

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Inverell Shire Council

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29 May 2024

Mr Edmond Atalla MP
Committee Chair
Legislative Assembly
Committee on Law and Safety

Dear Mr Atalla,

**COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES INQUIRY SUBMISSION
– AN INVERELL SHIRE COUNCIL PERSPECTIVE**

Council considered a report regarding crime and community safety at their April 2024 Ordinary Meeting. It was subsequently resolved that:

- 1) *Council make a submission to the Legislative Assembly Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities regarding the level and impact of crime in the Inverell Shire;*
- 2) *Council encourage community members that have been impacted upon by crime and other interested parties to make submissions to the Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities;*
- 3) *Council seek the formal support of the Member for Northern Tablelands Adam Marshall MP and Northern Tablelands Councils to have an Inquiry hearing conducted in Inverell; and*
- 4) *Council continue to advocate on behalf of the community to relevant authorities, agencies and government to ensure an appropriate and wholistic response to crime and community safety in Inverell Shire.*

Further to point 3) above, submission/s have previously been forwarded under separate cover regarding this matter.

This correspondence focuses on the level and impact of crime in Inverell Shire consistent with point 1) of the above resolution.

Introduction

The wave of crime, in particular youth crime, that has swept across the state in recent times has had a significant negative impact upon the residents of Inverell Shire.

Inverell Shire is located in the New England North West Region of NSW covering a land area of 9431km² and extending to the Queensland border in the north. The Shire serves a population of approximately 18,000 people and has exhibited modest but sustained growth in the recent decade. As well as the major township of Inverell, the Shire also contains the villages of Yetman, Bonshaw, Ashford, Delungra, Gilgai and Tingha.

A recent report prepared by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) indicated the New England North West Region had a property crime rate 1.9 times above the state average

and a violent crime rate 1.8 times the state average for 2023. Such outcomes have a clear impact on the quality of life of those living in the region.

Crime Rate

Over the last 5 years in regional NSW there has been significant increases in four reportable crime categories:

- Motor vehicle theft up 20%
- Non-domestic assault up 14%
- Sexual assault up 47%
- Domestic Violence related assault up 24%.

Inverell Shire has also experienced increases across these crime categories. Astonishingly, motor vehicle theft in Inverell, which averaged 21 offences per year between 2014 and 2020, has now increased 300% with 63 offences in 2022 and 65 offences in 2023. Crime statistics for regional NSW would suggest the increase in motor vehicle theft over the last 5 years appears to be due to an increase in offending by young people; legal actions for this group increased by 188% from 2019 to 2023. Police data also shows an increase in vehicle theft incidents co-occurring with break-ins and an increase in keys being stolen in break-ins.

Based on the 2023 BOSCAR data comparing crime rates per 100,000 population for a range of offences, