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2022 MURCHISON

Listening Tour

Summary Report



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.

During 2021-2023, YACWA received pilot funding from Lotterywest to strengthen our regional engagement by employing local staff through a place-based model. Our aim was 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.

About the Midwest Listening Tour

The aim of the Listening Tour in August 2022 was twofold;

- to explore the strengths and challenges in remote Midwest communities, and capture these as a peak body, and;
- create a space to work together to map out approaches and solutions that create better outcomes for young people and the services who support them in the community.

YACWA invited sector professionals across 14 local government areas of the Midwest to connect with one another in a half-day workshop format, facilitated by YACWA. Representatives from the sector came together to not only share the strengths and challenges within their community but to explore solutions at a local level. A small number of local representatives ranging from government, non-government organisations and community participated in the Kalbarri/Northampton conversations. This provided us the opportunity to build relationships, listen to the needs and priorities of remote communities within the Midwest, and capture what we heard to assist in identifying advocacy priorities moving forward.

This report summarises the issues we heard from participants in regional and remote Midwest communities, with the intention of capturing sector voice that may otherwise often go unheard and to advocate to decision makers to engage in dialogue with communities and provide the necessary place-based resourcing.

This report was prepared by Melissa Myers, YACWA Regional Project Officer – Midwest, with support from YACWA's Regional and Policy and Advocacy staff.

YACWA acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of this land, sea and waters. We also pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging of the lands on which we reside and travel.

Towns invited/engaged to participate in the Midwest Listening Tour

- Carnamah
- Coorow
- Cue
- Greenhead
- Kalbarri
- Leeman
- Meekatharra
- Mount Magnet
- Mingenew
- Morawa
- Northampton
- Perenjori
- Three Springs
- Yalgoo

This report highlights the strengths, challenges and solutions for the **Murchison** communities, including Cue, Meekatharra, Mount Magnet and Yalgoo. To review the Listening Tour Reports for the other above-mentioned communities, please visit the YACWA website <https://www.yacwa.org.au/regional-yacwa/>

Preface

Common themed issues emerged as they have in our other reports from the Great Southern Youth Sector Forum [2022], Midwest Youth Sector Forum [2021] and the State of Youth Sector Forum [2021]), highlighting the challenges the sector and young people face regarding Housing & Homelessness, Education, Employment, Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs, Youth Justice, Child Protection and emerging more, Climate Change.

However, as we heard from our conversations, these remote communities have less access to resources to support outcomes in the aforementioned areas compared to major regional hubs or the greater Perth metropolitan area, exacerbating systemic issues throughout remote communities.

STRENGTHS IDENTIFIED IN THE COMMUNITY AND YOUTH SECTOR

Stability supports collaboration

There is some stability in staffing in some communities of the Murchison, which has also seen networking through interagency collaboration improve.

Shire youth services providing positive environments

We heard that LGAs have committed frontline staff in some Murchison communities who are passionately driven to achieve positive outcomes for the young people of the Murchison. Both Meekatharra and Mount Magnet provide after-school services so that the young people of these towns feel safe and well connected.

Community support holding towns together when demand for services is high

Participants told us that many local community members, alongside the on-ground sector are committed and passionate allies when it comes to providing safe spaces for young people. This is seen through families often supporting young people when demand for services outstrips their capacity to deliver (due to limitations in resources and funding).

Strong sporting interest among young people

We heard that many young people love their sport and participate well when offered the opportunity to partake in extracurricular activities. Participants told us this is evident in Meekatharra with the local Shire's youth team providing safe and fun sporting activities. This also provides opportunities for young people to try new things and connect with community, whilst having their potential interests and talents recognised.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY SECTOR WITH A SUMMARY OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Diagnostic supports are needed

Participants shared that the lack of assessment availability, cost of assessments and ongoing support to diagnose young people has meant that diagnosis and support for neurodivergence is unachievable for many, especially vulnerable cohorts who do not have the financial means to seek diagnosis elsewhere. This can impact outcomes for young people across a range of areas.

We heard the need for each school and region to have specialist staff available who can engage with young people, conduct assessments and provide tools and support, to mitigate lengthy wait times. Referrals to telehealth and links to additional specialists could then be made for those in remote and regional WA where medication and/or further supports may be required.

Young people in the justice system need additional supports

We heard from participants the need for ongoing support for young people with complex needs who are involved with the justice system. This might look like optional free ongoing support through to age 25 with significant handover as required to adult services, and could work on a partnership model between organisations and government agencies.

