

**Submission
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COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Maranguka's Submission: Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities

From: Alister Ferguson, Executive Director of Maranguka Ltd

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Subject: Submission on the Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities

Introduction

Maranguka Ltd. is a place-based Indigenous-led justice reinvestment initiative operating regionally in Bourke, NSW, with a mission to improve social, economic, and criminal justice outcomes for the local community.

The word 'Maranguka' means "caring for others" in the local Ngemba language, which embodies the spirit of our organisation, the Bourke Tribal Council, and our broader community.

Maranguka creates culturally appropriate coordinated support for children and families through innovative, community-led approaches, focusing on addressing the root causes of crime rather than its symptoms, through our *Growing our Kids Up Safe, Smart and Strong* Strategy.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry, which seeks to address the complex issue of community safety and youth crime in regional and rural areas of NSW. This submission will provide an overview of Maranguka's approach and offer detailed recommendations to the Committee.



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Demographics in Bourke

Understanding the demographics of Bourke and its surrounding regions, particularly the significant Indigenous and youth populations, is essential for developing and implementing effective policies and programs. Addressing the root causes of socio-economic disadvantages and providing culturally relevant and community-driven support can help foster a safer and more supportive environment for young people in these communities.



Bourke, located in north-western New South Wales, is a remote community with a unique demographic profile that significantly influences local social dynamics, particularly regarding youth and Indigenous populations.

General Population

Bourke Shire has a small population, with estimates typically around 2,600 residents. The population density is low, characteristic of many rural and remote areas in Australia, contributing to challenges in service delivery and economic development.

Indigenous Population

A significant portion of Bourke's population is Indigenous. Approximately 30-40% of the residents identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, a much higher



proportion than the national average. This demographic factor is crucial in understanding the community's cultural landscape and the need for culturally appropriate services and interventions.

Youth Population

Young people constitute a substantial segment of Bourke's population. Around 30% of the population is under the age of 24, with a notable proportion of these young people being Indigenous. This youth demographic highlights the critical importance of targeted programs and services to address their specific needs and challenges.

Socio-Economic Factors

The region faces significant socio-economic challenges. Bourke has higher rates of unemployment, lower median incomes, and higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage compared to state and national averages. These factors contribute to a higher incidence of social issues, including youth crime, which necessitates comprehensive and community-driven approaches to support young people and their families.

Education and Employment

Educational attainment levels in Bourke are generally lower than the state average, with many young people not completing secondary school. Employment opportunities are limited, contributing to high youth unemployment rates. These factors underscore the importance of initiatives aimed at improving educational and employment outcomes for young people.

Health and Wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of residents, particularly Indigenous youth, are areas of concern. The region experiences higher rates of chronic health conditions, mental health issues, and substance abuse, which impact the overall quality of life and increase the vulnerability of young people to engaging in criminal activities.

Surrounding Regions

Surrounding regions, such as Brewarrina and Walgett, share similar demographic profiles and socio-economic challenges. These areas also have significant Indigenous populations and face issues related to youth disengagement, unemployment, and



limited access to services. Collaborative efforts and shared strategies across these regions help address common challenges more effectively.

Case Study: The Impact of Maranguka

Since its inception, Maranguka has achieved significant milestones in reducing youth crime and improving community wellbeing in Bourke. The KPMG Impact Assessment of the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project in 2018 highlighted several key outcomes between the years 2016 and 2017:

- A 38% reduction in charges across the top five juvenile offence categories.
- A 23% reduction in reported incidents of domestic violence.
- A 31% increase in retention rate for Year 12 students.

These outcomes demonstrate the potential and effectiveness of the Maranguka approach and the capacity for similar initiatives to achieve positive results in other communities.

KPMG estimated that the gross impact of the changes in Bourke in 2017 was worth \$3.1 million, with approximately two-thirds of this impact associated with the justice system. The impact estimate achieved was 5 times greater than the operational costs of Maranguka that year.²

Maranguka's Approach

Maranguka has demonstrated the effectiveness of a holistic, community-led approach to reducing youth crime in Bourke and some surrounding regions. Our justice reinvestment initiative focuses on reallocating resources from the criminal justice system to community-based prevention and early intervention programs. This approach addresses the underlying causes of crime and fosters long-term community resilience.



