

Submission

No 84

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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The Committee Manager
Committee of Children and Young People
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir Madam

Re: Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW

In response to the request for submissions to the inquiry being conducted by the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Children and Young People, the following issues have been identified for the Clarence Valley.

These issues have been identified through a comprehensive community consultation and research process undertaken in 2006 in developing Clarence Valley Council's current Social Plan. All must be viewed within the context of the area's socio-economic profile which exacerbates the gaps in addressing identified needs to enhance life experiences.

Clarence Valley ranks amongst the lowest 30% of Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Australia in terms of relative levels of disadvantage and is well within the lowest 20% in New South Wales (ABS Census Data 2006). Lower than State average household incomes, labour force participation rates and educational qualifications together with higher than average unemployment rates, one-parent families with children under 15 years and Aboriginal population establish a scenario of significant challenges in being able to effect some fundamental improvements in living circumstances.

It should be noted that that the age range targeted in the Inquiry partially spans two target groups within the Clarence Valley Social Plan - 'Children' up to the age of twelve and 'Youth' from 12 to 24 years. The issues likely to be more relevant to those above 14 years have not been included.

Recent research on children at risk of social exclusion (undertaken by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling 2006) indicates that children in the Clarence Valley are in the top twenty LGAs in NSW 'at risk'. Social exclusion is a multidimensional measure of disadvantage and is defined as "when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill health and family breakdown." There is a great need for additional support services for children and their families and a structure to allow improved identification of local needs and issues.

Needs of Children and Young People in the Clarence Valley

General Issues:

- Significant lack of services and facilities to support their needs as Commonwealth funding programs to support families and children have not targeted the Clarence Valley. Of the five major youth capacity building programs administered by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Co-ordination Centre (FACSIC) only Reconnect has had a presence in the Clarence Valley and more recently Stronger Families.
- Poor public image of young people.
- Lack of suitable affordable housing impacts on families and children.
- A Youth Interagency operates as an information exchange, but it is limited in its capacity for strategic planning to address the needs of young people in the Clarence Valley.
- There is a minimal number of specialist youth services available in Clarence Valley, including those focused on release from detention (Grafton has a separate jail for young people).

Substance Abuse Issues:

- Information about drug and alcohol issues delivered in a youth friendly manner is not readily available.
- Growing incidence of alcohol abuse by young people, in particular binge drinking.
- The abuse of alcohol exacerbates street vandalism and poor behaviour, further damaging the perception of young people by others in the community.

Recreational Opportunity Issues:

- There are no generalist Youth Support Service available.
- Such services generally operate from a Youth Centre which does not exist in the Clarence Valley.
- Any youth activities that are provided are variously attended due to the lack of public transport and cost to be involved in activities. Replicating events at difference venues across the Clarence Valley is one option which is hampered by cost and also defeats the purpose of achieving greater socialisation amongst all communities.
- The result is anti-social behaviour particularly on weekends and holidays.

General Health Issues:

- Limited adolescent health services.
- Long waiting list for the speech pathologist in Grafton.
- Childhood obesity increasing in the Valley increasing cost for children to be involved in sport
- Young people find it difficult to access information about sexuality and contraception in a private and youth specialist atmosphere.

Parenting Issues:

- Limited community support services for children and families, apart from child care, to assist families at an early stage before inadequate parenting skills impact on children.

Disability Issues:

- Parents of children with a disability in the Lower Clarence find it difficult to access the service in Early Intervention Service Grafton.
- Disability Service Providers priorities include additional therapy for children.
- Residential care options are inappropriate for young people.

Mental Health Issues:

- The key issues for youth in the Northern Rivers, including the Clarence Valley, are depression, suicide, self harm and psychosis.
- Of those aged between 5-14 years with a mental illness in the Northern Rivers, 20% reside within the Clarence Valley LGA, which is only exceeded by Tweed LGA with 26%.
- Due to changes by NSW Health every young person has to go through the Mental Health Access Line (MHAL) to be referred to triage at the local hospital where they are assessed by hospital staff before being referred on to mental health. Health workers and case workers have both commented that this new system has increased the barriers to young people accessing mental health services. Furthermore, there are many vacancies in both community health and mental health youth services.
- There is also only one sexual assault worker for the entire Clarence Valley. The service operates only during office hours, therefore requiring a young person who is sexually assaulted outside of office hours to be transported to Lismore base hospital for care.
- Coffs Child Sexual Assault Service covers the Clarence Valley but has a long waiting list.
- Child victims of sexual assault are required to wait at least 6 months to access the Coffs Harbour based Child Sexual Assault Service, by which time the benefits of early counselling are lost.
- Within Community Health, the general counselling targets families and children but it is difficult for young people to receive counselling until it reaches a crisis and can be served by Mental Health Adolescent counsellors.

Education Issues:

- Lack of alternative schooling for those not suited to traditional style.
- Department of Education data reports that numeracy and literacy levels for Year 3 and 5 students are significantly below the State average.

Indigenous Issues:

- A breakdown in traditional culture and social structures within certain groups has resulted in a whole-of-government approach in addressing issues for a local community.
- Substance abuse, anti-social behaviour and suicide are key health issues.
- Criminal behaviour has resulted in over representation of Aboriginal youth in detention.
- Truancy is recognised as a problem and literacy levels act as impediments to life chances.
- Transport limits potential for inclusion with other communities given the isolated nature of some Aboriginal communities throughout the Clarence Valley.

Activities, Services and Support that Provide Opportunities to Develop Resilience

There are limited efforts that Council is aware of that have been able to successfully address this issue. Council has recently supported the establishment of a Children's Interagency which may be able to address this type of issue through the functions of the participants' organisations, however, substantial resourcing (including funding) will be required to address the family matters that underpin the adverse life experiences of children that result in the need for enquiries such as this.

In summary, the issues are numerous and the local community is struggling to address them in a meaningful manner. Their complexity requires a multi-pronged and long-term approach that also addresses family matters from a much earlier age.

Clarence Valley Council would welcome additional resourcing that can be used to develop localised solutions in partnership models for its young people.

Yours faithfully

Stuart McPherson
General Manager