Employment and career pathway opportunities are limited

There are limited opportunities for students to experience the workforce in the Murchison district. Having schools provide more career pathway options in upper secondary and community sector providing placements could address this issue.

This includes volunteer positions such as bushfire brigades, Police Cadets, Volunteer Ambulance Officers, as well as paid sports umpiring and access to coaching training courses. This also includes working with local businesses to identify local employment gaps and partnering with the community workforce to offer the necessary training for eligible students to fill some of these vacancies.

Youth centres and staff need to be resourced appropriately in line with demand for services and support provided

Youth centres in Mount Magnet and Meekatharra are run by passionately driven youth workers and lived experience youth mentors. However, being in a small regional town, we heard of staff who are always 'on the clock' and significantly overburdened with the responsibility of providing support outside of set program hours due to presenting needs of young people, and the limitations in funding and resourcing.

We heard from sector that young people trust and respect staff and these roles, having built a relationship with them over the years and in addition, there is no alternative for young people to go elsewhere for support outside of set programs or after hours. We heard the need for greater resourcing for youth centres and staff in remote and rural areas of the Midwest, to fit the reality and demand for service. This extends to provision of additional support for workers who are across local government, child welfare and youth and wellbeing sectors, and an increase in capacity of services to mitigate burnout within the sector.

An increase in mental health supports is needed

We heard there is a real lack of mental health service support in the Murchison district. This includes no in-person psychologist or psychiatry support, with a visiting school psychologist allocated certain times to visit the schools.

Participants shared that providing more free training in youth mental health first aid and trauma-informed practices is necessary. This would be for all services and community members in the district who support young people and needs to be held on a more regular basis.

We heard the importance of this as professionals and community members in regional WA are often wearing multiple hats to meet needs yet may require upskilling in some areas. Given the limitations in services and resources in the regions, providing communities with the tools they need to support each other is vital.

Participants shared the need for more tools and services to better prevent mental health issues escalating into crisis, rather than simply providing reactionary support to communities when problems have worsened. The sector highlighted this was a concerning and a reoccurring issue when a tragic incident occurs.

Youth justice reform is needed

Further programs and opportunities need to be made available to young people who have offended or those at risk of offending in regional WA. Using therapeutic justice models could address the rates of reoffending by providing community-led, on country youth justice initiatives to provide holistic and culturally based support to young people and their families to divert them from the justice system. We heard of opportunities for youth justice services to work with the community to find alternative options for punitive action, such as volunteering and community work orders, and participation in on country programs.

Disengagement from school needs to be addressed

Attending school prepares a young person with better knowledge, understanding, and potentially the ability to further their employment and financial prospects, however, schools may also struggle to meet the needs of all their students. Disengagement can occur when individual needs are not met, affecting attendance and resulting in missed learnings. We heard this is a growing issue throughout the Murchison communities, requiring school decision makers to explore meeting local needs and be granted the flexibility to modify the

curriculum and provide programs and opportunities to suit the individual school and its students.

For some young people, school may be their main source of support, guidance, education and even food, and therefore school-based improvements need to be a priority.

Child welfare concerns around school attendance

We heard challenges around communication and collaboration between government agencies when it comes to the responsibility to monitor the school attendance of students. As school attendance is compulsory in Western Australia for young people in pre-primary to year 12 or equivalent, this needs to be considered a child safety issue and must be regulated by a whole system approach to recognise and find solutions to issues that arise.

Increase physical, mental and emotional well-being education in schools by specialist delivery staff

We heard a growing concern among sector professionals regarding young people being exposed and/or subjected to unhealthy and inappropriate activities whilst underage. Being exposed to unhealthy habits and relationships, with lack of consent awareness due to the age of cohort involved, has raised concern about possible further detrimental outcomes for young people.

Specialist delivery staff are required to facilitate in-person and online education and many are available from external organisations to support the delivery of this vital information and resources for all school-aged children and young people. We heard that schools need to utilise these services more often, which will also alleviate the increasing strain on education staff that often leads to a high turnover of staff in regional areas. It can also provide an opportunity for young people to seek help in those smaller communities, where they otherwise may not feel comfortable doing so due to the fear of sharing confidential information with local staff they are familiar with.

Local level child protection supports are needed

Participants shared with us that identifying and addressing issues around child protection at a local level was vital. We heard that the current system and reliance on Perth-based professionals making decisions via phone is leaving local services and community members disappointed their concerns of a child's welfare is not being assessed correctly. We heard from sector professionals that services and community members have felt let down too often by the system designed to protect vulnerable young people in their community and are concerned about the ongoing issue of children left in unsafe environments, even after a report to investigate a child's welfare concern is submitted, with no feedback provided. In this region there is a lack of services, staffing and systems that can provide a timely response to need.

