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2022 NORTH MIDLANDS

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.

In 2021, YACWA received pilot funding from Lotterywest 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.

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 identify solutions at a local level. A small number of local representatives ranging from government, non-government organisations and community participated in the North Midlands 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 **North Midlands** communities, including Carnamah, Coorow, Greenhead, Leeman, Mingenew, Morawa, Perenjori and Three Springs. To review the Listening Tour Reports of 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

Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers successfully engaging students in school

Participants highlighted the success of having Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) within schools. We heard that AIEOs have helped keep young Aboriginal people engaged in school activities and provide culturally appropriate support to local Aboriginal families.

Agriculture school supporting local needs

There is a popular agriculture school in Morawa that has students enrolled from all over Western Australia. We heard that the Western Australian College of Agriculture Morawa provides great opportunity for growth within the North Midlands economy as it attracts visitors to the area and has the potential for more young people to remain living and working within the region upon graduating.

Mental health supports are growing

In recent years, there has been the development of the North Midlands Project. This has contributed to new programs and initiatives in the North Midlands area that have been designed to support the sector and community in trauma-informed practices and youth mental health first aid. We heard these are valuable resources for the whole community. There are also visiting and locally based (Morawa) support services who focus on counselling, suicide prevention and LGBTQIA+ support.

Community policing teams in regional shires of the Midwest are building positive rapport

Some participants shared that there is a strong, positive police presence in all shires. We heard that police officers are involved in community events and take a preventative approach to involving themselves in supporting the community, participating in discos and visiting schools and sporting events to build positive relationships with the young people in the district.

Youth centres are well-utilised

We heard that youth centres and programs for young people (operated by local governments with resourcing for this within their portfolio) are well-utilised by the community. Some local governments also offer traineeship programs to young people,

helping keep them within the community by providing the skills necessary to support them through employment and to build future leaders locally.

Community Development Officers support each other

We heard that the Community Development Officers (CDOs) of each shire in the North Midlands district meet regularly to share ideas and initiatives in supporting their designated communities. The CDOs take a community of practice approach in creating effective programs and service delivery.

Sporting interest in the region is strong

There is a strong interest in sport in the North Midlands district among young people, with towns keen to compete and explore more opportunities to use sport to promote mental and physical well-being.

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

More options for affordable, sustainable and youth-appropriate housing are needed

There is a lack of affordable and sustainable housing opportunities for workers, families and independent young people in the region, and we heard that this is a growing concern in the community. Young people are also at a disadvantage when trying to start in the workforce as they struggle to find housing to accommodate their needs, such as in proximity to their work. Many of the houses in the area are aged and in need of repairs and upgrades and some are still damaged and uninhabitable due to Cyclone Seroja, which significantly affected some towns in the Midwest in April 2021. The allocation of resources to upgrade and maintain this existing housing stock should be considered a priority.

One idea (also heard by YACWA in other areas) is to have young people who are experiencing unemployment, involved in fixing up rundown houses within communities for them to reside in. This initiative can be used to provide positive employment opportunities for young people at-risk of disengagement and is also a way to enhance local skill sets and increase the pool of locally based workers.

Further education and employment opportunities for young people are necessary

We heard there is limited opportunity for students to experience the workforce in the North Midlands district. It was identified that the provision of more career pathway options in upper secondary school and community sector placements could address this issue.

The sector also suggested furthering the current opportunities by providing options for flexible off-campus, after-hours learning. It was identified that local government could potentially support student engagement with these options by providing a 24/7 drop-in centre with laptops for enrolled students to complete off-campus/on-line qualifications.

Disengagement from education is growing

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 North Midlands 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.

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 to unhealthy and inappropriate sexual behaviours whilst underage. This exposure, combined with the lack of consent awareness and education provided due to the age of the cohort involved, has resulted in concern about possible further detrimental outcomes for young people.

Staff with specialist skills in this area can facilitate in-person and online education sessions and many are available from external organisations to deliver this vital information, support and resources for all school-aged children and young people. We heard that schools need to utilise these services more often, which could 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 private information with local staff they are familiar with.

Increase supports for young people who are neurodivergent

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.

Youth Centre facilities are needed

We heard that the lack of adequate youth spaces in some towns and areas where young people can hang out in a safe environment can lead to isolation and boredom, resulting in antisocial behaviours or young people not wanting to stay or participate in the town's activities.

More opportunities for young people to be involved in community activities, including proposing their ideas and designs as to what this could and should look like to meet their needs, is vital and was identified by participants as an important element to addressing this issue. Providing young people with a space that they want to engage in also provides the sector with the opportunity to engage and offer service support.

Community and sector mental health training is required

In recent years the North Midlands region has gained some mental health support, though we heard that there is still a lack of mental health resources and tools for educators and a lack of service availability for community in the North Midlands district.

Providing free training in youth mental health first aid and trauma informed practices to educators and services supporting young people, such as those in residential support roles in regional WA is necessary and frequently requested. This also is an important tool for community members in regional WA to be upskilled/trained, as they are often wearing multiple hats to respond to unmet needs.

