

**Submission
No 146**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Social Futures

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SOCIAL FUTURES

Positive Social Change

Submission to:

Inquiry into community safety in
regional and rural communities

May 2024



We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we live and work and their continuing connection to land, water, sea and community. We pay respects to Australia's First Peoples, to their unique and diverse cultures, and to Elders past, present and future.

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Brief for Addressing Youth Needs in Ballina Shire to Enhance Community Engagement and Reduce Youth Crime

Introduction

Social Futures is a leading social services organisation in regional NSW, connecting people to the support they need when they need it. We have been proudly serving our customers for over 48 years, with our services now extending to various regions including the NSW North Coast, Western NSW, Far West NSW, Central Coast, Hunter, and the QLD Gold Coast.

Annually, we provide support to over 27,400 individuals through a wide range of services including homelessness and housing, employment programs, youth and family support, mental health services, Veterans support, sector development initiatives and disability inclusion initiatives, totalling over 87,000 occasions of service.

Our programs for young people include early intervention mental health services; Specialist Homelessness Services for Young People; the Reconnect youth homelessness prevention program; the Getting it Together program for young people experiencing issues with substance use; the Resilient Kids program for young people affected by natural disaster; the Clubhouse drop-in centre in Lismore, Bathurst and Broken Hill; NDIS Local Area Coordination; and Family Connect and Support.

Prior to transition to an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in early 2024, we operated the successful Youth on Track diversionary program for young people at risk of engaging with the criminal justice system in the Coffs/Clarence region. We note that Youth on Track has successfully helped young people to avoid involvement in criminal activity and could be implemented as a state-wide program.

Through these and other services, our staff have gained a significant understanding of the issues experienced by young people in regional NSW.

A fundamental principle in crime prevention strategies for young people is to recognise them as valuable assets with significant potential to enrich our community, rather than a source of concern for community safety. Regional communities tend to have an older population than NSW, as we lose young people to metropolitan environments. By recognising the value and providing positive opportunities for young people within our regions, our communities stand to gain economic prosperity, vibrancy, and enhanced cultural diversity from the contributions of these young people.

Our experience is that funding for youth programs, activities and services in regional NSW is limited. The funding that is available is often spread too thin to have a meaningful impact for young people across communities. Successful programs such as Youth on Track are often established as pilots in a few locations and are not extended state-wide even when shown to be effective in reducing engagement with the justice system. By comparison to metropolitan areas, funding for vital service programs such as youth homelessness services and housing for young people is minimal.



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This submission uses the regional centre of Ballina as a case study, noting that the issues that young people experience in Ballina are consistent with those reported by young people across regional NSW.

Ballina – Case study

Social Futures currently works with a significant number of young people in Ballina Shire who experience a range of pressing issues. Some trends identified through current services include:

- Following the 2019 fires, 2020-2022 Pandemic and 2022 Natural Disasters, young people are facing greater complexity than previously and experience multiple factors in their lives that affect their mental health and wellbeing.
- These issues include significant impacts of Family & Domestic Violence, housing stress, low incomes, disengagement from schooling, transport, and an overall lack of community safety for young people.
- Young People seek support for managing emotions, in particular anger for which they require assistance through psychoeducation, counselling, and therapeutic interventions.
- Other common service approaches include safety planning extending to keeping safe at school and in the home environment; minimising self-harm; supports for managing social anxiety; and support for general life skills development.
- There are limited opportunities for young people to safely meet and socialise after hours and transport is often unavailable.

Our staff targeted initiatives in three areas: improving transport accessibility, creating community engagement opportunities, and empowering youth voices. Addressing these areas will foster a stronger, more connected community and support young people to make good decisions.



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1. Enhancing Transport Accessibility

Issue: Transport is a major barrier for young people in Ballina Shire, limiting their access to community activities and resources.

Solution:

- **Improving Public Transport:** Advocate for enhanced public transport services, including increased frequency and expanded routes, particularly to and from areas where young people reside, and community activities take place.
- **Youth Transport Programs:** Implement programs such as subsidised transport passes for students and young people, and shuttle services for after-hours activities.

Impact: By ensuring that activities and community groups are easily accessible, young people are provided with viable, positive alternatives to crime, fostering a sense of inclusion and engagement.

2. Creating Community Engagement Opportunities

Issue: There is a lack of structured opportunities for young people to connect with their community in meaningful ways.

Solution:

- **After-Hours Programs:** Develop and support after-hours programs, including sports like basketball, soccer, and other hobbies such as music, arts, and technology clubs. These programs should be designed to cater to diverse interests. Most importantly these programs need to be of no cost to families.
- **Targeted Youth Groups:** Establish targeted groups that focus on various interests and issues, providing safe spaces for young people to gather, share, and grow.
- **Community Events:** Organise regular community events that bring together young people and other community members, promoting intergenerational interaction and understanding.

Impact: Providing structured, positive outlets for young people will not only decrease idle time but also build a sense of community and belonging, reducing the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities.



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3. Empowering Youth Voices

Issue: Young people need platforms to express their concerns, ideas, and aspirations for their community.

Solution:

- Youth Councils and Forums: Establish youth councils and forums that allow young people to voice their concerns and propose solutions. Ensure these platforms are accessible and inclusive.
- Co-Design Initiatives: Engage young people in the co-design and planning of community projects and programs. This involves them directly in decision-making processes, ensuring their needs and ideas are reflected in community development.
- Strengths-Based Approach: Use a strengths-based approach to recognise and build on existing positive aspects of the community. Highlight success stories and model new initiatives based on what is already working well.

Impact: Empowering young people to take an active role in shaping their community leads to a greater sense of ownership and responsibility. This involvement fosters leadership skills and a vested interest in maintaining a positive community environment.

Conclusion

Social Futures thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission. We are happy to provide further information if requested.



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