



2021 MIDWEST

Youth Sector Forum

Summary Report



YACWA acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

as the Traditional Custodians of this land, sea and waters. Our Perth office is situated on Whadjuk Nyoongar Boodja, and our Geraldton office on the lands of the Yamatji people. We pay our respects to the Elders: past, present, and emerging of the lands on which our offices are based and extend this respect to the traditional custodians of the land, sea and water across which we travel.



This report was prepared by Melissa Myers and Olivia Knowles, with support from the YACWA Policy and Advocacy team.

Photographer Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Kimmy from Glow Photography Geraldton for expertly capturing the spirit of the day through her photography at the Midwest Youth Sector Forum.

The 2021 Midwest Youth Sector Forum was made possible by the generous support of Lotterywest funding for Regional YACWA.



Contents

ABOUT YACWA	04
ABOUT THE MIDWEST YOUTH SECTOR FORUM	05
AIM OF THIS REPORT	06
WHO ATTENDED	07
SHARED THEMES ACROSS TOPIC AREAS	08
HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS	10
EDUCATION	14
EMPLOYMENT	18
MENTAL HEALTH	20
ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS (AOD)	24
CHILD PROTECTION	26
YOUTH JUSTICE	30
WHERE TO FROM HERE	34
APPENDIX A – AGENCIES REPRESENTED	35

About YACWA

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) is the peak body for young people and the youth sector in Western Australia. We operate primarily as a human rights organisation that seeks to address the exclusion of young people in a rapidly changing society.

Our continued vision for Western Australia is one that celebrates and engages young people in all aspects of the community. Our role is to strengthen the trust, cooperation, collaboration; professionalism and voice of the non-government youth service sector to better serve the young people of Western Australia.

In 2021, YACWA received funding to strengthen our regional engagement by employing local staff through a place-based model. We aim to build strong regional connections to better understand regional issues and amplify these in our policy and advocacy work, increase the capacity of young people to be changemakers in their communities, and support the youth sector where needed with training, networking, events and activities.

www.yacwa.org.au

Our work is governed by four guiding principles of – respect, equity, integrity and the celebration of diversity.

About The Midwest Youth Sector Forum

The Midwest Youth Sector Forum was a gathering of youth workers, service managers, executives and government officials from the Midwest region in November 2021.

The aim of the Midwest Youth Sector Forum was to explore the strengths and challenges in the Midwest youth sector and create a space to work together to map out approaches and solutions that could create better outcomes for young people.

We wanted to create an event to elevate regional voices to decision-makers and challenge metro-centric decision-making. Two years into the Covid-19 pandemic, the Forum also provided a critical networking opportunity for sector staff and opportunity to reconnect and learn about services and programs in the area.

YACWA hosts an annual State of the Youth Sector Forum in Perth, and the Midwest Youth Sector Forum format was adapted from this event.

It was the first time such an event had been run in the area by YACWA. As YACWA had only recently established in the Midwest prior to the Midwest Youth Sector Forum, this event provided a key opportunity for YACWA to engage with stakeholders and begin to understand the needs and priorities of the region, assisting us to identify advocacy priorities moving forward.





Aim of this Report

This report provides a snapshot of the current state of play for the youth sector in the Midwest. It captures a point in time representation of the sector's attitudes, feelings and perceptions, and creates an opportunity for this to be heard by local and state-wide decision makers.

Living and working in regional WA is not the same as metropolitan Perth, and this report strives to highlight the unique needs and experiences in the Midwest for consideration in policy formulation and decision-making.

It is important to note that table discussions were not required to reach consensus for something to be noted down on the data capture proforma that informed the report.

In accompaniment to this report, we recommend in-depth mapping and open dialogue with young people, services, and stakeholders to understand local needs, and place-based solutions informed by the sector and importantly, by young people.

The Midwest youth sector is strong, passionate and strengths focussed. They know what needs to be done to address service gaps and systemic barriers that young people face in their region.

Who Attended?

Attendees represented a diversity of youth sector staff, from frontline youth workers, service managers to senior government staff. The focus of this event was on creating space for the sector to come together, therefore this event did not have a focus on engaging and including young people at the same time.

The event was promoted widely through existing networks, and recipients were encouraged to forward it through their own networks to ensure a diversity of service representation.

The full list of organisations in attendance is provided in Appendix A.



60 individuals attended, representing **36** youth sector organisations

What Did We Talk About?

The day featured a Welcome to Country from Derek Councillor, an introduction from YACWA CEO Sandy McKiernan, and an opening address from the WA Minister for Youth, the Hon. Dave Kelly MLA. A networking icebreaker activity led us into a day of workshopping Strengths, Challenges and Solutions, with each table discussion led by a facilitator. Participants were asked to choose one topic to focus on for the whole day. We encouraged people to have deep and robust discussions, and to capture key discussion points onto the provided proforma.

At the end of the day, tables had the opportunity to present back a summary of their topic's key points and key decision-makers were invited into the room to listen and learn.

The event focused on several issues impacting young people in the region, including:

- Mental Health
- Child Protection
- Housing and Homelessness
 - Education
 - Employment
- Alcohol & Other Drugs
- Youth Justice

Shared Themes Across Topic Areas

Below is a summary of common themes that emerged from multiple tables on the day. Please note they are also retained under their original topic area in the report.

