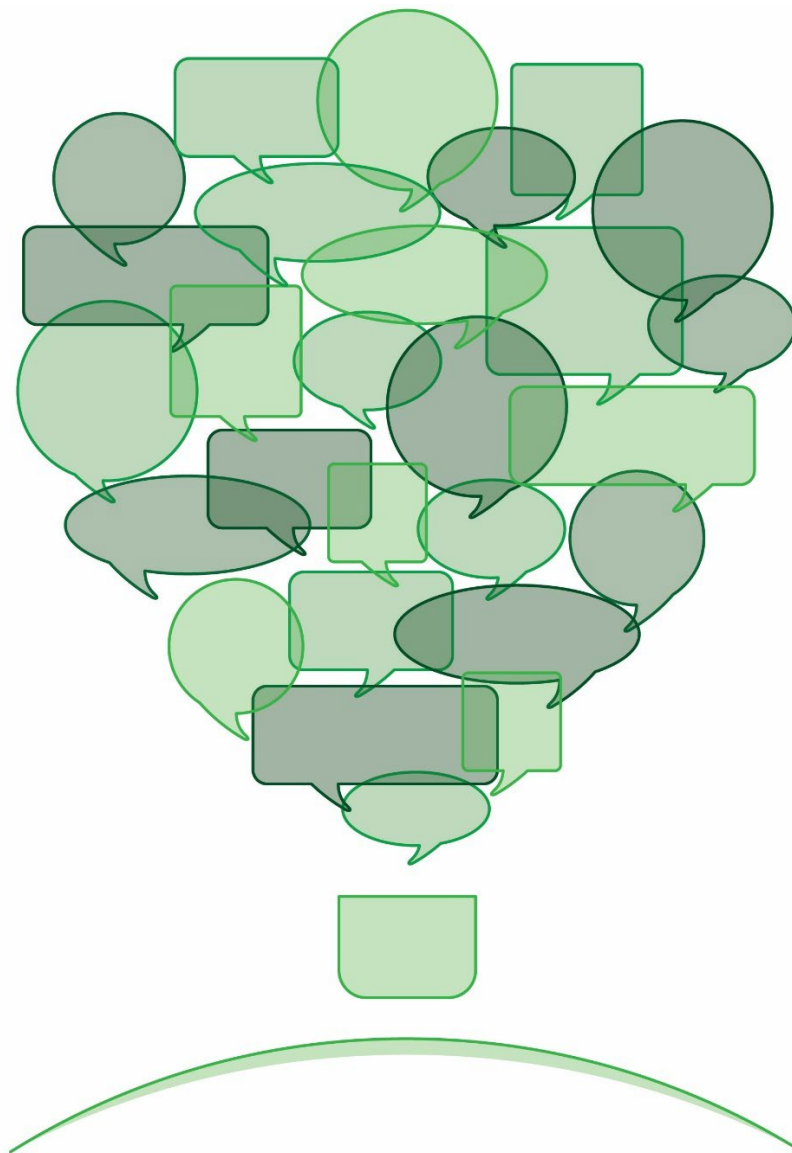


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Executive Summary

Merri-bek City Council is undertaking an integrated socioeconomic analysis of Merri-bek workers to understand where they live, the types of jobs that they do, their incomes, their rates of car ownership, how they travel to work and their housing needs.

To supplement this work, Council was keen to hear voices from the community about key workers and use the stories and quotes from the engagement to illustrate the socioeconomic analysis. Key workers are people whose jobs cannot be done from home.

Engagement was conducted via the online Conversations Merri-bek project page throughout September 2023.

36 stories and experiences were shared by:

- 23 key workers
- 2 employers of key workers
- 7 community members who rely on services provided by key workers (residents)
- 1 contractor

Experiences referred to more than 7 sectors/industries:

- Accommodation and food services
- Administrative and support services
- Construction
- Education and training
- Health care and social assistance
- Horticulture
- Utilities
- Other

The stories have been themed into several broad categories:

- Access to services
- Commuting
- Cost of living
- Reduced shifts
- Understaffed
- Other

Overall, the experiences indicate that there are a number of challenges for key workers, their employers and the Merri-bek residents who rely upon key workers. Participants mentioned a number of times in their stories that they feel under pressure and that they will have to re-think many aspects of their lives due to the increased cost of living (particularly rent/mortgage and transport costs) and the lack of ease and time needed for commuting. They are considering moving house, changing jobs and giving up trying to use active transport.

