



The State of the Youth Sector Forum 2021 :

Forum Report

Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia

Acknowledgement of Country

YACWA acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of this land and its waters. We wish to pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend this to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeing this message.



Photographer Acknowledgement:

Susie Blatchford, Pixel Poetry

Sincerest thanks to Susie for her photography at the State of the Youth Sector Forum, and her continued support of YACWA and young people across Western Australia.

Sponsor Acknowledgement

The 2021 State of the Youth Sector Forum was made possible through support from Department of Communities and Lotterywest.

Lotterywest funding supported the attendance of regional youth workers and sector professionals from as far as Esperance, Albany, Kalgoorlie and Broome. The input of these attendees is essential to capturing the trends and current concerns and trends facing the youth sector across our state.



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About the State of the Youth Sector Forum

The State of the Youth Sector Forum (the Forum) is an annual event held by the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA), and is an opportunity for youth sector representatives to congregate and develop solutions to problems facing young people and the youth sector across the state.

This edition of the Forum was held on Monday 4th October 2021 and was attended by around 100 individuals who reflected various areas of service delivery and governance in the youth sector. This included youth workers and executives from community organisations, as well as representatives from local and State Government agencies.

The Purpose of the Day

The broad aim of the Forum was to provide an opportunity for the youth sector to come together, find common ground, explore weaknesses in the system, and build a collective list of priorities for advocacy in the year to come. Three key elements of this were:

1. **Networking:** Providing an opportunity for the youth sector and other key stakeholders that engage with young people to come together to build collaborative relationships and discover what is occurring in various organisations across the service spectrum.
2. **Collaboration:** Discovering synergies and opportunities for collaboration between organisations that may not otherwise have the capacity and platform for meaningful interaction. This includes opening up engagement across State Government agencies, youth services and young people as well as between service management and youth workers in order to facilitate more cohesive action to improve outcomes for young people in WA.
3. **Consultation:** Allow the youth sector more broadly an opportunity to directly engage with decision makers across the State Government and to inform the ongoing advocacy of their peak body. The State of the Youth Sector Forum directly informs YACWA's Pre-Budget Submission development.

Who attended?

Over 60 individuals attended the State of the Youth Sector Forum, representing a variety of service provider organisations across a range of areas of youth engagement and support. Attendees were a diverse mix of frontline service delivery workers, executive level managers, representatives from local governments and State Government agencies as well as other stakeholders that provide key roles in engaging young people.

During the final part of the day, we were joined by several Members of Parliament and senior public service executives. Engaging with these key decision makers was intended to establish collective approaches to complex problems, break down the silos between all levels of decision making that affect young people, and allow YACWA members to directly speak to their own views and perspectives.

We wish to acknowledge the attendance of the following Members of Parliament who donated their time to engage with the sector:

- Hon Dave Kelly MLA, Minister for Youth

- Hon Dr Brad Pettit MLC
- Hon Dr Katrina Stratton MLA, Member for Nedlands
- Hon Jessica Shaw MLA, Member for Swan Hills
- Hon Samantha Rowe MLC, Member for East Metropolitan Region
- Hon David Scaife MLA, Member for Victoria Park
- Hon Hannah Beazley MLA, Member for Victoria Park

In addition, the following key public service executives and VIPs:

- Colin Pettit, Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Mike Rowe, Director-General at Department of Communities
- Chad Stewart, A/Executive Director, Strategy at Department of Communities
- Sharon Webb and Rebekah Marton on behalf of Hon Stephen Dawson

And finally, to Shaun Nannup for his Welcome to Country. Shaun is a Whadjuk Noongar man, and has been a supporter and friend to YACWA for many years. We were honoured to see his passion and support for the youth sector on the day.

About this Report

The Report has been focused on the following key systems unpacked on the day:

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

Each year, YACWA hosts the State of the Youth Sector Forum and incorporates the sector's input into our advocacy agenda, including into key documents such as our [2022-23 Pre-Budget Submission](#), which was released in December 2021.