Additional support to encourage youth sector interagency and networking groups

The forum attendees came together to not only discuss the strengths, challenges and solutions for the youth sector but to engage with one another. With limited opportunities and services being time poor, the request for resourcing and administrative support for regular interagency meetings was raised by many. Whilst COVID-19 has restricted face-to-face meetings and interagency networks, the value of these regular opportunities to meet and collaborate either digitally or in-person is vital, perhaps even more so during a pandemic. Effective networks can reduce silos and improve collaboration, resulting in better outcomes for young people.

Regional areas need place-based and equitable funding

Resourcing, service plans and projects must meet specific Midwest community needs. Every region across WA has unique issues and needs and these are often drastically different to Metropolitan areas. This needs to be better acknowledged and addressed in commissioning contracts that better reflect the needs of the local community. Additionally, the pay discrepancy between the community sector and the State Government needs to be addressed.

Sustainability of services requires long-term funding

Services providing support for young people in the Midwest found short term contracts were doing more harm than good in the continuity of care for vulnerable young people. Long term (5+ years), sustainable funding is necessary to ensure no young person is left behind. There also needs to be more support for existing services with proven outcomes through increased resources and correctly costed deliverables.

Invest in a Youth Hub concept

The sector raised the need for a youth hub in Geraldton that accommodated the needs of young people using a multi-service and co-location approach, so young people can access what they need, when they need it.

Young people need more access to wraparound support from service providers

Providing a more connected, wraparound service with the confidentiality of a young person in mind is vital for streamlined movement of young people between services and collaboration for effective outcomes. Organisations experience limitations in the services they can provide, as well as their intake capacity and ability to service regional towns. More opportunities to work together to share data and minimise gaps is important to improve this.

Staff are passionate and committed, but require support

Those working in the Midwest youth sector are passionate, dedicated and often 'wear many hats' in the community. However, systemic issues such as short-term contracts and funding impact on employment stability and financial security, contributing to staff turnover and difficulties in attracting skilled staff to the regions.

We need to address root causes and work in partnership with Aboriginal communities

The sector raised multiple times the importance of services and approaches being culturally appropriate for the young people and communities of the Midwest. The importance of addressing underlying factors such as dispossession, intergenerational trauma and loss of connection to country and culture were raised. This impacts on young people's experience with each of the seven topics we discussed on the day. Appropriate resourcing for holistic services, programs and approaches in partnership with and led by Aboriginal communities to address this is critical.



What We Heard From The Sector

Housing and Homelessness

“Public housing models for young people with complex needs are needed.”

There is not enough housing stock

More housing stock is desperately needed. Investment needs to be made in not only upgrading and maintaining existing crisis accommodation, rentals and shared housing but also in building new, sustainable and youth-appropriate homes for long term tenure¹.

Identity documents are barriers to young people accessing support, housing and transition services

Young people often turn up to crisis accommodation with little to no identification, let alone belongings. Staff are currently able to redirect young people to the appropriate organisations, however it is important to proactively support young people to obtain their identification documents through streamlined services, clear pathways and information provided in schools to avoid delay in service care.

Public housing models for people with complex needs are needed

At the time of the forum, there were no crisis accommodation service models available to cater to young people with complex needs. The current service model was designed to protect the accommodation service and its staff, and isn't designed to accommodate these young people in times of crisis. All young people who are vulnerable need to be considered in service frameworks, guiding crisis accommodation services to provide a successful exit plan or appropriate care arrangements that cater the needs of the young person with complex issues. Provision for complex needs must be addressed to avoid repeat crises and the re-occurrence of systemic issues².

Services are supporting one another but more resources are necessary to continue successful relationships

It was acknowledged that in the housing and homelessness space, there is an incredible amount of committed and passionate staff on the ground. The collaboration between agencies is effective and respected. There is no competition between services and the joint effort to deliver a multi-faceted approach is successful.

The crisis accommodation services in the Midwest are currently doing the best they can to work together with the little resources they have. Increased resources and staff would see positive outcomes enhanced for not only these crisis accommodation centres but for the vulnerable young people who rely on this sector for support.

Solutions From The Sector

Young people need long-term affordable and secure housing that is relevant to their needs

Young people need affordable and accessible housing such as smaller dwellings with easy to maintain outdoor spaces. Proximity of housing to support services as well as transport links to support engagement with education, employment and training are critical³.

Invest in programs to support sustainable housing tenure

Young people need support to maintain their housing tenure. Support with life skills development is important for transitioning into independence. Practical support such as garden maintenance, cleaning and repairs alleviates the strain on young people who may not have the funds or knowledge to conduct these tasks alone, particularly if they are receiving minimal income support. It was suggested this could be supported through a social enterprise model whereby young people are trained and supported to assist others with garden and property maintenance, thereby supporting their skill development and employability.

Apply Housing First for Youth principles to all youth tenures

All staff need to be adequately trained and upskilled using a Housing First for Youth framework to guide services. This is to increase understanding and the ability to support vulnerable young people with complex needs. Without the support or the understanding, there is a high turnover resulting in some negative outcomes for this cohort. This then creates a systemic issue. Services however, cannot provide an exit plan based on Housing First for Youth Model principles when there are no long term housing options available to the young people in their care, especially those with complex needs.