Introduction

Merri-bek City Council is undertaking an integrated socioeconomic analysis of Merri-bek workers to understand where they live, the types of jobs that they do, their incomes, their rates of car ownership, how they travel to work and their housing needs.

This work will analyse the disconnect between the housing and labour markets in Merri-Bek. The project will identify emerging issues and develop an action plan that explores what happens if nothing is done about the issues and what could be done to avoid these things happening.

To supplement this work, Council was keen to hear voices from the community about key workers and use the stories and quotes from the engagement to illustrate the socioeconomic analysis. Key workers are people whose jobs cannot be done from home.

Engagement was conducted via the online Conversations Merri-bek project page throughout late August and September 2023.

Engagement Approach

This engagement was conducted from 23 August – 30 September 2023 to encourage the Merri-bek community to share their experiences of being, employing or relying upon key workers.

The purpose of the engagement was to:

- Collect stories of the experiences of key workers who work in Merri-bek, particularly the challenges they face
- Collect stories of the experiences of Merri-bek-based employers of key workers who work in Merri-bek, particularly the challenges they face
- Collect stories of the experiences of Merri-bek residents who buy goods and use services delivered by key workers, particularly any challenges they have experienced in regards to accessing those goods and services
- Identify quotes from the stories received, to use in the socioeconomic analysis
- Identify anyone who may be willing to be interviewed for a more in-depth case study.

An online Conversations Merri-bek project page was established, providing information and a short survey. This method was chosen for ease of participation at times that suited the community, and ease of re-visiting the site after taking the time to consider a response.

An online business owners/employers focus group was also planned, however this generated a very low level of interest and was cancelled. Interested parties were happy to complete the online survey instead.

- Resident and business social media and newsletter promotion was conducted at the beginning and at the mid-way point of the engagement
- More than 100 key stakeholders were emailed the page link
- More than 200 email invitations were sent to local businesses for an online focus group discussion.

The online project page attracted 731 page views from 490 unique visitors, who spent a total of 11 hours and 40 minutes on the page during the 5 week engagement period.

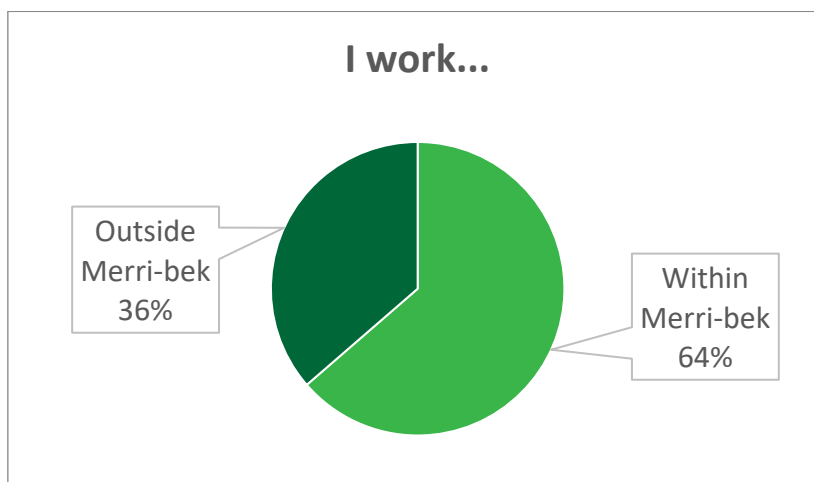
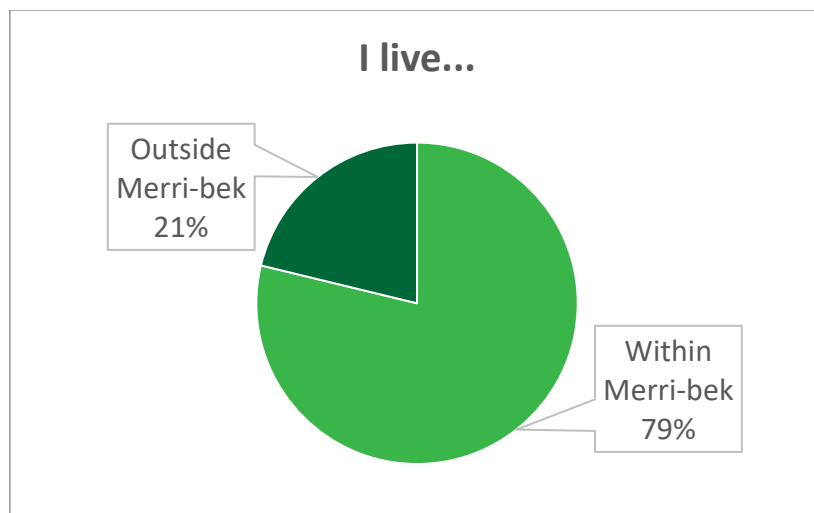
Participants