This document is meant to be read as a point-in-time capture, highlighting the key trends and insights the sector has observed on how Western Australia is faring in its support for young people. It's insights reflect broad themes.

Overview of Themes from the Sector

From the discussions, YACWA heard common themes between the tables and portfolios around issues and opportunities in the youth sector. These themes provide a snapshot of policy and resourcing considerations that could improve outcomes and the accessibility of services to young people if addressed.

The common themes we heard were:

- 1. Collaboration between the youth sector and local, State and Federal Governments needs to be improved.**

This issue was a frequent point of discussion amongst attendees at the Forum as silos between different sectors and government agencies often cause a breakdown of efficient and collaborative procurement and data sharing, hampering the ability of organisations with separate or multiple funding streams to deliver effective services for young people.

This issue was seen by attendees at the Forum as entrenched within ways of working within the system and as a result has had a longstanding impact the youth sector, putting increased regulatory burden on services and allowing for significant gaps in support that young people urgently need address. To address requires more flexibility, coordination and diffusion of power between different government agencies and a willingness to deliver more strategic joint-funding approaches.

- 2. Additional resourcing is needed to support mainstream services to meet the needs of diverse young people who require specific care (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, young people from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds, and LGBTIQA+ young people).**

Many cohorts of young people have unique needs and experience issues in different ways to the 'typical' young person. Homelessness among LGBTIQA+ young people has unique drivers and requires tailored responses in services that aim to assist them. Similarly, mental health services must be culturally informed to ensure they are supporting Aboriginal young people with appropriate care.

This issue was raised by multiple tables and in multiple discussions, and the sector wanted to see support for services to develop their knowledge and improve service accessibility for different cohorts. There is a need for resources and support for cohort-specific, trauma-informed and multi-disciplinary knowledge and practice to be improved across the entire service system – ensuring young people receive the right support when they first seek help.

- 3. Core institutions such as health and hospitals are an opportunity to improve early interventions for at-risk young people.**

Many young people (particularly those who identify as LGBTIQA+) have reported to youth workers that they have had adverse experiences accessing the health system, meaning that their outcomes and disadvantage have worsened as a result.

There is an urgent need for hospital staff and management to undergo cohort specific and trauma informed trauma informed training which allows them to provide a more supportive environment for young people experiencing crisis. In addition more specific beds that are designated for young people to support them with mental illness should be prioritised.

4. Procurement and contracting policies can be improved to support long-term outcomes and collaboration in the youth sector.

Many service providers within the community services sector are working with old contracts that have not appropriately kept up with the changing costs of service delivery, particularly with regards to the impacts of the Equal Remuneration Order. For many providers, this has resulted in significant hardship on staff within services to deliver on KPIs with increasingly thin resourcing, with some service providers in extreme cases requested by funding agencies to scale back delivery in order to remain within current funding frameworks.

There is a need for the State Government across all departments to recognise that adequate yet flexible funding to meet changing needs is a critical component of agile and appropriate service delivery, and the provision of appropriate long-term contracting arrangements should be prioritised for the community services sector. Long-term contracts also provide services opportunities to test, evaluate, and adapt to better respond to needs which will improve the overall quality of service delivery.

5. Lack of access to basic necessities such as housing, mental healthcare and identification remain the most significant barriers to the ability of youth workers to provide effective support to young people to break cycles of disadvantage.

It is incredibly difficult for the youth sector to provide effective support for young people experiencing homelessness or other significant hardship when their basic needs are not being met across multiple areas of life, such as nutrition, access to mental health or AOD support and adequate identification.

There is a need for the State Government to better resource the youth sector to be able to provide additional support beyond their existing remits, such as specialist mental health support, foster partnerships with Federal agencies such as Centrelink to build partnerships with youth services, and build the capacity of schools to provide increased support to students who are disengaged to ensure their basic needs are being met.