Focus on preventative programs and interventions to ease the burden on homelessness services

More investment in prevention is necessary to reduce young people needing accommodation in response to a crisis occurring in the first place. Mentorship was a repeated solution to rectify this issue. Programs in parenting support (family mediation) and mentoring young people is necessary. This could be achieved through additional resourcing for the many in-school programs already available to support young people experiencing hardship. The sector felt these programs may not be utilised as frequently as they could be, due to the current curriculum outcomes needing to be achieved that limit time for engagement in other programs.

“Young people need long-term affordable and secure housing that is relevant to their needs.”

More long-term accommodation and support for high-risk young people in crisis

It is important to review current service plans and funding for crisis accommodation services. Long-term funding is necessary with transitional support for young people to access other services/housing to avoid poor outcomes. Support up to five years was recommended, as short term care (three months) can result in poor outcomes for a young person experiencing reoccurring homelessness.

Consult with sector and young people on what is needed and adjust contracts to match

Open communication between government funders and service providers is vital, with funders listening to the service providers' experience and feedback on needs and resources necessary for positive outcomes. Service plans and projects also need to be specific for the regions, which operate differently to metropolitan areas. It is important to hear from young people with lived experience and design and adjust service delivery in response to their input. With this information, a review and restructure of service outcomes and deliverables that are relevant to a vulnerable young person's needs can prove successful. It is also important that governing bodies are realistic with services working at capacity and support workers to avoid burnout.

Explore alternative housing options to meet a variety of needs

The sector felt it was important to consider the 'village concept'. When the elderly have large empty homes, look at accommodating young people who are able to live independently. This may be beneficial for both parties. Young people learn from experience, while the elderly have someone there for company and safety.

Increase pathways for young people to home ownership

Enhance the promotion of home ownership for young people. This solution is rarely targeted at young people experiencing hardship, although it should be a part of what the mentoring programs provide in schools. Educating young people on the benefits of home ownership early can have a positive outcome for many who may otherwise be unguided to successfully better their environmental outcomes.

References:

1. Shelterwa.org.au. https://www.shelterwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/End_Homelessness_Report_FA2_web.pdf. Page 8.
2. Mhc.wa.gov.au. <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/3023/a-safe-place-a-wa-strategy-to-provide-safe-and-stable-accommodation-and-support-to-people-experiencing-mental-health-alcohol-and-other-drug-issues-2020-2025.pdf>.
3. https://www.housing.wa.gov.au/HousingDocuments/Affordable_Housing_Action_Plan_2017_2018_2019_2020.pdf. Page 7-8.



What We Heard From The Sector

Education

“Young people who require additional support and personalised learning experiences are falling through the gaps.”

The current system is not working for all young people

The curriculum currently uses an outcomes based approach to learning. Whilst the aim is to meet each individual young person's needs, it is missing the fundamentals for young people who are not considered mainstream learners. Young people who require additional support and personalised learning experiences are falling through the gaps. The curriculum is not diverse enough or culturally secure, leaving some young people feeling disconnected from their education.

Lack of resources and support for students who are neurodiverse

There are significant waiting times and costs involved in young people obtaining a diagnosis, that would then ensure eligibility for much-needed services and support. Young people and their families in regional communities are often required to travel to Perth (at their own expense) to participate in assessments, which for a range of factors may be inaccessible for many. An appropriate approach to adequate services to provide affordable assessment for young people in regional WA is desperately needed.

Positive programs bridging gaps in schools are needed

There are currently a number of programs in the Midwest that complement the current curriculum. These programs focus on social-emotional learning and life skills education through activities and experiences, which support increased attendance and participation in other areas of schooling for students who may be at risk of disengaging from school. It was noted that there could be more programs of this nature delivered within schools to support positive outcomes for vulnerable young people and have more programs designed for young men and boys.

Staff need additional training to reflect the needs of students

Organisations need to be better resourced to provide training for education staff in mental health awareness, LGBTIQ+ inclusion, cultural awareness and trauma-informed practices, to reflect what they are seeing and hearing from students. Some education staff feel overwhelmed with the information they receive regarding their students and felt more support for staff, provided with appropriate resources and workshops on the aforementioned topics would be beneficial for them to then support their students more appropriately.

COVID-19 impacts

COVID-19 contributed to the increasing pressures on the education system, requiring students, their families and educators to transition from full time face to face learning to full time online learning. For some young people, this resulted in disengagement from school and study.

Solutions From The Sector

Collaborate with external organisations to support young people's wellbeing

There are several government, community and non-government organisations who are specialists in working with young people in particular fields such as alcohol and other drugs, mental health, sexual health, financial well-being and so on.

Having services who specialise in a variety of health and wellbeing topics, and who are trained to engage with young people in the delivery of information, are valuable to both students and the education system. This includes organisations who focus on fostering cultural identity and connection to country. Increasing health and wellbeing needs and having them embedded within the curriculum, while being resourced effectively by specialised professionals, will create strong and sustainable partnerships within organisations to support students throughout their education and during some possibly challenging transitional years.

Support for disengaged young people in early childhood, primary and secondary

Early intervention is critical for young people who are at-risk of disengaging from education⁴. Providing more alternative education models, as well as appropriate supports is important. This can supply students from disadvantaged environments, or those with learning styles and needs that fall outside what a rigid mainstream system can provide, the support necessary for a positive outcome. Staff may require further training in how to identify risk factors for disengagement in young people, to address the issue early and link students with the necessary supports.

