

Inquiry into community safety in regional and rural NSW

Supplementary questions

- 1. Service providers have told us that they are limited by resource-intensive funding and grant frameworks. Do you have any comments on these issues and how they might be addressed?***

Studies¹ including recent NCOSS research, show that NGO services are significantly underfunded, and contracted in a way that hampers their ability to meet community need. Many grants fail to cover full operating costs or recognise the full scope of work required. Contracts often place arbitrary limits on essential expenses such as management costs, insurance and wages.

At the same time, the need in the community is growing, and our members report that people seeking support have increasingly complex needs. These problem are exacerbated in regional and rural NSW, where services struggle with higher transport costs, poorer digital access, and fewer service options.

To address these issues, the Government must ensure that its funding models cover the true cost of service delivery, reduce unnecessary administrative costs, and increase flexibility so that critical front-line services can better support the community. In the immediate term, the Government must commit to effective indexation of funding contracts, and cover the cost of the Portable Long Service Scheme levy.

- 2. The Committee heard that competition for limited resources amongst service providers creates barriers to pursuing collaborative approaches. Could you comment on this?***

NCOSS members say competitive funding creates instability and unfairness. This is a big issue in regional and remote areas, where local organisations like neighbourhood centres—which have long supported their communities—often don't receive core funding.

¹ NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) and ASK Insight (2022), The High Cost of Doing Business – Administrative and Management Overload in Smaller NGOs, viewed on 11 March 2025 <https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/The-High-Cost-of-Doing-Business-FINAL-2.pdf>

Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact (2022) Paying what it takes: funding indirect cost to create long-term impact. Social Ventures Australia. <https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/publications/paying-what-it-takes-report/>

Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M. (2023) At the precipice: Australia's community sector through the cost-of-living crisis, findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey. Sydney: ACOSS. https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/At-the-Precipice_ACSS-2023.pdf

Smaller services must compete for the same funding as larger NGOs, which puts them at a disadvantage. In many cases, competition reduces coordination and collaboration, making it harder for services to work together. Bureaucratic rules and geographic barriers also make accessing services more difficult for those who need them most.

3. *Could you tell us more about how 'linker roles' in schools would work, and how they could help address risk factors associated with youth crime? How would these roles be funded?*

A number of public schools across NSW have set up versions of 'wellbeing hubs' as a response to navigating the fractured service system that makes it difficult for children, young people and their families to get the support they need at the right time. The role of the linker (also described as 'navigator' or 'mentor' by some hubs) has emerged as a critical function in these hubs as they help people navigate the complexity of the services system by building longer term relationships with and between the community, services and young people.² Linkers, who are located inside schools, can leverage existing services and supports and make sure that young people are able to get connected in with the necessary allied health specialist supports, family and other early intervention supports they would need in order to continue developing and being engaged in school.

The funding for these roles has primarily been pulled together by schools through various budgets. The schools where these hubs have emerged are often located in disadvantaged areas of NSW and often driven by internal staff who know that young people cannot engage with education unless they get the support, they need in the other areas of their lives such as their health. The funding for the linker roles needs to include the following elements in order to make it successful:

- the salary for the role
- an administrative support role to assist with organising appointments and paperwork
- flexible brokerage funds that would allow the Linker to flexibly respond to the needs of the young person they are working with (e.g. access to allied health providers; extracurricular supports).

A major challenge for regional schools is access to allied health providers, like speech-language pathologists. Many students with speech and language difficulties disengage from school—some even end up in the justice system. Young offenders often struggle to understand police interviews or court proceedings, making them even more vulnerable.

Investing in allied health services, especially in regional areas, will help keep students in school and set them up for success. This kind of funding delivers real long-term benefits, making the most of existing services while improving outcomes for young people.

Breaking through the silos

Narromine may be 40 kilometres outside of Dubbo but its young people face significant barriers in accessing health, development and social services support in a timely and affordable way. As a result, they often go undiagnosed for critical conditions, which in turn impacts their overall well-being and education outcomes.

To assist with overcoming these challenges, in 2019, Narromine High School established a school-based hub, offering students access to a general practitioner, speech and occupational therapists, a psychologist, as well as hearing and dental check-ups. The hub ensures that students receive timely, tailored, and ongoing care without major disruption to their lives.

The results have been transformative. In the year following its introduction, the High School Certificate completion rate rose to 74%. By 2023, that number had reached 100%, with over a third of students also completing a vocational education and training course. The hub has also had a profound impact on student health, with over 300 GP appointments conducted in 2023, including 93 Indigenous students receiving a comprehensive health check to assess chronic illness risks.³

By integrating healthcare and community services into the school environment, the hub has not only improved academic success but also empowered young people to take charge of their health, setting them up for a stronger future.

4. Do you think the Joint Protocol to reduce the contact of young people in residential out-of-home-care with the criminal justice system has had an impact on the criminalisation of young people in care?

a. Do you think strategies and directives such as the Protocol are effectively embedded in agency practice?

The implementation of the Protocol was gaining momentum, but progress stalled due to COVID. NCOSS understands that no formal evaluation has been conducted, so the impact of the Joint Protocol on reducing the criminalisation of young people in care remains unclear. However, non-government service providers using the Protocol believe it has been successfully integrated into their practices through regular training and efforts locally to work with the NSW Police.

A major challenge has been the lack of a formal implementation plan, which has limited its broader use. While NGOs have embedded the Protocol, integrating it into police training has proven difficult. High staff turnover in both police and Residential Care and Intensive Therapeutic Care (ITC) services means continuous training is necessary, but this requires significant resources.

For the Protocol to be truly effective, it must be consistently reinforced across all agencies. Without it being rolled out to all regions of NSW, proper support, training, and cultural change within OOHC and police, its long-term success remains uncertain.

Not staying in your lane

For years, CASPA, a residential care provider in Northern NSW, worked with the NSW Joint Protocol to reduce unnecessary police contact with young people in care—but with mixed results. That changed when new leadership in the Richmond and Lismore Police Districts recognised the value of collaboration in diverting kids from the criminal justice system.

³ ABC News (2024) Narromine High School's social wellbeing hub gets a big tick from NSW students, families. As accessed on 12 March 2025 via <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-30/narromine-social-wellbeing-hub-popular-with-students-families/104576414>

Under this leadership, police actively worked alongside service providers, holding monthly meetings and staying in regular communication to keep vulnerable kids safe. CASPA have been able to train 120 police officers on the impacts of childhood trauma, intergenerational disadvantage, and intellectual disabilities, giving frontline police the tools and empathy to de-escalate situations and build trust.

As a result, more young people diverted from the system. By fully embracing the NSW Joint Protocol, Richmond Police District and CASPA are proving that partnerships, not punishment, make the real difference.