Child Protection



Summary of the Discussions

- **Adequate support for young people transitioning from out-of-home care into independent living is crucial to ensuring positive long-term outcomes.**
The Sector noted that despite young people historically not receiving enough supports when leaving care into independent living, the permanent expansion of Homestretch has been an incredibly important step to ensuring these transitional services are better resourced and coordinated to support every young person leaving the child protection system. There was strong agreement that access to flexible brokerage funding to build a service package that meets the unique needs of individual young people and develop their independent living skills and resilience is crucial for the successful transition of young people out of care.
- **More collaboration is needed between State Government agencies and the youth sector particularly in regional areas.**
Feedback from the Forum highlighted that there is still a significant issue in the Child Protection System and siloed ways of working between the Department of Communities (Communities), other government agencies, and the youth sector. Whilst it was noted that some districts such as Mirrabooka have been more successful in establishing longstanding collaborative partnerships, there has been very little intentional movement towards fostering an integrated service system at a strategic level. This is particularly in terms of sharing of data and information held by Communities as well as consistent resourcing for the sector that builds the capacity required to enable strong partnerships.

Homestretch was again mentioned as a good example of a burgeoning Sector/Government partnership in out of home care that has fostered a more equal and transparent relationship.

- **More cultural competency is required for mainstream care services to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.**

Given that there is only one Aboriginal foster care organisation in Western Australia, attendees felt that there is not enough cultural competency knowledge across the sector and more engagement with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Elders is required. It was noted that the announcement of the Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making Pilot is an important first step in this regard.

- **Young people with disabilities are often not being identified and diagnosed in out of home care and this is having a significant impact on their life outcomes.**

The Sector discussed how many young people are often not provided with early diagnosis of a disability in their care experience. They felt without this diagnosis young people would not get the awareness and support required to address any issues they are facing and this would have a significant negative impact on their life trajectory.

Solutions from the Sector

- **Ensure flexible brokerage funding tailored to individual needs are a crucial part of expansion of the Homestretch program across every region in the State.**

There was unequivocal agreement that access to brokerage funding that utilised based on area of identified need that is agreed upon by a young person and their care worker following set principles such as those identified in the 'Invest In Me' funding through Homestretch. It is especially important that consideration is given for the differences in costs between regions as young people from regional and remote areas may require more funding to access critical things such as education opportunities and mental healthcare.

- **Set up more mechanisms that enable a more collaborative approach between the State Government and Youth Sector.**

Enabling enhanced accountability, transparency and collaboration will only be truly integrated into practice across the Child Protection System when current issues and gaps in resourcing are identified and acknowledged, and purposefully addressed through policy implementation that is committed to and implemented in partnership with the youth sector. The sector wanted to see Communities commit to facilitating interagency meetings across the state in partnership with youth services, ACCOs and other relevant agencies at an operational level in order to better coordinate service delivery and access to supports for young people in care. This would also include regular sharing of data and information that is in line with guidelines around privacy for young people.

- **More specialist knowledge is required to ensure young people are receiving early attention and diagnosis for disabilities and neurodivergence.**

Young people who receive diagnosis, treatment and support early to mitigate any adverse impacts of physical and/or neurodevelopmental disabilities are meaningfully empowered to navigate and remove any social or environmental barriers that they may face. The sector was clear that more training is required to identify signs of trauma, disability and/or neurodiversity in order to support and enable the young person to access specialist assessment and diagnosis which they would be supported to do through resourcing from the Department.

Employment



Summary of the Discussions

- **Young people are not being equipped with the skills and knowledge required to navigate the job market, maintain employment and manage tax.**

In line with feedback we commonly hear from young people, the Sector felt that there has been an ongoing lack of opportunities to learn key skills that enable gaining and maintaining stable employment for young people who do not always have adequate support from family. Of the ones that do exist many are either often at capacity with significant waitlists or often delivered in a generalised and information-heavy nature, failing to be individualised to the young person's needs. These skills, such as building and developing a resume, interviewing and interpersonal skills, and managing tax and super, are integral to the successful pursuit of employment, and so without these many young people struggle to firmly establish themselves in the job market. This has meant that it is often left up to youth workers to provide this support, despite high caseloads providing limited capacity to do so.