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.

We also heard from participants about the need for ongoing support for young people with complex needs who are involved with the justice system.

Community employees wear many hats and can be utilised for their knowledge

Community members in roles not directly related to youth or community service work in regional areas are prime examples of how jobs not requiring this specialist experience can share valuable knowledge to the sector supporting young people. For example, we heard in the North Midlands that while young people are being transported between towns or to and from school, the bus drivers hear many stories of both concerns and strengths identified within the community. This could potentially be a resource for the local sector to improve service needs, however, consideration needs to be given to the training and knowledge required to navigate what to do with these stories, including handling privacy concerns and contextualising circumstances with care.

There is also opportunity to upskill a broader range of community services and people working in environments with young people, such as in youth mental health first aid, trauma informed practice and responding to disclosures. Where youth-focused forums are held, consideration could be given to extend invitations to the broader community where relevant and appropriate. This opportunity for community members to discuss what they hear and experience on the ground can be vital. In addition, they can receive free upskilling on how to recognise, report and support young people at a community level.

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.

Mandatory reporting concerns growing among sector and community

We heard the need for easier and more efficient reporting systems to be put in place, that reduce workloads and provide feedback on progress and outcomes to those doing the reporting. We also heard the need for support and information to be provided to community members to increase understanding of how to identify and report a concern, to alleviate reliance solely on sector professionals, who may not be mandatory reporters themselves.

In addition, information about what systems and options exist in each community to support young people who need out of home care (both short and long-term) is needed. Having a local agency provide assistance to sector and community with this could be an option.

Emergency relief is needed to provide support to families

Emergency relief packages need to be made easily accessible to families, as we heard that many of the concerns participants receive from community members in need of support relate to hunger, neglect or temporary homelessness. A better systems approach is needed and could be delivered by local providers, with support provided to community members to understand and identify what is available to them and how to access.

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.

Supporting locals to become Youth Sector professionals in remote areas

There is a limited number of youth professionals in regional WA but there are plenty of passionate and driven people willing to support the young people in their community. Opportunities to upskill and provide training to community members to become youth workers and mentors in their community is an important step in increasing local skill level and support in regional WA.

Overcrowding in remote housing and ratios in accommodation services causing concerns around the wellbeing of young people

Concerns were raised around the lack of available and appropriate housing for families and young people in the North Midlands area. Linked to this we heard concerns around exposure of young people to sexual behaviour and online sexual material, alcohol and other drug use and family and domestic violence whilst in these environments.

There is an urgent need for social housing developments and opportunities for appropriate and safer housing for young people, including those who want to live independently in the North Midlands.

Long-term funding is required to successfully implement positive outcomes in regional communities and grant application support is required

Short-term funding does not provide sustainability or ensure longevity, even if success is seen in the interim. Services are impacted by this in their pursuit to achieve positive, long-term outcomes in remote communities.

We heard from participants about a lack information around accessing appropriate funding to secure the continuity of successful programs, potentially due to lack of information sharing

as well as hesitancy of funding bodies to commit to long term funding in communities with smaller, changing populations.

Participants shared that application requirements to apply for grants can be difficult to navigate and support to do this successfully would be beneficial. Flexibility is required from funders around potential adaptations and changes in programs to respond to needs and local context.

Collaborative approaches are needed between organisations to achieve maximum outcomes

Removing silos that restrict services' ability to effectively work together is vital for effective co-design in communities to achieve positive outcomes. This can mitigate duplication in programs and services working to achieve the same outcomes. Providing sector with opportunities to share programs and services with one another is ideal. Facilitation of meetings and capture of this information provides a continued network of support and supports collaboration.

Provide cultural awareness and appropriate supports delivered by local Aboriginal community members

We heard the importance of addressing underlying factors such as dispossession, intergenerational trauma and loss of connection to country and culture in community. It is critical to involve and provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to lead discussions and design decision-making processes on issues that impact them, with provision of resources and tools to support this.

LGA resourcing for youth engagement and planning is needed

Strategic youth engagement plans are needed for each LGA, as well as creating more opportunities for staff to network and engage with one another to achieve best practice across the North Midlands district.

It is also important to involve young people in the decision-making processes when designing something for them. Each LGA should be able to provide and support programs for the young people in their community. We heard that identifying local community members as suitable champions to run these programs as mentors in paid casual positions could be beneficial and providing additional staffing support.

Invest in mechanisms to raise the voice of young people

We heard that the shires in the North Midlands district could work together and support a single youth advisory committee. This could enable the identification of young community leaders who LGAs can support and upskill moving forward to fill local positions in the shire. This could also address the need to hear from the young people in this region and provide a clearer picture of what is required to support their needs.

Where to from here?

Thank you to the community and youth sector professionals across the North Midlands district for contributing their time and effort to meet and collaborate to provide the information highlighted in this report, as well as participate via phone and email.

By highlighting key regional issues, we hope this report adds value and supports the North Midlands 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 us on where to focus our advocacy efforts and how to refine our role in supporting the Midwest young people and communities moving forward.

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