

# Consultation questions – youth policy

**Date:** 02/11/2015

## **About you**

### **Organisation name/s**

Yarra Ranges Council

### **Organisation purpose**

This is Yarra Ranges Council's officer submission based on evidence, Council's adopted Strategies and an understanding of local needs and challenges relating to the youth policy discussion paper.

Local government is in a unique position to work with all young people by providing supportive programs and activities, celebrations to show young people in a positive light and to incorporate young people into their communities, increasing belonging and purpose. Local government also plays an important role in coordinating the local youth sector through leadership and collaborative initiatives.

Yarra Ranges has detailed data and qualitative sources on the needs of young people. Collaboration with schools through School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) has provided further detail of the challenges facing young people in Yarra Ranges. Council's submission brings local data and the expertise of youth professionals to the consultation questions.

## **Draft vision**

### **Q. What do you think of the draft vision?**

This vision statement supports young people to live an empowered life. The key focus of 'realising their potential and improving outcomes' are fundamental components to the transition process from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence is an intense time of development and growth, placing all young people in vulnerability. Acknowledging that every young person between the ages of 10 to 25 years is vulnerable in one way or another would have a positive influence on policy direction and funding allocation. It would also direct service provision towards building resilience and harnessing protective factors. Additionally, we know that a significant proportion of the young Australian community are faced with complex challenges which increase their risk factors and disadvantage. A balance between preventative and targeted approaches is necessary to ensure the potential of all young people is reached. The acknowledgement of the need to attend to young people who are disadvantaged and disengaged is critical and pleasing to see included.

## **Draft objectives**

### **Q. What do you think of the draft objectives?**

Feedback regarding the objectives includes:

- Being heard and engaged is only one part to the participatory process. It would be ideal to see young people included and involved in decisions through governance structures in order to allow a more in depth and meaningful inclusion.
- The need to further highlight government and sector responsibility to meet the needs of the most hard to reach young people.

- 'Fair go' should instead be phrased as a right's based objective related to equity and equality with a link to the UN Rights of the Child to express a strong positioning that is non discriminatory and applies to all diversities mentioned.
- The need to include both universal services with targeted services has not been mentioned.
- In determining the objectives it is important to consider their measurement to enable a more responsive approach into the future, including policy and strategy direction, program development and funding.
- The word 'emerging' appears at odds with policy statement that recognises challenges being present in pre-adolescent years. The challenges are very much 'real' rather than 'emerging' from a young person's perspective.

### **What's important to young people?**

Young people have identified the following issues as important to youth.<sup>32</sup> Please respond only to those questions of interest to you.

#### **Q. What do you think should be done to improve educational opportunities for young people?**

Education opportunities designed for the most disengaged young people need to incorporate trauma informed practice in order to address learning and wellbeing outcomes. Much of what is offered in the education system as it stands, understandably has a significant focus on academic achievement with pressure to perform enforced by measures such as the NAPLAN.

Preparing young people for life and educating them on ways to become fulfilled adults is an area that is currently lacking yet significantly important. Schools are best positioned to provide young people with social and emotional learning and resilience, alongside academic growth.

Flexible learning structures and meaningful learning opportunities, along with improvement to the accessibility of schools could support students to remain engaged in education, especially the most marginalised cohort.

As stated in the recent Education State vision, schools will be driven to incorporate community engagement in learning. This is particularly of benefit to disadvantaged young people, providing support through education and making connections to social services available to them. Initiatives that build greater collaboration between all providers and schools (former Youth Connection, the new Navigator program, School Focus Youth Service) help to strengthen school engagement and address wellbeing concerns and improve academic outcomes.

Without attention to social wellbeing, educational attainment will not be improved. The link between early intervention at pre-school and early Primary School and future Year 12 attainment is evidenced and should be a focus for attention. In Yarra Ranges there is a small but significant group of young people for whom life experiences have led them to a place of being disengaged with school. Additional support to schools to shift this is required. Innovative options or pathways for young people that are realistic, work based and relevant to the lives of these young people are urgently needed. Co-design should be prioritised.