- **Navigating Centrelink is complex and confusing, with strict criteria often excluding many young people who need assistance.**

A common consensus among stakeholders attending the Forum was that they regularly work with young people who face significant barriers navigating Centrelink and delays to accessing financial support. This has meant they have had to utilise significant capacity to support young people through the process, often having to act as an advocate on a

young person's behalf when contesting fines, withholding of payments or exclusion from access.

- **Many young people have limited knowledge of their rights in the workplace, and this often leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.**

Attendees at the Forum said that many of the young people they work with have jobs in hospitality or retail that are both casual and insecure. These young people also have limited knowledge of their legal rights in the workplace, including pay rates, minimum and maximum hours, as well as leave entitlements. Evidence shows that these industries have a higher likelihood of systematic and deliberate underpayment of wages and other entitlements¹ and as such attendees felt that this was an issue that is significantly impacting many vulnerable young people and hampering their ability to improve their financial stability.

Solutions from the Sector

- **Fund the development of a statewide education program to teach life and employment related skills to young people in schools and services.**

There is a critical need to vastly upscale and enhance the delivery of education to young people that fills in the gaps between mainstream schooling and transitions to employment, ensuring these are embedded in early education for young people both within and outside school. Current approaches to this are often spread across multiple institutions and carried out in a limited, ad-hoc and non-compulsory manner. The sector felt that this could be improved by bringing together a lead agency alongside of a consortium of partners to devise a peer-led education program that delivers modules on employment and life skills in both schools and youth services, professional development workshops for teachers and youth workers, as well as education for employers on how to engage and support young people looking for jobs.

- **Encourage TAFE and local businesses to engage with young people accessing youth services to provide opportunities for employment.**

The sector felt that there are significant opportunities available for local businesses to engage with youth service providers (particularly supported accommodation providers) and establish a partnership on employment pathways for young people looking for employment. This could also leverage the 'Lower Fees, Local Skills' TAFE courses to provide young people in supported accommodation a guaranteed pathway from attaining qualifications into steady employment.

- **The State Government and youth advocacy organisations such as YACWA to engage Federal Government agencies such as Services Australia (Centrelink) and the Fair Work Ombudsman to advocate for changes in practice and youth engagement.**

Much of the responsibility for employment and welfare support in Australia sits with the Federal Government, and so there are a number of changes that the sector feels could

¹ The Government of Western Australia (2019). *Inquiry into Wage Theft in Western Australia*. Retrieved from https://www.commerce.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/atoms/files/report_of_the_inquiry_into_wage_theft_0.pdf

be championed by YACWA and the State Government to improve their policies and practice for young people, including:

- o Developing a comprehensive education package for young people on their rights in the workplace and deliver this alongside peer-educators in schools and services across WA (Fair Work Ombudsman).
- o Engage and upskill community-based youth workers to deliver personalised case management for young people accessing welfare, in order to assist them in finding long-term stable employment.
- o Reform current JobSeeker requirements such as mutual obligations and dependent/independent classification criteria to enhance accessibility for young people who need to access welfare support and improve transitions into employment.

Alcohol and Other Drugs



Summary of the Discussions

- **There is not enough funding for services with specialist AOD knowledge in the youth sector**

Despite some positive investments in this space the sector still felt that the majority of services are ill-equipped to deal with the complex issues that result from addiction, and as a result many young people who need support are often turned away with little alternatives available. Funding for AOD specialist programs is still heavily invested in adult-focused services, which many young people are unable to access or successfully engage with.

- **A criminalised approach to AOD use continues to fail to adequately address the issues surrounding addiction and causes further harm to young people and the community.**

Despite decades of evidence showing the criminalisation of AOD use as part of the 'war on drugs' have failed to reduce addiction-related societal harms and often increased individual harm^[1], the sector is frustrated that these mentalities still permeate the broad responses from the State Government to engaging with young people in this area. This is reinforced by the fact that over two-thirds of State Government funding going to supply reduction with a much smaller proportion going towards harm reduction. Attendees remarked that this both limits the funding available to expand health-focused AOD services for young people and limits the ability of youth workers to prioritise a harm reduction approach to supporting young people with addiction issues.