1. Early Intervention and Prevention

Youth Programs

We offer a range of programs aimed at keeping young people engaged in education and employment. These programs include mentoring, skills training, and cultural education. By providing young people with the tools and support they need to succeed, we help them build a positive future and avoid criminal activities.

Family Support Services

Strengthening families through support services is crucial in addressing the root causes of youth crime. Our services include consultation, referrals, and advocacy. By creating stable and supportive family environments, we reduce the risk factors associated with youth crime.

2. Community Empowerment

Capacity Building

We empower local communities to take ownership of the solutions to their issues. This involves engaging community leaders, building local governance structures, and fostering partnerships with local organisations. When communities are empowered, they are better able to create sustainable solutions to the problems they face.

Cultural Connection & Authority

Reconnecting young people with their cultural heritage provides a sense of belonging and identity, which is crucial for their well-being and resilience. Cultural education and activities help young people develop pride in their heritage and a stronger sense of community, reducing the likelihood of engaging in crime. Maranguka recognises and is guided in part by the leadership of Aboriginal elders in the Bourke Tribal Council.

Deep Listening

Youth empowerment is fundamentally strengthened when young people are given a voice and a platform to be heard, where their needs, wishes, and recommendations are taken seriously and actioned. Deep listening involves genuinely engaging with



youth, valuing their perspectives, and incorporating their insights into decision-making processes. This approach not only affirms their worth and builds their confidence but also ensures that the solutions developed are relevant and effective. By prioritising youth voices in policy and program development, we can create supportive environments that respond directly to their unique experiences and aspirations, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment that drives positive change.

3. Systems Change

Justice Reinvestment

By redirecting funds from prisons to community programs, we address the socio-economic and systemic factors contributing to youth crime. This involves close collaboration with government agencies, non-profits, and the community to ensure that resources are used effectively to support at-risk youth.

Policy Advocacy

We advocate for policy changes that support community-led approaches and address systemic inequities. This includes pushing for reforms in policing practices, juvenile justice, and the delivery of social services. Policy changes that reduce systemic discrimination and promote rehabilitative justice are essential for long-term success.

Collaborative Approach

Recognising that Maranguka is a part of a large system with multiple players striving towards similar outcomes, we adopt a truly collaborative approach in our engagement across community, government, service providers, philanthropy and Aboriginal-controlled community organisations. Our close relationship and engagement over many years with the Bourke Tribal Council, JustReinvest, Department of Health, NSW Police, CatholicCare, PCYC (Police Citizens Youth Clubs) NSW, and other relevant stakeholders is a key driver of our progress in Bourke.



Understanding the Drivers of Youth Crime

The drivers of youth crime are multifactorial, deeply intertwined and often affected by broader societal events.

Coming out of a long period of isolation after the pandemic into continued civil unrest around the world and high cost of living pressures, young people are in an understandably fragile state, where they both feel powerless and unheard at the same time.

The referendum and its surrounding media coverage made many feel retraumatised and rejected from Australian society. Young people often haven't developed the coping mechanisms to process their emotions appropriately and understand the different outlets available to them - this can lead them to channel those emotions and retaliate in unhealthy ways.

1. Economic Disadvantage and Disengagement

Cost of Living Pressures

The rising cost of living, including housing, utilities, and food, places additional financial strain on families in regional and rural areas. This economic pressure can exacerbate poverty and lead young people to engage in criminal activities out of necessity or frustration.

Lack of Economic Opportunities

Regional and rural areas often have limited education opportunities, job prospects and economic growth compared to urban centres. This economic stagnation can lead to feelings of hopelessness and a lack of motivation among youth, leading them to seek alternative means of survival. This often includes engaging in criminal activities, which may seem like the only viable option.

Educational Disengagement

A considerable number of young offenders have histories of educational disengagement. Factors contributing to this include inadequate educational resources, lack of support, and culturally inappropriate educational approaches.



When young people are not engaged in meaningful educational activities, they are more likely to drift towards alternative avenues.