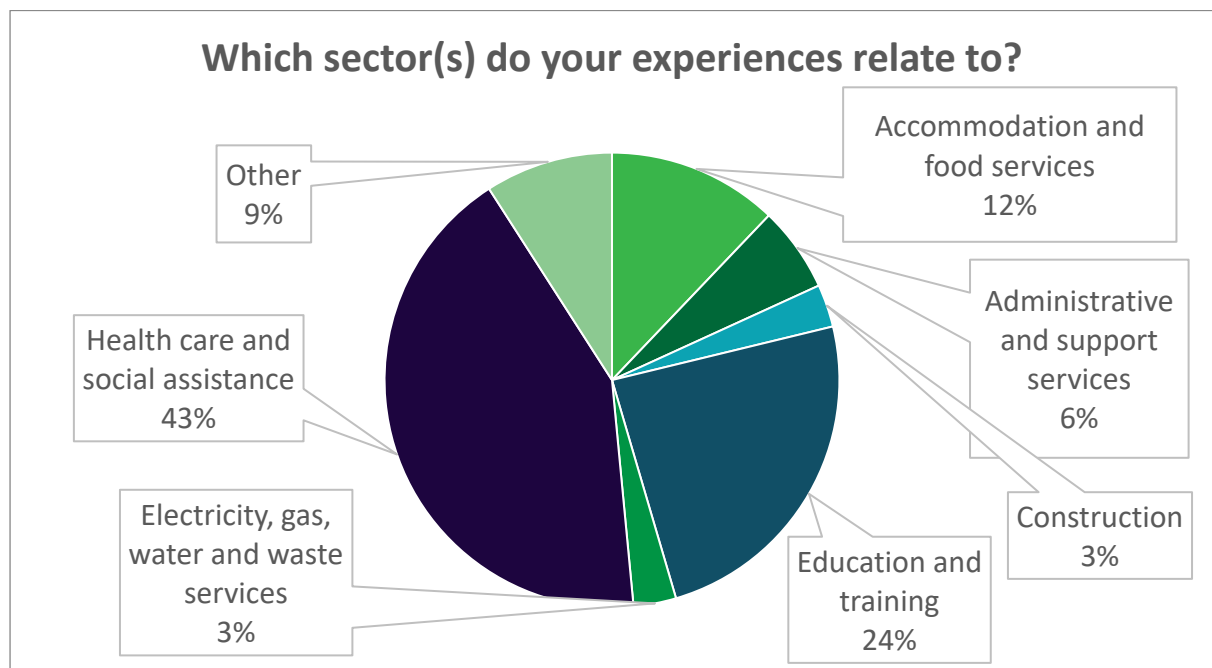
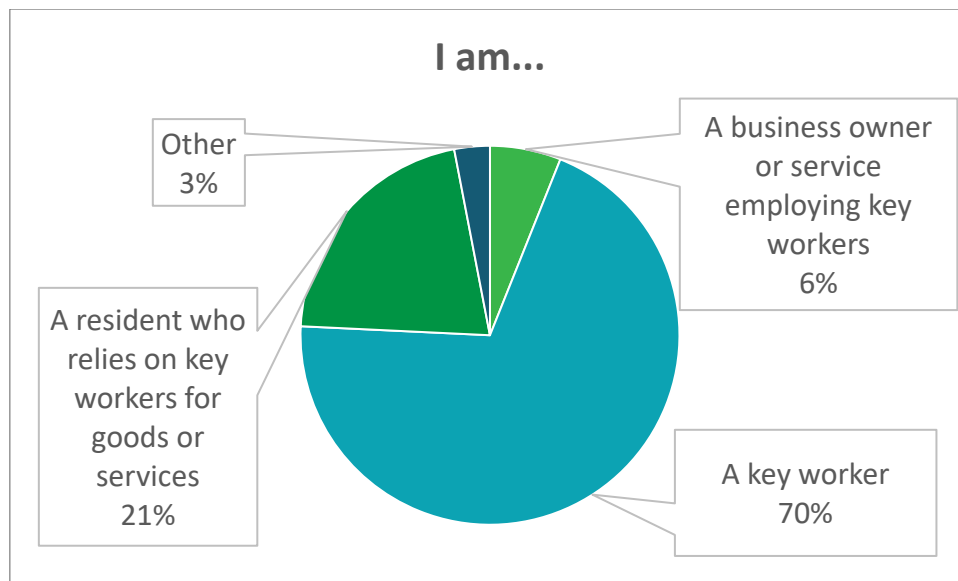
Thirty three people completed the online survey and were asked where they lived and worked, their role in relation to key workers (as an employer, being a key worker or user of the services) and the sector/industry that they had experiences with.