- **Abstinence-based approaches to AOD education are still a strong focus of the education system.**

As with ongoing attempts to implement a criminalised approach to AOD use, an abstinence-based approach to education has been noted by the sector as still strongly entrenched within mainstream schools, particularly when it comes to illicit substances. This has led to young people feeling both shamed and stigmatised about their drug use, causing them to not seek help of any issues that may be occurring as a result, putting them at further risk of drug-related harm. Attendees also pointed out the double standards in broader societal messaging between 'legal' and 'illegal' drugs, with alcohol consumption largely celebrated and encouraged across social events in Western Australia, despite causing significant harm to physical and mental health.

- **FASD and other AOD-influenced conditions are still not widely understood and identified early in young people.**

Although there has been a strong focus on the need to develop better frameworks for identifying and providing support for children and young people with neurological impairments influenced by AOD such as FASD, the sector noted that this is yet to be actioned into substantial progress by the State Government. This issue was considered a significant priority as it has a significant flow-on effect into pushing young people into the juvenile justice system and other areas of harm.

Solutions from the Sector

- **Schools need to play a stronger role in ensuring a harm reduction approach is embedded early, as well as acting as key points for early intervention.**

The sector felt that effective education in schools can be vital to ensure young people understand and employ harm reduction principles if they are engaging in AOD use and this will result in a reduction of AOD-based harm that is managed by both the health and community sectors. More training is also needed for teachers and school administrators to identify the early signs of conditions such as FASD so that they can ensure young people receive the supports needed as early as possible to prevent negative outcomes such as disengagement from schooling and interactions with the juvenile justice system. Peer-based education models were also regarded as crucial components that any school or service should incorporate into their engagements with young people.

- **More funding for harm reduction efforts focused towards young people must be prioritised in WA.**

The sector again reiterated the need for more funding for both early intervention and harm reduction to be more in line with the targets outlined in the 'Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015-2025'. This should prioritise young people as a key cohort in order to intervene early and prevent the significant physical and mental health issues that result from chronic long-term addiction.

- **Develop a youth-specific harm reduction strategy in partnership with the youth sector and young people with lived experience.**

The sector wanted to see a more dedicated focus from the State Government towards ensuring young people have the right services available to mitigate the harm of AOD help them tackle addiction in a community-based therapeutic setting rather than in hospital-based crisis care. This means conducting a whole of sector review of current AOD-related capabilities, determining gaps in service delivery and providing resourcing to upskill existing AOD services to provide better specialised support for young people.

Housing and Homelessness



Summary of the Discussions

- **Youth crisis accommodation services are overburdened and have little capacity to keep up with ongoing demand.**

The sector reiterated ongoing concerns that young people are struggling to access low threshold crisis accommodation, with high demand meaning that those with the most complex issues are often the ones who get turned away due to a severe shortage of staff capacity to provide the support required to maintain the young person's safety. In addition to this, many accommodation services often have restrictive eligibility criteria that is mandated through service contracts and can exclude the young people that need the most help.
- **The unavailability of affordable housing and rentals has severely impacted the ability of the youth sector to support young people with long-term solutions to homelessness.**

The ongoing lack of affordable housing and rentals has meant that sector has had very little options to support young people with a coordinated pathway from homelessness into long-term safe and secure accommodation. This has also meant that key early intervention programs such as Housing First for Youth have been difficult to properly implement as housing choice is crucial to its success.
- **Young people experiencing homelessness face a variety of barriers when it comes to accessing necessities such as applying for identification.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how crucial it is for young people experiencing homelessness to have access to key items such as identification (ID), with it required to undertake important actions such as getting vaccinated and accessing the Services WA app. The sector reported that many young people they provide case management to face unique barriers to accessing ID, and may have no avenues to secure it.