2. Family and Community Dynamics

Family Stress or Dysfunction

Economic hardship and social isolation have placed additional stress on families, sometimes resulting in neglect or abuse. Without a stable family structure, children lack the necessary support and guidance to develop positively. Experiences of stress and trauma can have a profound impact on young people's mental health and behaviour.

Mental Health Impacts

The pandemic has heightened anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues among youth. The lack of mental health services in regional and rural areas means that these issues often go untreated, leading to behavioural problems and criminal activities.

Lack of Community Support

Weak community structures and the absence of positive role models leave young people without the necessary guidance and support. Communities that lack cohesion and strong support networks are less able to provide the positive influences that deter young people from engaging in crime.

3. Systemic Issues

Intergenerational Trauma

The impact of intergenerational trauma cannot be overstated when considering the drivers of youth crime. Historical injustices, such as colonisation, forced removals, and systemic discrimination, have left deep scars on many Indigenous communities, with parental responsibilities disrupted over generations. This trauma is passed down through generations, manifesting in various forms, including mental health issues, substance abuse, and violent behaviour. Young people growing up in environments



where trauma is a daily reality are at higher risk of engaging in criminal activities as a coping mechanism.

Inadequate Support Services

The insufficiency and poor coordination of support services for at-risk youth fail to address their needs effectively. Many young people require comprehensive support, including mental health services, housing assistance, and addiction treatment, which are often not adequately provided or are located at a great distance from their families and community.

Discriminatory Practices

Systemic discrimination and the over-policing of marginalised communities exacerbate youth crime. Minor offences are often criminalised, and young people from these communities are frequently denied rehabilitative opportunities. This leads to higher rates of incarceration rather than constructive interventions.

Whole-of-Government Approach Towards Youth Crime

Actioning Previous Recommendations

The government has had many recommendations put forward through previous investigations of related matters. Without actioning these first, this cycle of re-inventing the wheel continues to be inefficient and disrespectful towards those who have contributed to them in the past. As a first step, the recommendations from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody should be actioned with urgency to uphold community trust in the authorities.

Supporting, Funding and Developing Strong Place-Based Communities

Place-based community-led approaches are showing significant results in different communities across the country.



The KPMG impact and economic analysis report about Maranguka, described further below in more detail, illustrated that success can be achieved with the right mix of leadership, services, resources and funding. Government should focus on working with community-based leadership in a shared responsibility model to target improvements towards different local targets, with needs and goals customised and tailored to each individual community.

It takes a long journey of deep, embedded trust and sustained leadership for true systems change within communities - this should be funded, supported and intentionally developed in communities at varying stages of this journey.

Government-to-Community Data Sharing

Government-to-community data sharing with organisations like Maranguka is crucial for successfully addressing issues like community safety and youth crime. Collaborative and comprehensive data sharing over a sustained period enables deep understanding of the multifaceted issues contributing to youth crime, facilitating the development of targeted, innovative interventions, and enables organisations like ours to quickly adapt to changes in the observed trends.

Maranguka's existing successes in data collaborations with government bodies demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach. For example, Maranguka has worked closely with the NSW Police, and other local and federal agencies, to securely receive and hold data that has informed the development of community-led initiatives and policies tailored to the specific needs of Bourke, through data working groups. These collaborations have allowed Maranguka to track and assess the impact of our programs on youth crime and its underlying drivers.

By expanding such data-sharing practices, government agencies and community organisations can coordinate their efforts more effectively, avoiding duplication and ensuring resources are directed where they are most needed. This transparency fosters trust, accountability, and a unified strategy, empowering communities like Bourke to implement holistic solutions that address the root causes of youth crime and support positive youth development.



Wraparound and Diversionary Services

Limited Service Availability and Accessibility

Service availability and accessibility has always been an issue for regional and rural areas. The closest availability service is often hundreds of kilometres away. Those who need it tend to already be in a deeply vulnerable state - to be further disconnected physically from country, community, and family can be a detriment to their healing process. As an example, the closest rehabilitation service for youth in Bourke is Dubbo, which is 370 kms and effectively a 4-hour car journey away. This becomes even more pronounced when we look at the number of places available for detox facilities for women from Bourke, where there are 8 places available in a service in the Blue Mountains, a staggering 640 km away.