We also heard the need for easier reporting systems to be put in place, so that there is clearer understanding around who can make a report, and how to do so. A local agency

could provide assistance if required. Support and upskilling from Department of Communities – Child Protection is required to inform services of protocols to follow, as well as identifying and responding to the issues noted by community. Alternative arrangements need to be provided, such as out-of-home care options locally for communities who lack service support.

Domestic violence and alcohol and other drug use requires a harm minimisation approach in rural communities

We heard of a substantial amount of family and domestic violence occurring in the Murchison area, generally fueled by alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, with cases going unreported.

We heard that information and upskilling to support school staff to recognise issues would be helpful, with schools then able to invite AOD service support teams in to promote prevention and postvention supports to young people, utilising harm minimisation strategies and empowerment programs. This could be combined with increased investment in community based non-clinical support services and programs to increase availability in the area. Partnerships can be established with schools and community leaders to provide on country program support, and other opportunities to provide education, rehabilitation and reduce risk for young people who are experiencing AOD-related harm.

Support is needed for families in the first five years of a child's life

We heard that remote areas of the Midwest are not serviced adequately when it comes to supporting families within the first five years of their child's life. Programs to support individual family needs in early childhood should be invested in to enhance accessibility in more remote areas of WA. It was suggested that local community champions could be paid to represent these programs, and for local people to be trained to deliver programs and initiatives, to avoid delivery solely on a fly-in, fly-out or drive-in, drive-out basis.

Overcrowding in remote housing creating unhealthy environments for young people

We heard of overcrowding in the Murchison area impacting on young people, with the need for social housing developments and the opportunity for young people to live independently.

Incentives are needed for professionals to remain in rural communities

Many skilled professionals in the community are not originally from the Murchison, and we heard there is a high turnover of employment in the region. This impacts on relationship development and continuity of engagement with young people.

Incentives such as providing district allowances, free or subsidised accommodation and the flexibility for staff to re-develop frameworks that meet local needs and generate success, may help mitigate these issues. We also heard interest from community members in

opportunities to advance their education and professional skillsets while remaining within their community, via online platforms or supported by industries who provide local services.

Further youth-friendly infrastructure and activities are needed

We heard that prevalence of antisocial behaviours is linked to boredom and lack of opportunity. Often communities are not built with young people in mind, lacking appropriate infrastructure and activities to accommodate the needs and interest of local young people.

Creating more opportunities for activities after school and over weekends (campouts, sporting events, art workshops etc.) and having those workers/champions within communities who are respected be the ones to deliver these opportunities may be a way to address this. It is critical to involve young people in the design, planning and implementation of such activities, and asking for their input on what is needed is paramount.

Food insecurity is a growing concern for rural and remote communities

With the recent increases in the cost of living, food insecurity has become a major concern in the Murchison. We heard anecdotes of health impacts and illness in young people, linked to poor nutrition, as well as difficulties in obtaining fresh fruit and vegetables in rural and remote areas, with those available often expensive and past expiry dates.

There is stigma around receiving medical support

We heard anecdotes from participants that young people have shared that there is a large amount of shame around going to seek medical help in town. In Meekatharra this is mainly due to the proximity of the school, which is right next to the medical centre, where it may be rare not to be seen seeking help or medical advice and was identified as a significant barrier in help-seeking. We heard the need for more opportunities for support from other providers such as visiting clinicians and exploring a different or more discreet location for medical care to support young people to feel comfortable seeking medical help.

Long term funding and support to acquire grants is needed

We heard that funding packages are sometimes difficult to navigate, and that support in how to apply and acquit funding is needed, with the provision of grant officers to more regional and remote areas of WA potentially assisting this.

We heard challenges around funding for provision of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) services. There can be perceptions of 'box-ticking' and frustrations in communities at the lack of meaningful support provided, despite the funding commitment made to support young people in the area. We heard that long-term funding, providing more permanent employment opportunities and partnerships with local services is needed to demonstrate commitment and investment in regional and remote towns and provide consistency.

Where to from here?

Thank you to the community and youth sector professionals of the Murchison for contributing their time and effort to meet and collaborate to provide the information highlighted in this report.

By highlighting key regional issues, we hope this report adds value and supports the Murchison district's youth sector planning, collaboration and advocacy work.

YACWA will share this report with key decision makers, to highlight and advocate for the key issues raised by the youth sector in smaller towns throughout the Midwest. This report will also guide YACWA on where to focus our advocacy efforts and where to play our role in supporting the Midwest young people moving forward.

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