Solutions from the Sector

- **More investment is needed into early intervention to address family breakdown, prevent young people ending homeless and easing the pressure on crisis accommodation.**

Evidence shows that one of the most common reasons for children, young people and their families entering homelessness is familial breakdown, financial difficulties and domestic violence²¹. The sector felt there needs to be a significant increase in investment channeled into early intervention initiatives which provide intensive family support to disrupt the pathways into homelessness and allow children and young people to remain in safe, stable and supportive living environments.

- **Resource Community Housing Providers and youth services to provide low-cost affordable housing for young people.**

The sector felt that there needs to be reform in the way that social housing is allocated and managed, with many identifying that the community sector can play an important role in providing supports to young people to access and maintain secure tenancies. This would mean the implementation of a Housing First for Youth model where a percentage of social housing is allocated for young people and partnered with youth services who would be provided brokerage funding to support the young person to transition into independent living and maintain individual goals.

- **Partner with schools and youth services to develop a streamlined program for young people to access ID and other basic necessities.**

Access to ID and other basic necessities such as transport, Medicare and phones simple yet vitally important thing for many young people struggling to access housing, welfare and service support and so the sector argued that this should be a priority focus for the State Government moving forward. They suggested forming a partnership between the State Government, schools, local governments and youth services to develop one-stop-shop hubs across the state where young people can go to be supported to organise access to ID, SmartRiders, phone and data packages and other vital amenities.

Education



Summary of the Discussions

- **There are strong examples of successful alternative education models in WA that are providing effective support to young people who don't suit mainstream education.**

Often our mainstream education's one-size-fits-all approach can dissuade some young people from engaging with schooling and further education, with alternative education programs providing young people with a diverse range of options to further their knowledge. The sector reported that there are many alternative education models across WA that are showing strong results in reaching traditionally hard to engage young people and there could be used as models to inform the develop programs in other areas where there are strong rates of school disengagement. Examples include culturally-based models such as Olabud Doogethu's Mibala 'Learning On Country' Program in the Kimberley, peer-based models such as YACWA's Youth Educating Peers Project and community school models such as those implemented by the Cities of Kwinana and Rockingham, which embed community-based youth workers in schools to provide individualised education support.

- **Standardised testing is counter-productive for many young people and more individualised and diverse approaches need to be considered.**

Many of the individuals at the Forum who engage with young people in the education system received regular feedback that young people feel their individual voices and needs are not often fully considered in mainstream education when it comes to the

delivery of both learning models and methods of assessment. Young people are often not consulted when it comes to determining course structure and content and evidence shows this means traditional methods of education and assessment such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) have become outdated and no longer meet student's needs^[3].

- **There has been an ongoing failure to prioritise and embed cultural learning and safety in the school curriculum.**

The sector felt that education on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People is still largely absent from the WA school curriculum and this has severely impacted the ability of children and young people to learn about these important parts of Australian society from an early age. They noted that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have given feedback that they feel like they are not represented in educational settings and this has meant that many schools do not feel culturally safe or tailored to individual needs.

Solutions from the Sector

- **Invest in a program which partners schools with youth services to enable youth workers to provide support to young people in WA schools.**

Youth workers are specialists in engaging with children and young people who are disengaged from mainstream institutions and should be better utilised to ensure young people who are dealing with educational disadvantage and issues that may disrupt their schooling experience. There was common agreement among attendees at the forum that there are significant opportunities available in WA for schools to form partnerships with youth services and State/Local Governments to utilise youth workers to engage and support young people in schools who are experiencing disengagement and disadvantage. Evidence has shown that this model of educational support can contribute to successfully reducing educational disadvantage for students in low socio-economic areas^[4], and so this is where the sector believed this kind of initiative should be prioritised.

- **Work with the Federal Government to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and education in the curriculum.**

The sector wanted to see more of an intentional effort to integrate education on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, culture, history and connection to country into the core curriculum in all school settings. This includes both engaging First Nations Cultural Educators to deliver and embed culturally based knowledge and perspectives across the curriculum as well as expanding compulsory professional development provided for teachers to deliver more comprehensive education in this area.