Most participants were Merri-bek residents (79%) and the majority also worked within Merri-bek (64%). One fifth (21%) of participants were key workers who work in Merri-bek but live elsewhere.

Seventy percent of participants identified themselves as key workers, 21% as a resident relying on key workers and 6% as business owners/employers of key workers (and 3% identified as “other”).

There was a good spread of sectors represented or referred to. Health care and social assistance was the most popular with 43% and education and training 24%. Childcare was referred to under both these categories. Accommodation and food services were referred to by 12% of the participants, administrative and support services at 6%, and construction, utilities or horticulture were also mentioned, although no story was shared for utilities.

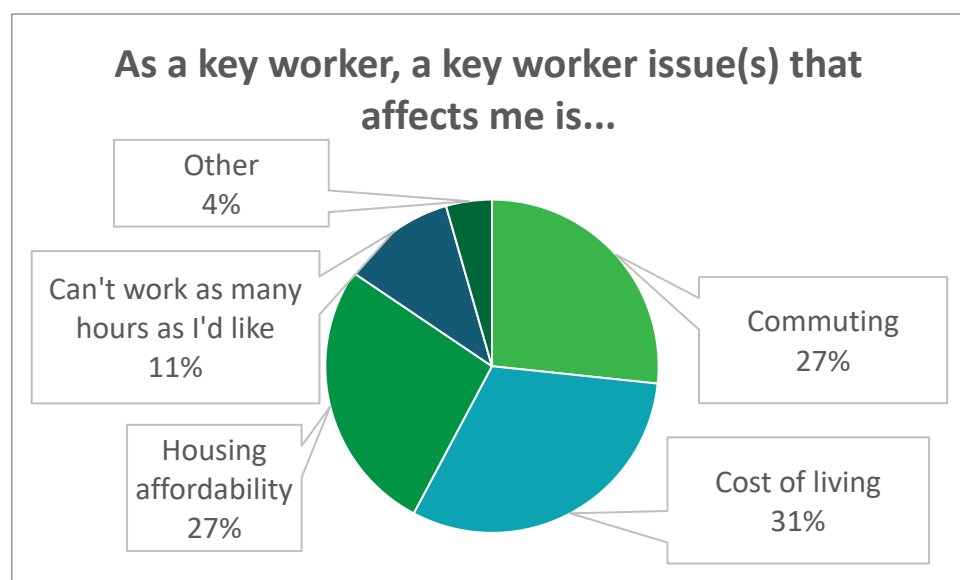
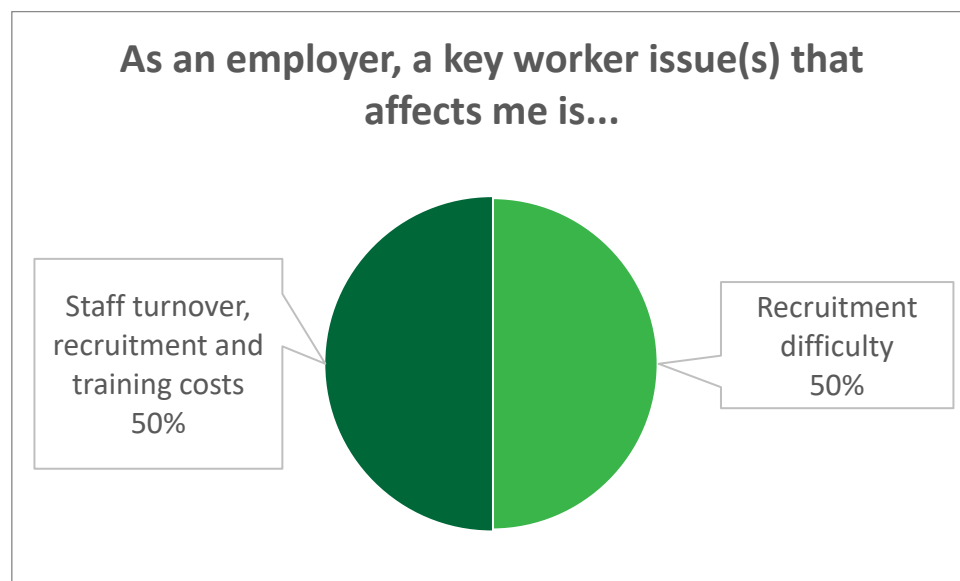