Along with physical location and accessibility, the hours of a service also matter. Young people can be in need at all hours of the day, yet most of our services only function from 9 AM to 5 PM. To expand this, Maranguka has developed a Collaboration Agreement with service providers like CatholicCare and PCYC to expand youth services to cover the 5 - 9 PM hours, and launched a program called TribalConnect to cover hours until midnight. This has been a tremendous help to the community.

Pre-Release Process

To combat high levels of reoffending, Maranguka recommends developing a more robust and holistic pre-release process across the state, with a strong community focus for accountability and support. In Bourke, Maranguka has developed a Return to Community strategy that works with youth, families and community to ensure that young people are returning to a supportive, nurturing environment.

These programs should be designed to seamlessly reintegrate young people into their communities by providing comprehensive support tailored to their individual needs. This involves coordinating efforts across various sectors, including mental health, education, employment, and housing, to ensure a smooth transition from detention to community life, and would benefit from a whole-of-government



approach. Engaging local community organisations and Aboriginal leaders in the design and delivery of these services can enhance their cultural relevance and effectiveness, aligning with the NSW Government's commitment to partnership with Aboriginal people.

Pre-release programs should include personalised case management, skills training, and mentorship to equip young offenders with the tools and support needed for a successful reintegration. Regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms should be established to measure outcomes, allowing for continuous improvement of these services.

By adopting a community-centred approach, we can create a supportive environment that reduces recidivism and promotes long-term positive outcomes for youth in regional and rural areas.

Staffing Levels and Workforce

Incentive Packages

To effectively combat youth crime in regional and rural areas, it is essential to address the persistent staffing shortages and workforce issues, including those affecting police and support services. Incentive packages can play a crucial role in attracting and retaining skilled professionals in these communities. Such packages could include financial incentives like higher salaries, relocation allowances, and housing subsidies to offset the costs and challenges of living in remote areas. Additionally, offering professional development opportunities, career advancement prospects, and wellness programs can make positions in these regions more appealing.

Police officers already have one of the best incentive packages in the industry. For police officers, service workers and any associated support personnel, providing specialised training in cultural competence, mental health, and youth engagement can enhance their effectiveness and job satisfaction.

By creating a supportive and rewarding work environment, incentive packages can ensure that regional and rural areas are staffed with committed professionals who



are equipped to address the complex issues driving youth crime, thereby fostering safer and more resilient communities.

Education & Employment Opportunity Development

Developing robust education and employment opportunities is critical for addressing staffing levels and workforce issues in regional and rural areas, which, in turn, can have a significant impact on reducing youth crime through more effective service provision as well as youth empowerment and diversion.

By investing in local educational institutions and vocational training programs, communities can cultivate a skilled workforce that is well-equipped to meet the unique needs of these areas. Initiatives such as scholarships, apprenticeships, and partnerships with local businesses can encourage young people to pursue careers in healthcare, social services, education, and law enforcement. This not only provides meaningful employment opportunities for youth but also ensures that essential services are staffed by individuals who are deeply connected to their communities. Additionally, creating pathways for local residents to enter these professions can help retain talent in the region, as individuals are more likely to remain in their hometowns.

By fostering educational and career opportunities, regional and rural areas can build a sustainable, locally-based workforce that is committed to addressing and mitigating the drivers of youth crime.

Recidivism Rates

Preservation and restoration of the family unit

Preserving and restoring the family unit is crucial in reducing youth recidivism rates in regional and rural NSW. Strong family bonds provide young people with stability, emotional support, and a sense of belonging, which are essential for their development and rehabilitation.



Programs aimed at preserving the family unit should focus on providing comprehensive support to families, including counselling, parenting education, and conflict resolution services. By addressing underlying family issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, and financial stress, these programs can create a nurturing environment that deters youth from reoffending. Additionally, involving family members in the rehabilitation process through family-centred interventions and restorative justice practices can reinforce positive behaviour and accountability. Strengthening the family unit not only aids in the reintegration of young offenders but also helps to break the cycle of intergenerational crime, fostering healthier communities overall.