- **Provide more opportunities for young people to have a say in shaping their education experience, including content, structure and assessment.**

Discussions on this table continually centered around the need for more youth consultation, feedback and evaluation within the education system. The sector felt that providing young people more ways to be active contributors to the direction of their

schooling experience would be an important way to teach and encourage active citizenship, provide individualised and engaging curriculum content and allow more rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of assessment methods such as NAPLAN in measuring student progress and aiding educational development.

- ^[1] Select Committee into Alternate Approaches to Reducing Illicit Drug Use and its Effects on the Community (2019). *Help, Not Handcuffs: Evidence-Based Approaches to Reducing Harm from Illicit Drug Use*. Retrieved from [https://parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/\(Report+Lookup+by+Com+ID\)/76DC63572B331E7F482584BE00219B5F/\\$file/id.alt.1911111.rpf.final.xx%20web.pdf](https://parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/(Report+Lookup+by+Com+ID)/76DC63572B331E7F482584BE00219B5F/$file/id.alt.1911111.rpf.final.xx%20web.pdf)
- ^[2] The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). *Australia's Children*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/6af928d6-692e-4449-b915-cf2ca946982f/aihw-cws-69-print-report.pdf.aspx?inline=true>
- ^[3] Wilson, R., Piccoli, A., Hargreaves, A., Ng, P. T., & Sahlberg, P. (2021). Putting Students First: Moving on from NAPLAN to a new educational assessment system (The Gonski Institute Policy Paper #2-2021). Retrieved from https://www.gie.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Putting%20Students%20First_final.pdf
- ^[4] Oakes, A Maier & J Danie (2017). *Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement*. Retrieved from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/productfiles/Community_Schools_Evidence_Based_Strategy_BRIEF.pdf.

Youth Justice



Summary of the Discussions

- **There are many examples of successful community-led programs that provide effective early-intervention, diversion and rehabilitation.**
At the heart of these crucial components of the justice system are a range of community-led alternatives to detention and other supports for at-risk young people that sustain great success despite incredibly limited resources. Examples mentioned such as the Olabud Doogethu Project in Halls Creek and the Youth Partnership Project in Armadale have seen important outcomes emerge from their work. However they like many others are resource intensive and require stronger support from funders.
- **Transitional supports for young people leaving detention into independent living are still grossly inadequate.**
In Western Australia there still exists a strong pipeline of young people exiting the justice system into poorer life outcomes such as poverty, homelessness and mental health and AOD issues^[1]. This is a factor in the ongoing high rates of recidivism for young people who have been in Banksia Hill Detention Centre. Attendees noted that many young people they work with struggling with these issues had also had ongoing interactions with WA Police and fail to receive the supports required to stabilise their living situation.
- **Overfocus on a punitive approach to youth justice continues to hamper efforts to provide therapeutic care to young people and reduce recidivism.**

The sector felt that there are many within both State Government and community-led parts of the justice system that wish to see a shift in approach to more therapeutically focused supports and programs that prioritise addressing the social determinants that influence youth crime and incarceration. However they noted that current funding structures often disproportionately resource punitive measures and entrench restrictive silos that prevent WA Police, the courts, the Department of Justice and youth services from working together at a systemic level to facilitate a collaborative approach that optimises the resources available.

[\[1\]](https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/end_homelessness_report_august_2021.pdf) The Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (2021). *Ending Homelessness in Western Australia 2021*. Retrieved from https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/end_homelessness_report_august_2021.pdf

Solutions from the Sector

- **Modify key parts of the youth justice system to provide significant and long-lasting improvements to crime prevention and youth wellbeing.**

There was common consensus among the sector that there are a few significant legislative changes that could be made that would provide an overwhelmingly positive flow-on effect across the entirety of the youth justice system. Key of these included raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14, ending mandatory sentencing and expanding resourcing for existing and new community-based programs that have the capacity and expertise required to step-in and provide alternative solutions.

- **Improve collaboration between the health, education and justice systems to strengthen early intervention.**

A recurring theme of these discussions is that many young people with neurological impairment are not being identified and provided support early enough to prevent disengagement from mainstream approaches to education and social services, leading to high proportions of incarceration for this cohort. Enabling the health and education sectors to better partner with diversion programs to identify those who have a neurological impairment and provide alternative supports to prevent sentencing is critical to facilitate a reduction of young people with conditions such as FASD ending up in detention.