Hold schools accountable for the implementation of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework

Young people and their families need to feel culturally safe and supported at school. A whole of school approach to the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework is critical in ensuring equitable educational outcomes for Aboriginal students⁵. Creating opportunities for staff, students and parents/guardians to be a part of what this looks like is vital. Community input on a needs-based approach can contribute positively to not only student engagement but also the family becoming more involved in their child's education.

“Create strong and sustainable partnerships within organisations to support students throughout their education and during some possibly challenging transitional years.”

More staff development opportunities

Teaching staff are requesting the need for more opportunities to develop and update their skills and knowledge as the system changes and new research and evidence is released. To be able to respond to the needs of the students, it is important to focus on the emerging requirements of each region. This is to assist with identifying training and development opportunities, which vary between each community; ignoring this can be detrimental to not only young people but also for retaining staff in regional and remote areas of WA.

Address the gaps that young people fall through

Young people need a holistic approach to their education that is needs-based, not outcomes-based. Young people fall through the gaps in the school system for a range of factors, and the disadvantages are exacerbated when this is not appropriately addressed and supported. Appropriate resourcing was identified as key for services to be able to support young people in a way that is tailored to their developmental needs.

Expanding family support

The sector discussed the need to expand service support for vulnerable families beyond the early years. This was to assist families with the appropriate resources to navigate challenges that may and do appear throughout the years and to support families to do this together.



References:

- ⁴. Ccyp.wa.gov.au. <https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/1422/report-education-children-at-risk-of-disengaging-from-school-literature-review.pdf>. Published 2015. Page 7.
⁵. Education.wa.edu.au. <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/dl/jjpnzned>. Published 2015. Page 4.



What We Heard From The Sector 

Employment

Employment opportunities are available but there are barriers to participation

The sector felt that there was currently a wide range of employment opportunities available for young people, however, there was an issue of attracting and retaining young staff to the vacant positions.

There needs to be a sector wide understanding of the challenges some young people may face that create barriers to their ongoing participation. Lack of transportation, family commitments and health and well-being are reoccurring issues young people may be faced with that can create barriers to continued employment⁶. An understanding on the behalf of the employer is important, with empathy and flexibility being key.

Workplaces need to be culturally safe (with Reconciliation Action Plans) and be mental health aware. In addition, providing ongoing mentoring and support for young people and their employer as they work together is an important consideration.

Wraparound supports are needed to enable participation

Young people need holistic supports to enable them to participate in meaningful and sustainable employment. Support to access identification documents and navigate government systems is needed. Access to safe and secure housing, support with physical and mental wellbeing and assistance with transport and getting their driver's licence are all critical factors for young people in being able to gain and maintain employment.

COVID-19 vaccination mandates have impacted on the sector

Services faced added pressure to recruit new staff to replace those leaving due to the introduction of vaccine mandates, whilst operating at capacity and already experiencing challenges in recruiting staff prior to the pandemic. The sector was also required to create and implement policies and address vaccine hesitancy without additional resourcing.

“Young people need holistic supports to enable them to participate in meaningful and sustainable employment.”

Employment 

Solutions From The Sector

Support employers to employ and retain young people

Young people face the dilemma of not having enough experience to get a job, but not being able to get a job to gain experience. Supported pathways into employment are critical, and more resources are needed for the sector to work in partnership with businesses and organisations to increase the employment opportunities for young people in a range of industries and roles. This can support young people to build their skills, confidence and work history for ongoing sustainable employment.

Support youth mental health first aid training in workplaces

Employers receiving mental health training could improve their ability to put in place supports that better meet the needs of young staff. This ensures that mental health is not a barrier to young people participating in employment and young people feel supported to continue employment.

Appropriate supports at key transition points are needed

Structured supports and pathways need to be in place at all transitional stages in a young person's life, not only available once they have disengaged. This is to encompass supported learning with a strong focus on life skills. It also equips young people for future employment and possible further studies. A proactive approach is important to building positive life skills personally and professionally at all stages of a young person's journey.

References:
6. Library.bsl.org.au. https://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/6086/1/Perkins_making_it_work_PSP.pdf. Published 2007. Page 2-15.



What We Heard From The Sector 

Mental Health

“The lack of resources and staffing to support the increased need of service is concerning.”

A passionate sector is making positive change but lacking support

The sector felt staff and organisations were professional and passionate advocates in supporting the mental health needs of diverse cohorts of young people. However, more support for the mental health sector and increased resources are necessary for the continuity of successful services and achieving positive outcomes. Some mental health professionals felt overwhelmed by the increasing mental health conditions young people were presenting with, as well as the increased number of young people accessing services. The lack of resources and staffing to support the increased need of service is concerning.

Services are under pressure to service intra-regional communities

Mental health services based in Geraldton experience the pressures of not only providing services to young people within the town, but providing outreach services and support to other towns and communities throughout the Midwest region. Contracts and funding limitations prevent effective service delivery to communities who are in desperate need of support. Improving staff capacity and allocating funding and appropriate resources to service regional communities more regularly needs to be prioritised.