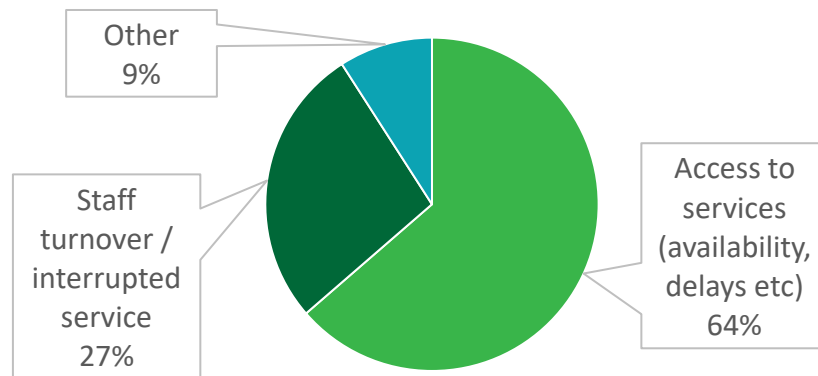
Engagement Outcomes

This section presents a summary of the stories and experiences that were shared, in the form of quotes. They are presented by sector/industry and have been themed. Some stories incorporated several themes and these quotes have been separated to appear in the most appropriate sections.

Several of the survey questions are also presented here. Participants were asked to identify key worker issues that affected them. Most chose only one option, although all options were available to select. These key issues were not always the ones then discussed in the stories provided, which is why the stories were themed.

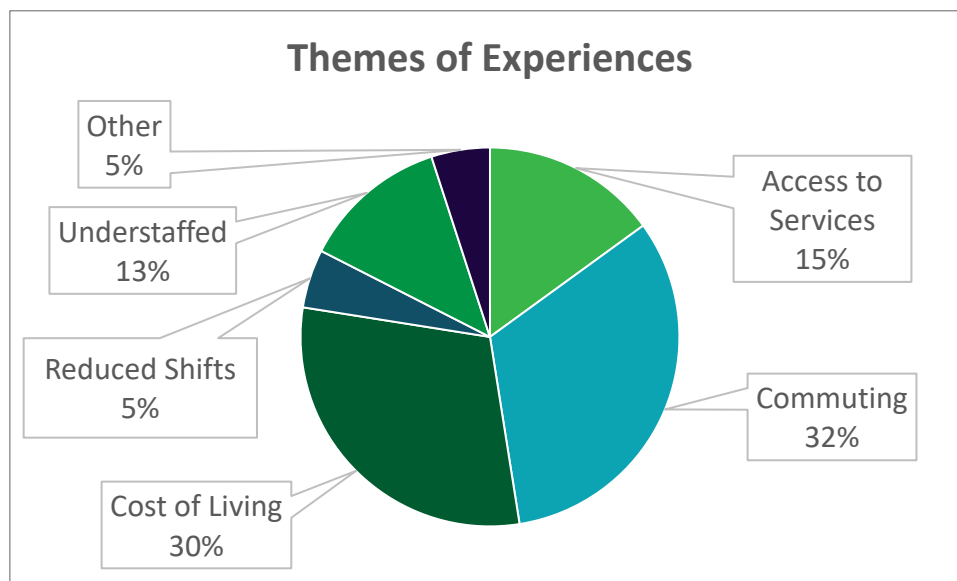


As a resident, a key worker issue(s) that affects me is...



Experiences

From the 33 participants in the survey, 32 shared a story of their experiences.