- **More partnerships with community housing providers and support services to facilitate safe transition into independence.**

Young people exiting detention sometimes do not have any existing family supports or safe and stable living quarters, meaning that there needs to be a solid pathway available for them to access the housing and support required to effectively re-integrate them back into the community. The sector wanted to see these supports resourced as a priority as well as strengthened partnerships with community-based youth services to facilitate a holistic and long-term approach to transitioning young people into independent living.

Mental Health



Summary of the Discussions

- **Young people with mental health issues are frequently unable to access services such as accommodation due to service capacity and eligibility criteria.**
The sector raised that many services such as homelessness accommodation are struggling to provide support to those with mental health issues. The significant impact of COVID-19 straining already limited resources and exacerbating the demand for support, as well as often rigid eligibility criteria has meant that youth workers have simply not had the capacity to provide the trauma-informed practice required to provide a safe space for young people experiencing mental illness. This has meant that there may be limited community-based options for young people to access support, leading to worsening conditions and an increased burden on hospital-based emergency services. Attendees also noted the often limited policy and practices in place to provide a safe space for LGBTIQA+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and multicultural young people, leading to experiences of discrimination further traumatising of young people and impacts on mental health.
- **Early intervention education to build social and emotional wellbeing skills needs to be better prioritised in schools.**
The sector felt that the education system in WA is not doing enough to prioritise mental health education in schools and support the community sector in intervening early and undertaking social and emotional wellbeing learning to better equip young people with skills to build resilience, manage emotions and develop healthy identities. Whilst there are existing frameworks and programs to implement social and emotional wellbeing

supports, reviews have shown that the success and availability of these are often directly linked to the resources available.

- **Rising demand for services and overburdening of youth workers has placed staff under significant stress and risk of burnout**

Attendees reported that many in the sector are struggling to cope with the significant demand on services that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led to regular occurrences of burnout amongst youth workers and a struggle for organisations to retain staff members, with ongoing under-resourcing meaning that many have increasingly had to go over their capacity in order to provide effective support for young people.

Solutions from the Sector

- **Investment in mandatory training in schools, hospitals, employment services and other services to implement culturally safe, trauma informed and LGBTIQ+ inclusive social and emotional wellbeing frameworks when engaging with young people.**

There needs to be a systemic and purposeful approach to broad mental health support for young people across systems rather than relegated to an individual position or based on individual staff knowledge and capacity. Services and staff need to be aware of the unique needs of young people and have the guidance required to feel comfortable in providing mental health support to young people in non-clinical settings. This training should be delivered mental health practitioners and guided by lived experience.

- **Improved partnerships between schools and youth services to deliver holistic social and emotional wellbeing support and education support in the curriculum.**

The role of mental health support in schools is often relegated to the school psychologist or chaplain and as well as by teachers in an ad-hoc manner. There is a significant opportunity for a statewide program which partners schools with high levels of student disengagement and entrenched social issues with youth services to implement an integrated social and emotional wellbeing framework which provides personalised and integrated support for young people in the classroom. This would relieve the burden on teachers in the classroom who would work with youth workers to ensure that students mental health needs are being identified and supported, leaving teachers to focus on core education and class management duties. Youth workers would also support teachers to provide learning modules to students equipping them with the skills and knowledge to build resilience and independently maintain social and emotional wellbeing.

- **More specialised mental health support and knowledge across services.**

It was a strong theme of discussions at the Forum around mental health that the lack of capacity of youth services to provide adequate support for young people with mental health issues has meant that a key opportunity for early intervention is lost, leading to an increased burden on the mainstream hospital system and mental health crisis services. The sector wanted to see an increase in investment in community-based alternatives to the emergency department, such as 24 hours community-based therapeutic care

management, as well as specialised mental health workers to be integrated into the local service landscape to support organisations to better manage young people's mental health issues.