Climate change impacting regional communities

The 2021 Cyclone Seroja caused not only destruction to multiple Midwest towns, it left devastating, long term effects on the mental health of many young people in regional communities. With the increase in activity of severe and damaging weather patterns in the Midwest, there has also been an increase in presentations of mental health issues seen among young people in these areas. In an area already struggling to keep up with priority presentations, in times of a pandemic, this is concerning⁷.

Appropriate funding and service mapping for the Midwest is needed

Ongoing funding for existing programs achieving positive outcomes is important. It is important to understand the responsibilities of each mental health service in order to identify the gaps. The sector felt that funders also needed to be accountable for outcomes and adjust funding and contracts in response to the needs that services are experiencing.

Mental health interagency networking meetings need to be re-established

At the time the Forum was held, no mental health interagency networking was occurring in the Midwest. This is an important space for mental health service managers to come together to understand the challenges, establish goals, create strategic plans and delineate tasks, and foster relationships among the sector. For mental health organisations, the re-establishment of these meetings is important, including ongoing administrative support to ensure sustainability.

Solutions From The Sector

Expand specialist services throughout the region

There are a limited number of specialist mental health staff, most of whom are based in the regional hub of Geraldton. However, towns and communities within the region need support too. More resources are needed for organisations to be able to expand their service provision further afield within the region and service smaller towns and communities more regularly through primary and secondary support, such as prevention and counselling. Geography and population bias should not determine a young person's access to timely and appropriate mental health supports.

Provide more specialised services by existing skilled practitioners in regional communities

The sector stated the need for more specialised services and skilled practitioners that allow for timely interventions and diagnosis for young people, including local practitioners assessing for neurodiverse issues, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Expanding the skills and services of those already in the professional sector eliminates limitation of service and removes the barriers currently in place for young people needing to be assessed to receive appropriate support and care.

Improve collaboration of services and share the load

Silos create unnecessary delays in the appropriate care or referral for clients in need. Sharing expertise and understanding the responsibilities of care from each organisation is important. Building the capacity of services to share the load and increase their capacity to do assessments ensures there is #nowrongdoor for young people seeking support.

End delays in assessment for mental health support

The majority of services are only able to deliver mild to moderate care with limited (or no) capacity to provide appropriate support for those in crisis. This results in a restricted number of acute services available outside of hospital emergency departments, with long waiting lists creating delays in providing timely support and achieving successful outcomes for young people.

The accountability of these outcomes currently sit with mental health services who are limited by funding and resources, and may not be able to assess clients due to capacity and service restrictions. Shared accountability for outcomes may promote dialogue between services and funders.

"Increase service capacity to ensure there is #nowrongdoor for young people seeking support."

Empower communities with mental health literacy and resources

Mental health first aid training needs to be more widely accessible to upskill whole communities to support one another. Equipping young people with this information and skills while at school is a great place for this to start. In addition to raising awareness of mental health issues, it creates an environment for peer support, connection and understanding.

Increase young people's voice and power in decision making

The sector felt that having pathways and opportunities to train and support young people with lived experiences of mental health issues in youth worker roles, as well as encouraging youth leadership groups, can be of great value. Facilitating the involvement of young people not only provides peer education and support, but can also ensure their ideas and experiences inform the development of strategic plans.

Increase training and upskilling opportunities for staff

Training is critical to ensure that staff are trauma-informed, to better understand the pervasive nature of trauma and create an environment for client healing and recovery. All organisations working with young people need to be equipped to identify the needs of a young person who has experienced trauma. This early intervention is critical to link young people with support and resources, to prevent ongoing trauma and further impact on a young person's wellbeing and life opportunities.



References:

⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356364262_Climate_change_activism_and_supporting_the_mental_health_of_children_and_young_people_Perspectives_from_Western_Australia. Published 2021. Page 1760

What We Heard From The Sector 

Alcohol & Other Drugs (AOD)

Service collaboration to minimise the impacts caused by gaps in the sector

The Midwest youth sector are collaborating where possible to address any gaps in service to minimise poor outcomes on young people. In Geraldton the Community Alcohol and Drug Service (CADS) and headspace currently have an MOU in place, which sees young people redirected to headspace for a counselling service that is specific for their needs. However, there is a pressing need for a specific youth AOD service within the Midwest that also addresses issues that affect young people such as mental health, housing and employment. At the time of the forum, this was not an available service anywhere in the region.

Lack of AOD youth-friendly services available

The need for youth specific, friendly AOD services in the Midwest was a repeated necessity among sector professionals attending the forum. A service providing not only primary care but preventive support in non-clinical environments was recommended.

Young people under 18 can't access services and support

There is a gap in delivery of AOD services in the Midwest for young people under the age of 18. More focus is needed on early intervention and prevention and harm minimisation programs, as well as appropriately resourcing primary health services to address the issue of alcohol and other drug misuse by young people under 18 throughout the Midwest.

Need for more culturally appropriate alcohol and other drugs services within the Midwest

It is important that AOD programs and service environments are designed to appropriately meet the needs of Aboriginal young people, delivered by trauma trained staff in a culturally appropriate way.

Families and carers require support

More support is needed for families and carers of young people experiencing issues with alcohol and other drugs. Local alcohol and other drugs organisations receive many enquiries from families and carers, who are looking for support and resources, often when young people are already experiencing crisis. Support and resourcing for community care and peer support amongst families is vital.