Yarra Ranges' early school leavers were much more likely to be doing an apprenticeship. They were less likely to be employed or looking for work; and less likely to not be in the labour force, education or training. Amongst Year 12 completers who did not study in 2011, Yarra Ranges had a high level within this group who had never planned to study, at 31% compared to 27%.

For early school leavers in Yarra Ranges, a high percentage had cited 'too much travel' or 'never planned to study' as their reasons for not studying. Anecdotal information also shows a lack of employment and education opportunities and low aspirations from young people and their parents. There are also comparatively high levels of disengaged young people and limited alternative education options available (Yarra Ranges Health & Wellbeing Profile, 2013).

**Q. What do you think should be done to improve training opportunities for young people?**

In Yarra Ranges, young people have limited tertiary education and training opportunities available. The recent announcement about the former Swinburne site is welcome. Improving and supporting access to the site will be critical to the success of this educational institution (see public transport).

The 2011 Census data shows that young people in Yarra Ranges were less likely to complete Year 12, and less likely to go to university if they finished Year 12. They were more likely to attend TAFE, and more likely to undertake an apprenticeship. The local alternative for young people includes one community based VCAL program, options are limited.

Social isolation is compounded by physical isolation in Yarra Ranges, including isolation from education, facilities, employment and opportunities to connect. In line with physical access, transport for rural young people presents barriers to opportunity, financial strain regarding costs associated with education. These barriers reinforce disadvantage.

The most vulnerable of young people are more likely to attend TAFE, yet recent cuts to resources and funding to the TAFE system has led to increased student fees and discontinuation of entry level courses that are vital as pathways to employment. Further, restrictions placed on accessing government assistance for only two TAFE courses in a lifetime has significant impact on the most marginalised and disadvantaged cohort. The systems governing TAFE, apprenticeships and government payments for students (Centrelink, study loans) are all entwined and require an overhaul with consideration weighing towards increasing opportunities for the most hard to reach young people.

Attempting to address this issue is identified in Council's Youth Strategic Action Plan and involves collaboration with partners to improve access to training and post school education, through:

- Virtual classrooms, outreach education and innovative use of technology.

Further recommendations include informing parents about education and employment pathways for young people, providing industries with training and incentives for increasing opportunities for young people and investing extra resources towards the most marginalised populations, particularly young people with disabilities and/or experiencing mental illness/those with a parent with a mental illness.

Local government provides young people with opportunities to develop employability skills through their involvement in programs, committees and events. Recognition of both informal and formal training structures is required to prioritise and allocate appropriate resourcing including funding.

**Q. What do you think should be done to increase employment opportunities for young people?**

In Yarra Ranges, research for the development of the Youth Strategic Action Plan revealed a lack of employment and education opportunities and low aspirations from young people and their parents. There are also comparatively high levels of disengaged young people. The average unemployment rate in the Yarra Ranges (March 2015) was 5.69%. The unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 years was 9.5%. As a result, employment has been highlighted as one of three priority areas in our Action Plan to cultivate a solid response to local issues and disadvantage over the next three years. One initiative currently adopted by Council is the introduction of an Indigenous Trainee, employed with Youth

Services as part of a broader policy of targets to increase employment opportunities for the Indigenous community. Other key actions addressing youth employment include to:

- Provide programs through partnerships that remove barriers to accessing education and employment opportunities for young people, with a focus on overcoming transport barriers.
- Deliver grants to facilitate education and employment responses to the needs of vulnerable young people.
- Collect evidence on employment trends, emerging professions and opportunities for local based employment.
- Support job ready skill development in programs delivered with and to young people.
- Provide advocacy and deliver support for young people with a disability and from new and emerging communities to build job capacity and skills development.
- Collaborate with key partners to address early disengagement from education impacting young people and their employability.
- Support innovative youth social enterprise initiatives.

Inadequate formal training and local employment prospects create significant limitations for young people in the Yarra Ranges. As an interface Council, a large number of young people re-locate to Melbourne in aim of increasing employment options. Moving away from established support structures including family, peers and services can present further vulnerability and disadvantage.

**Q. What do you think should be done to improve the mental health of young people?**

There is limited access to locally based mental health services for young people.