Lack of Clinical Support Services

The lack of consistent, locally-based clinical support in regional and rural communities significantly hampers efforts to reduce youth crime and recidivism. Many trained professionals, such as psychologists and social workers, operate on a fly-in-fly-out basis, which limits their availability and disrupts continuity of care. This transient model of service delivery prevents young people from building trusting, long-term relationships with clinicians, a factor critical to effective mental health and behavioural interventions. Furthermore, the limited access to reliable internet and data in these areas means that many youths cannot effectively utilise phone or online services such as Lifeline. This digital divide exacerbates their isolation and reduces their engagement with crucial support services.

Addressing these issues requires investing in permanent, locally-based clinical services and infrastructure to ensure that young people have consistent, accessible, and reliable support within their own communities. This approach would foster more meaningful therapeutic relationships and provide continuous care, essential for addressing the complex needs that drive youth crime and recidivism.

Creative, Innovative Solutions

Breaking the entrenched cycles of youth recidivism in regional and rural communities necessitates the implementation of creative and innovative solutions that act as effective circuit breakers. Traditional punitive approaches often fail to



address the underlying causes of criminal behaviour, such as trauma, poverty, and social disconnection. Innovative programs that incorporate elements of education, mentorship, and community engagement can offer more holistic and impactful interventions.

For instance, arts and sports-based programs can provide positive outlets for self-expression and skill development, while entrepreneurship and vocational training initiatives can open pathways to economic independence. Additionally, technology-driven solutions, like virtual reality-based empathy training or mobile mental health units, can reach youths in remote areas, offering support where it is most needed. These innovative approaches can disrupt the cycle of reoffending by addressing root causes, fostering resilience, and providing youth with practical tools and positive experiences that steer them away from criminal activity.

We need to encourage and fund creative, innovative solutions that focus on prevention and diversion, to provide young people the outlets they need and reduce offending and recidivism.

Police Functions and Required Supports

Cultural Competency

In order to enhance the effectiveness of police officers in regional and rural areas where there are multicultural populations, it is essential to provide comprehensive support through tailored incentive packages and cultural competency training. Police incentives should include induction into the local community strategies and ways of working, emphasising cultural awareness and community involvement as integral components. This approach fosters a deeper understanding and respect for the local Aboriginal culture, enhancing officers' ability to engage positively with the community.

Maranguka has facilitated a unique cultural competency training program for many stakeholders, including NSW Police, over the years. We introduce them to the local community context, our Safe, Smart & Strong Strategy, and ways of working. This training takes place in a neutral environment, as well as on country, where officers visit significant cultural sites and experience the local language. This immersive



experience, which has already benefited more than 600 participants from police, philanthropy, and other stakeholders, helps build genuine connections and mutual respect.

Incorporating cultural competency and community training elements into the incentive packages for police officers not only supports their professional development but also strengthens community-police relations, contributing to more effective crime prevention and intervention efforts.

Deep Collaboration & Listening

Maranguka adopts a deeply collaborative approach in working with NSW Police, fostering strong community-led engagement to address youth crime holistically.

This partnership is reflected in police involvement in various working groups focused on Early Childhood & Parenting, 8-18, the Role of Men, and the Role of Women, ensuring a comprehensive approach to community issues. NSW Police actively participate in Maranguka's Daily Check-Ins twice a week, a practice that has been replicated and trialled in other areas like Walgett. This regular interaction facilitates real-time collaboration and problem-solving. The NSW Police Collaboration Agreement with Maranguka formalises this partnership, underscoring a commitment to working together for community safety. Police officers are also invited to quarterly leadership and update meetings, promoting transparency and shared decision-making.

Additionally, all relevant authorities, including police, are signatories to the "Growing up Safe, Smart and Strong" local strategy, which aligns efforts towards youth development and safety.

One example of the deep listening and collaboration practised in Bourke is from the Maranguka Education & Employment Summit, which included police participation, and resulted in actionable insights and the development of a local police trainee program. Despite the initial trainees not completing the program, this initiative highlighted areas for improvement and the need for ongoing evaluation to understand and address challenges together.



Based on the success of these collaborative efforts, it is recommended that these collaborative methods be extended to the police-led Youth Action Meetings (YAM) and that similar approaches be applied in other communities across regional and rural NSW.