Harm reduction methods work

Harm reduction methods work, and there has been success in helping young people with AOD issues, as well as their families and the greater community⁸. More investment in harm reduction strategies is vital, while using addiction and dependency models to understand AOD prevention, use and treatment among young people⁹.



Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) 

Solutions From The Sector

Focus on early intervention and prevention approaches

There needs to be a priority focus on funding programs in prevention and upskilling staff to recognise early warning signs of alcohol and drug misuse. Greater resourcing for collaboration between services and the education sector is needed, to provide regular formal education and raise awareness of and connect young people to the appropriate supports in the community

Alcohol and other drug education needs to begin at a younger age

Alcohol and other drug education is delivered in high schools throughout the Midwest already, but it depends on the educator and/or the school as to what type of information is delivered to secondary students. Culturally appropriate education on AOD needs to be incorporated as a fundamental part of the curriculum and start much earlier on in a young person's education. Experimental AOD use starts around the age of 14-17 in Australia¹⁰, with up to an 80% increase in usage among young people in regional and remote communities¹¹. This is likely due to attitudes and beliefs that are copied and influenced by the young person's environment.

Providing young people with a safe space to detox and for injecting

There are no safe injecting facilities in the Midwest with appropriate staff to support and educate individuals. There is also no detox facility in the Midwest, with young people forced to travel out of the region away from family and friends to access services.

Address the issue of normalising AOD use

The sector raised their concern regarding the normalisation of alcohol and other drug use within the home environment of some young people. Alcohol and other drug use is being enabled by family and friends and used as a celebratory tool in some households, which is leading young people who are vulnerable to develop unhealthy habits from an early age¹².

References:

- ⁸ Harmreduction.org. https://harmreduction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NHRC-PDF-Principles_Of_Harm_Reduction.pdf. Published 2020.
- ⁹ Youth AOD work | YouthAOD Toolbox. [YouthAOD Toolbox. https://www.youthaodtoolbox.org.au/youth-aod-work](https://www.youthaodtoolbox.org.au/youth-aod-work).
- ¹⁰ Alcohol, tobacco & other drugs in Australia, Younger people - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia/contents/priority-populations/younger-people#initiation>. Published 2021.
- ¹¹ Chan GC, Kelly AB, Connor JP, Hall W, Young RM, Toumbourou JW, Williams J. Regional versus urban differences in teenage alcohol use: Does parental disapproval account for these differences?. *Australian journal of rural health*. 2016 Feb;24(1):3-8.
- ¹² Chan GC, Leung J, Quinn C, et al. Rural and Urban Differences in Adolescent Alcohol Use, Alcohol Supply, and Parental Drinking. *The Journal of Rural Health : Official Journal of the American Rural Health Association and the National Rural Health Care Association*. 2016 Jun;32(3):280-286. DOI: 10.1111/jrh.12151. PMID: 26450773.



What We Heard From The Sector 

Child Protection

“Prevention was seen as a high priority and an opportunity to provide better outcomes for young people.”

Lack of preventative and family support services

Child protection services are heavily funded at the intervention and crisis response stages, while prevention-based and family support services represent a smaller mix of the service systems. Sector indicated they felt intervention-based services were unable to have a lasting impact, and would like to have more preventative programs delivered by skilled staff to limit the number of young people being put in to care. Prevention was seen as a high priority and an opportunity to provide better outcomes for young people than intervening after situations had escalated to out-of-home care.

Overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people and children in the care system requires Aboriginal-led responses and culturally-competent solutions

Aboriginal young people are overrepresented in out-of-home-care and child protection services in Western Australia¹³. As of 30 June 2021, 57 per cent of all young people under the care of the Department of Communities were Aboriginal young people, despite Aboriginal young people forming only 6.7 per cent of all children in WA¹⁴.

The focus in providing care for these young people is currently at a tertiary level (finding emergency care), though more attention upstream was necessary. To do this successfully, the sector felt it was vital to address the impacts of dispossession, colonisation, and related underlying factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in the care system. Seeking guidance and working in partnership with Aboriginal communities to better understand and effectively resource solutions to provide appropriate education on the issue was vital across all service providers.

Expand assistance and supports for grand-carers and informal care arrangements

There are many situations in which people are caring for their family members in informal arrangements, despite not being their legal guardians. Child support legislation at the time of the forum limited those eligible to care for young people within their families and communities, leaving gaps in a system designed to fail the very people it is conceived to protect. The systems in place at the time of the forum were complex and challenging for those who are willing to step up and are considered safe to be carers for young people. Those providing informal care arrangements outside of the system do not receive any financial assistance, nor are they or the young people they care for eligible for any benefits or support¹⁵.

Limitation to funding

Child protection workers feel the funding that is currently provided to support child protection services are limited and non-flexible. Sector also commented on how programs need broader outcomes to be achieved and more support provided to out-of-home child carers and support workers.

Solutions From The Sector

A holistic approach for young people in care

To achieve more positive outcomes for young people in care, services felt there needed to be greater flexibility and collaboration with one another, using a holistic approach to better service vulnerable young people of the Midwest. The sector identified that this could look like sharing programs and successes with one another to learn and adapt; sharing culturally qualified staff; sector providing an increase of opportunities to upskill staff and carers; and having systems that can support healthy social and emotional well-being to high-risk young people and their peers. This highlights the need for government and sector organisations to work together, supported through local collaboration mechanisms.