Overall, the rate of hospital admissions for adolescents was increasing at twice the Victorian rate, and Yarra Ranges had an above average hospital admission rate for a wide range of conditions amongst 15-24 year olds.

Support for young people through outreach services is urgently needed.

Programs that have shown some success through SFYS funding include: *Mental Health and Us*, and *Girls with Attitude*. The uncertainty of future funding for these programs through SFYS is a concern.

High rates of hospital admissions for young people with a mental illness in Yarra Ranges are alarming. Council provide entry level counselling and referral for young people and know that this cannot meet the need. Headspace is located in Knox, for young people in Warburton or Healesville this is a three hour round trip by multiple buses. The result is low access for young people in Yarra Ranges. In addressing mental health and ill health in young people, it is pivotal to ensure initiatives are evidence based and well researched.

Council's submission to the 10 Year State Mental Health Plan outlined our vision for a responsive, youth centred mental health service response.

<http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Lists/Latest-news/Council-calls-on-Government-to-support-young-peoples-mental-health>

**Q. What do you think should be done to tackle alcohol and drug issues for young people?**

There is a need to differentiate between young people who are experimenting with alcohol or drugs during their formative years compared to young people who are dependant and/or misusing substances that are harmful and disruptive to every day life experience.

Harm minimisation has proven an effective tool to educate and address the safety of young people who may be experimenting with or using drugs/alcohol in an ad hoc way or for recreational use.

For young people who are experiencing dependency issues it is imperative that global evidence and research is referenced to develop effective treatment and recovery services in response to national and local need. Further, the reasons behind addiction and substance misuse must be explored to take a preventative approach and provide young people with resilience and support. Increased resources allocated to dual diagnosis and the relationship between substance misuse and mental illness, are needed. Further, drug or alcohol addiction as a form of self medication and dependency on prescribed medications, require further exploration to establish adequate response and services.

In Yarra Ranges, the number of young people who have tried alcohol is 13 per cent higher than the State average. Consultation with young people has revealed their unease with the presence and use of illegal drugs in their broader community. Young people have stated feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood based on drug dealing activity. It is important to note the direct impact harmful drug/alcohol activity has on young people especially in the home setting and amongst peers. There is also evidence regarding Yarra Ranges Council having the highest number of packaged liquor outlets per capita for population 16 years and over, in the eastern metro region.

The evidence showing that the best protection for young people against harmful use of alcohol and other drugs is strong parenting (clear boundaries, know they are loved), points to investment in parent support and education as a prevention strategy. Our experience is that parents can struggle to provide strong boundaries across all socio-economic groups, but for very different reasons. Consideration of targeted and relevant parent support would support outcomes to protect young people from alcohol and drug related harms.

**Q. What do you think should be done to improve housing for young people?**

There are excellent models of youth housing for young people experiencing disadvantage, those needing rehabilitation or additional supports. However there is not enough of it. The lack of affordable housing options for young people needs a multi-sector response to build new stock and address the many decades of low investment in this vital public infrastructure.

In Yarra Ranges, many low income families move to outer areas because housing is, relatively speaking, more affordable, only to be trapped in poverty by low employment options, poor public transport and high costs of travel to education and employment. Inter-generational disadvantage is one result of this.

More Activity Centre based, appropriate (size, accessibility) and quality affordable housing would offer a stepping stone to independence for young people. Supported accommodation for young people experiencing mental illness, family violence or other issues, would prevent issues exacerbating and be more effective use of public resources than “mopping up” the consequences of young people remaining in unsuitable living circumstances.

Programs that support vulnerable young people to learn the skills of independent living are high value and should be invested in at a greater rate (e.g. Anchor’s Support for Young People program in Lilydale). Also, the age at which a young person can access housing supports needs to be lowered to support young people under 16 years of age.

Affordable housing that supports tertiary studies is also important.

Rob Pradolin’s recent article in the Age notes the cost benefit analysis by SGS Economics of 7:1 benefit to the community of providing public, social and affordable housing in the right locations. Local experience confirms this.