By replicating the Maranguka model, including the formation of specialised working groups, regular police participation in community-led initiatives, and formal collaboration agreements, other communities can benefit from a holistic and coordinated strategy to reduce youth crime. Expanding these practices can foster stronger community-police relationships, promote local leadership, and ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate and effective in addressing the unique needs of each community. Through these comprehensive and collaborative methods, regional and rural areas can create safer and more supportive environments for their youth.



Key Recommendations

1. Investment in Community-Led Initiatives

Support and expand justice reinvestment projects like Maranguka across NSW. Community-led initiatives have a proven track record of effectively addressing the root causes of youth crime. Investment in these projects should be prioritised to ensure long-term sustainability and impact.

2. Holistic Support Services

Develop and fund comprehensive support services that address the diverse needs of at-risk youth. This includes mental health services, educational support, housing assistance, and addiction treatment. Holistic services that address multiple aspects of a young person's life are crucial for preventing crime and promoting positive development.

3. Cultural and Community Engagement

Promote programs that strengthen cultural connections and community cohesion. Empowering communities to take charge of their own solutions leads to more sustainable outcomes. Programs and incentives that focus on cultural education and community-building activities should also be supported and expanded for authorities and service workers that interact with the community.

4. Policy and Systems Reform

Advocate for policy reforms that reduce systemic discrimination and promote rehabilitative justice. This includes reforms in policing, sentencing, and the provision of social services. Policies that focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment are essential for reducing recidivism and supporting positive youth development.

5. Economic and Educational Empowerment

Investing in local educational institutions and vocational training programs can provide young people with the skills and qualifications needed for meaningful



employment. By creating pathways to economic independence and stability, such as apprenticeships, scholarships, and partnerships with local organisations, we can offer youth viable alternatives to criminal activity. These efforts not only enhance individual prospects but also contribute to the overall economic resilience of regional and rural communities, creating a cycle of opportunity and growth that benefits all.

6. Open and Transparent Data Sharing

Open and transparent government-to-community data sharing is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat youth crime. Making relevant data easily accessible to organisations like Maranguka helps stakeholders understand local issues and coordinate efforts. This transparency helps foster targeted interventions, efficient resource allocation, and trust between government bodies and the community. As the saying goes, "What doesn't get measured, doesn't get managed", and the responsibility for addressing systemic issues should lie with all of us working collaboratively, not just government authorities.

Concluding Remarks

Addressing youth crime requires a multifaceted approach that tackles the underlying socio-economic, family, and systemic issues. The Maranguka initiative in Bourke provides a model for how community-led, justice reinvestment approaches can create meaningful change, with a focus on a strengths-based approach instead of the traditional deficit-based mindset. I urge the NSW Committee on Law and Safety to consider these insights and recommendations in its efforts to reduce youth crime and build safer, more resilient communities.

Maranguka's approach to addressing youth crime in Bourke and surrounding regions offers a powerful model for other communities facing similar challenges. By focusing on the drivers of youth crime, enhancing economic opportunities, and providing consistent, culturally appropriate support, we can address the root causes of criminal behaviour and create safer, more resilient communities.



Key to this approach is the integration of strong partnerships between community members, local organisations, and law enforcement. The importance of these collaborations is evident in the positive outcomes seen in Bourke, including the reduction in certain youth crime categories and improved community-police relations. Expanding this model to other regional and rural areas can help replicate these successes.

Our recommendations emphasise the need for locally-based support services, robust education and employment opportunities, and innovative programs that engage and empower young people. Additionally, providing police and other essential service providers with comprehensive incentive packages and unique cultural competency training ensures they are well-equipped to serve their communities effectively.

By implementing these strategies, practising openness and transparency, and continuously evaluating and improving our approaches, we can break the cycles of youth crime and recidivism, fostering environments where young people can thrive.

Maranguka is committed to working in partnership with the NSW Government and other stakeholders to create a future where all youth, especially those in regional and rural areas, have the support and opportunities they need to lead positive and productive lives.

Thank you for considering our submission. We look forward to continued collaboration to achieve these vital goals for our communities.

Alister Ferguson
Executive Director, Maranguka Ltd

References

1. Maranguka Growing Up our Kids Safe, Smart and Strong Strategy
2. KPMG Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project Impact Assessment, 2018