Providing a supportive environment for a person to find connection

Connecting young people to their culture creates a sense of community and supports reconciliation. These aspects were considered of significant value in the prevention and intervention spaces throughout the discussion on child protection at the forum. Attendees wished to see an increased focus on supporting Aboriginal young people through cultural awareness, and for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver this work.

Transition from care back to home/ community

Out-of-home care can be a significant challenge for many young people. In particular, the sector noted that many young people involved in out-of-home care require supportive and consistent relationships with adults and mentors. Relationships many young people not in out-of-home care have strong access to. These connections and relationships were considered vital for leaving out-of-home care.

It was also noted that providing ongoing support for the parents/guardians when having their children returned to them was needed, to ensure they feel supported and in some cases guided on how to successfully parent a physically and mentally healthy young person. Case workers, mentors or using a buddy system for continuous check ins is essential in the prevention of the systemic issues we see connected to children who have been in care.

“Government and sector organisations can work together in innovative ways, supported through local collaboration mechanisms.”

Extend the leaving care age to 25

For a young person returning home from care or becoming independent due to age, support needs to be available for them to successfully transition as young people do not always have the skills to be fully independent by age 18-21. The expansion of the Homestretch program to increase the age of support provided to vulnerable young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence to 21-25 was welcomed¹⁶.

Focus on appropriate staff/carer support to avoid excessive turnover rates

Workforce issues have plagued the child protection sector for many years, and require long-term focus to address them. Training and supporting those with lived experience of being a child in out-of-home care to enter the community services workforce was a mentioned solution to rectify this issue.



References:

- ¹³. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) Child protection Australia 2019–20, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 11 March 2022. doi:10.25816/g208-rp81
- ¹⁴. Commissioner for Children and Young People (2022). 2022 Profile of Children and Young People in Western Australia. Retrieved from: <https://www.cryp.wa.gov.au/media/4806/2022-profile-of-children-and-young-people-in-wa-for-web-february-2022.pdf>
- ¹⁵. Legislation.wa.gov.au. [https://www.legislation.wa.gov.au/legislation/prod/filestore.nsf/FileURL/mrdoc_44337.pdf/\\$FILE/Children%20and%20Community%20Services%20Amendment%20Act%202021%20-%20%5B00-00-00%5D.pdf?OpenElement](https://www.legislation.wa.gov.au/legislation/prod/filestore.nsf/FileURL/mrdoc_44337.pdf/$FILE/Children%20and%20Community%20Services%20Amendment%20Act%202021%20-%20%5B00-00-00%5D.pdf?OpenElement). Published 2021. Section 12.
- ¹⁶. WA State Government announces Home Stretch trial - The Home Stretch. <https://thehomestretch.org.au/news/wa-state-government-announces-home-stretch-trial/#:~:text=26%20March%202019%20IN%20October%20last%20year%2C%20Community,will%20start%20in%20April%20with%20%20young%20people>. Published 2019.



What We Heard From The Sector 

Youth Justice

“Due to lack of resourcing for ongoing care it is common for a young person to reoffend.”

Collaboration between services is strong

The sector felt the services available for empowering a young person to re-engage are working well, and that community focus is strong in the Midwest. Programs working alongside WAPOL and Target 120 are seeing great outcomes that encourage collaboration between services and young people. Local services are linking young people connected to (or at risk of engaging in) the justice system to their community, and providing support during after-school hours.

Working in silos impacts service delivery

Whilst there are examples of collaboration working well, overall, the lack of connectivity between youth justice, education and child protection results in young people falling through the gaps. This has been driven by strict and inflexible government policies and procedures and needs to be addressed to foster greater collaboration, breakdown of silos, and address gaps in service delivery. Effective networks and a multi-agency approach to crime prevention were recommended as a mechanism to support this. Organisations need greater freedom to collaborate and partner, and for this to be supported by government.

Short term support means incidence of reoffending is high

The programs currently supporting the youth justice system have a high, short term success rate but due to lack of resourcing for ongoing care it is common for a young person to reoffend. Funding needs to be considered for long term support of up to 5 years for a young person who has offended, to support them to develop strong community connections and set and achieve goals. Longer-term funding means decision makers recognise that young people take more than six months to improve their lives, and supports a sustainable sector and workforce that can form therapeutic and trusted relationships with young people, which is the basis for change.

Negative media and community attitudes perpetuate stigma

We know that young people need compassion and understanding in order to thrive, and negative media attention and community attitudes that vilify young people are harmful to their recovery. More awareness is needed amongst the community of the root causes of offending to foster understanding and shift the narrative away from punitive approaches and towards preventative ones.

Services need to be culturally secure

In the Midwest there is an overrepresentation of young Aboriginal people in the justice system, yet there are limited cultural services available to support them. More support is needed from the Department of Justice and Child Protection to engage with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), and to resource ACCOs to do this work with young people.

Lack of focus and resourcing for neurodevelopmental issues

There is an over representation in the youth justice system of young people with neurodevelopmental issues, many which have been undiagnosed¹⁷. Lack of knowledge to identify neurodevelopmental conditions may mean young people go undiagnosed and with limited access to specialist clinicians in the regions, those who are referred for a diagnosis are presented with barriers such as travel and financial burdens. This can lead to more systemic issues and a much higher chance of reoffending. Long term support for families and young people is needed to ensure supports are available and affordable.