In relation to localised issues outlining youth homelessness in Yarra Ranges, Anchor released a report on *Couch surfing students: the Yarra Ranges youth homelessness prevention project*, <http://apo.org.au/research/couch-surfing-students-yarra-ranges-youth-homelessness-prevention-project>

**Q. What do you think should be done to tackle discrimination of young people?**

Social isolation is compounded by physical isolation in Yarra Ranges. This includes isolation from education, facilities, support services, employment and opportunities to connect. Residents of Yarra Ranges experience barriers to travelling within the municipality for programs, services or activities increasing the need for decentralised services. This form of discrimination experienced in the Yarra Ranges relates to what has been outlined in this discussion paper, *Young People from rural/regional location*.

As an interface Council, young people in Yarra Ranges experience many challenges as highlighted in responses to employment, transport and mental health. Place based approaches trialled across the municipality present complexities for service providers. Recent changes introduced through State government rate capping will present further challenges for local government in meeting the diverse needs of its community with reduced funding and resources.

Young people presented with limited opportunities in their local surroundings, move to the inner city to pursue education, employment and further life prospects. This has a significant impact on their connection to family, community and broader supports.

Yarra Ranges has a significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community (around 1,000 according to Census data). Many report regular experiences of racism. Council has worked with our community to send a strong message that racism is not acceptable; more needs to be done. Council's early childhood team worked in partnership with services to develop Woiwurrung language cards for early childhood settings. This addresses cultural knowledge and building respect from an early age. Limited funds will potentially minimise the reach of this project. Consideration of prevention strategies that start early is encouraged. "Wexler (2009) ... discusses how positive connections with culture are critical to positive self-identity and health and wellbeing for young Indigenous people. Wexler (2009) explains that engaging with culture and building an identity connected to culture and history provide young people with a framework to understand their current location and experience in relation to the present, past and the future".

With a growing diverse population including an increasing Chin and African community in Yarra Ranges, cultural strengthening programs in our area have been shown to build self esteem, protective factors in young people and increase connection to culture. These evidenced programs should be replicated and support for community controlled programs encouraged.

**Q. What do you think should be done to improve public transport for young people?**

- Making it safer, youth friendly.
- Options for young people living in remote areas: more regular access to Public Transport (PT) for hard to reach places and young people who are very isolated.

Public transport in the outer towns and regions of Yarra Ranges is very poor. Council is aware that all stakeholders: bus companies, Council and community wish to see improvement but funding is scarce. As there are many models of effective and responsive public transport services around the world, it is suggested these models be examined as models for Victoria. More Smartbuses is a positive improvement however it doesn't assist young people in Yarra Ranges. Greater promotion of the Telebus service model could encourage PT use by young people.

De-stigmatising PT use for young people with a disability would foster greater independence and access to education and training. Specific focus groups with young people who have a disability should be sought to understand these barriers. The “I Ride with You” campaign showed the impact of social media to improve the safety of PT. Young peoples’ involvement in designing better PT that enables them to participate in their community, get to school and other commitments may result in innovative solutions.

Council has been advocating for increased public transport access for many years in order to improve health and wellbeing.

Consideration of the role of disruptive technologies to fill gaps in public transport in areas of small population and geographic barriers should be seriously considered.

**Q. What else do you think should be done to improve the lives of young people in Victoria?**

- Issues look at young people from a deficit rather than also allowing young people to be celebrated for their positive contributions and assets.
- We need to make sure protective factors for young people remain much higher than risk factors.
- Young people want to be engaged with, and feel a part of the community; they want to take part in decision making.
- Consumer input throughout the process- how will young people be authentically engaged throughout the development and implementation phase of the policy?
- Ensuring that young people are proactively engaged in community, recreation, leisure activities.
- Relationships – issues with family violence and/or break down, intergenerational disadvantage, and the need to connect with friends and the community. Families need the skills to help support and guide their children.
- How does the Youth policy link in with other state reforms currently occurring (mental health, education state, family violence)?
- Review current systems and governance for continual improvement and to address existing issues/barriers.
- How the areas concerning young people are inter-related. Rarely does a young person face one issue in isolation.

# References

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