Accommodation and Food Services

Access to services

I am struggling to afford medical expenses, with a clear lack of bulk-billing clinics in the area. As a young person, with no family, and no other means of financial support, it is a constant source of stress. – Key worker

Commuting

I feel really lucky that I've got a job only 15 minutes from home. I was previously commuting into the city, which is such a pain when trains are down. – Key worker

It's hard to earn a good wage in my field and also not easy to find jobs that are easily/quickly accessible from Merri-bek by bicycle or close with public transport as I don't have a car. – Key worker

Cost of living

Higher rents and cost of living have created stresses. It goes up faster than wages. – Key worker

Rising costs of living and increases to my rent mean that I am living pay check to pay check. I am struggling to afford medical expenses, and if I face another rent increase, I will be forced to move. It took me 6 months to find my current residence- we get 60 days' notice of an increase. – Key worker

We hope to buy in Fawkner where we've put roots down (as renters) for the last 6 years but all the houses we look at are either way too expensive or falling apart. – Key worker

Administrative and Support Services

Access to services

Some local businesses are no longer available e.g. food take away. – Contractor

Reduced shifts

Covid caused my hours to be decreased as systems and procedures were revamped and streamlined. – Key worker

Construction

Commuting

Hard for parking. – Key worker

Cost of living

Expensive housing. – Key worker

Education and Training

Commuting

*My cost of commuting nearly outweighs the amount I'm paid for teaching.
– Key worker*

Commuting is a nightmare given the lack of adequate public transport options north of Bell St and north of Bakers Road. It means being car dependent for everything. – Key worker

Cost of living

Cost of living is getting more and more expensive. Expenses are going up especially the bills and the rates. – Key worker

My wage doesn't match my skill set and my employer [non-profit] can't offer me more financial support. I was unable to buy a home and am locked in a forever rising rent market. – Key worker

Understaffed

My daughter's school has had to cancel school camps [lack of staff] for the first time in school history. – Resident

Shortage of teachers, educators and additional assistants. – Key worker

We now face a shortage of continuing staff in early childhood teachers and educators. – Employer

Health Care and Social Assistance

Access to services

Delays in in-home care for parent. – Resident

I had had trouble getting appointments with my GP in a timely fashion often having to wait weeks. – Resident

Transport to appointments difficult to access. One of my family take time off from their employment to take me to medical appointments. – Resident

Commuting

[To feel safe] it's hard to work anywhere that is not easy to get to on a bike track or separated bike lane. – Key worker

Increased commuting cost and less engagement in local activities as travel time and road congestion means I'm home later. Glenroy has a great train station but is poorly connected by bike paths/public transport to amenities provided in Merri-bek such as shopping hubs. – Key worker

Poor transport options from the growth areas in the west and north west make Merri-bek difficult to reach but many employees and clients are located in more affordable housing there. Unreliable and limited public transport. We may move head office out of Merri-bek. – Employer

Increasing cost of commuting (petrol and lack of free parking near work). If I wasn't able to work at home sometimes I'd be seeking employment closer to home outside of Merri-bek. – Key worker

If the trains/trams are late or cancelled, I have to pay more for Uber and risk being late to work. – Key worker

Find myself having to drive to work more than I would like to due to poor connections East/West on both public transport and cycling. – Key worker

Congestion/traffic affects my ability to get to work on time. – Key worker

Cost of living

As the housing/rental prices rise, moving further out in Merri-bek to maintain affordability has meant increased commuting cost. – Key worker

I work in the health sector for a NFP organisation but the cost of living and mortgage rates makes it hard to manage on the wage I am paid. I could get a higher wage working in the CBD but would need to commute. Also makes it hard to recruit others who live nearby as they often prefer to commute to get a higher wage to afford to live in this area. – Key worker

Understaffed

We need many more workers like me and can't get them. – Key worker

Many businesses cannot get enough staff. – Resident

Other

Access to services

I was on multiple waiting lists for over a year to get my child into childcare. I was forced to accept a spot I was not comfortable with - there was a constant turnover of educators. - Resident

Commuting

The commute to Brunswick East [for work] on the weekend can be 1.5 hrs door to door instead of 45mins-1hr. – Key worker

Cost of living

[We're] not getting the same level of enrolment as pre-Covid which means some classes are cancelled. I don't get paid. – Key worker

*I pay more than half my income in rent and am concerned that I won't be able to continue to live within a reasonable bicycle commuting distance from my work.
– Key worker*

The cost of living has reduced the customers in the store I work for which means as a casual I might not get as many extra shifts. – Key worker

This report summarises the information provided by the community and presents their experiences - sorted by industry and key theme. It provides a snapshot of only some of the many experiences of key workers, employers and service users in Merri-bek and should be considered as one input to the more extensive research currently being undertaken.