Lack of early intervention and prevention services

More resourcing is needed for early intervention supports to link young people to appropriate services and prevent them entering the justice system.

Solutions From The Sector

Invest in a 24 hour drop-in safe space hub for young people

Young people are in need of support at any time during the day or night, not just within business hours. Police may currently be the first point of contact for young people who are out after hours because home is an unsafe place to be. The sector raised the need for a 24 hour drop-in safe space hub that young people could access and be linked to services and supports, lowering the risk of offending and diverting them away from the justice system. The need for a short-term crisis accommodation dedicated to young people and linked to this hub concept was also raised. The sector was passionate about collaborating to provide such an environment, and spoke to the need for the service to be co-designed with young people.

Early intervention to reduce instances of offending

It is important that priority solutions that focus on the root cause of why young people offend are properly addressed. Intervening as early as possible in the event of a young person offending is vital to reduce the likelihood of offending to occur or continue. Place-based, multi-service collaborative approaches that provide wraparound supports are crucial for successful intervention. The sector also identified that access to trained mentors for long term support could provide stability for young people and their families.

Using diversionary measures in rehabilitation

To avoid young people from the Midwest being sent to Banksia Hill Detention Centre, the sector suggested using alternative approaches through offering community support in diversional strategies. This could be programs designed for young people at risk of offending or those already convicted of criminal involvement to be a part of local community activities that strengthen connection to individual and community, especially culturally based awareness activities that are delivered by local ACCOs. Exploring alternative education models and identifying young people early in the education system who may be at risk of offending means the focus can be placed on alternative pathways to support rather than criminalising and stigmatising young people.

“The focus can be placed on alternative pathways to support rather than criminalising and stigmatising young people.”

Increase resources and continuity to achieve outcomes

A lack of funding, lack of staff and the prevalence of short-term contracts creates high turnover of skilled workers, less job satisfaction and the lack of continuity of programs that could see positive outcomes if longer-term investment was made. Support and funding for ACCOs needs to be prioritised. We can learn from other jurisdictions such as the Olabud Doogethu project in Halls Creek and apply tailored place-based approaches that build on agency strengths, share assets and collaborate to address gaps¹⁸.

Increased professional development opportunities for staff

Trauma informed practices across the system are needed to ensure consistency of service and care for young people. Services providing support currently in the Midwest have limited capacity and seek upskilling opportunities to support staff to work effectively with young people. This extends to the education system, where early identification of mental health and neurodevelopmental issues is vital. Staff need training in understanding the signs and conditions, how to have a conversation early and what referrals and supports are available for young people and their families.

Improve access to education and training opportunities within the justice system

Young people who are incarcerated need more opportunity to extend their education. Training that encompasses one's culture, supports independence and provides guided pathways with less risk of reoffending and a positive push forward in creating a healthy future. Not only does this support future employment pathways but it can also provide an opportunity to develop skills and use lived experiences to become a mentor to others in the future.



References:

- ¹⁷ Bower C, Watkins RE, Mutch RC, et al. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and youth justice: a prevalence study among young people sentenced to detention in Western Australia. *BMJ Open* 2018;8: e019605. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2017-019605
- ¹⁸ Olabuddoogethu.org.au. https://olabuddoogethu.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/prospectus-booklet-olabud_WEB.pdf.



Where to from here?

We hope this report adds value by providing support to the Midwest youth sector's planning, collaboration and advocacy work.

YACWA will meet with key decision makers to discuss the emerging themes identified at the forum, to highlight and advocate for the key issues raised by the youth sector. This report will also guide YACWA on where to focus our advocacy efforts and where to play our role in supporting the Midwest youth sector moving forward.



Appendix A

Agencies Represented

- Bundiyarra
- Centacare
- Central Regional TAFE
- City of Greater Geraldton Greenough (CGG)
- Department of Communities
- Department of Education
- Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries
- Desert Blue Connect
- Flexi (Geraldton Flexible Learning Centre)
- Fusion
- Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Service (GRAMS)
- Geraldton Sporting Aboriginal Corporation (GSAC)
- Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC)
- Geraldton Youth Regeneration Organisation (GYRO)
- Headspace Geraldton
- Helping Minds
- Hope Community Services
- Job Link
- Lighthouse Church
- MEEDAC
- Ngala
- National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
- OUT Midwest
- Police Community Youth Centre (PCYC)
- Regional Alliance West (RAW)
- Salvation Army
- Short Term Accommodation for Youth (STAY)
- Social Reinvestment WA (SRWA)
- Shine
- St John of God - Horizon House
- WA Centre for Rural Health (WACRH)
- WA Country Health Service (WACHS)
- WA Health Alliance
- Waalitj Foundation
- Youth Care

Invited Guests

Hon. Dave Kelly MLA – Minister for Water; Forestry; Youth

Hon. Steve Martin MLC – Shadow Minister for Housing; Forestry

Lara Dalton MLA – Member for Geraldton

Michael Librizzi - City of Geraldton Greenough Member of Council

Clare McElhinney - Electorate Officer representing Hon. Sandra Carr MLC

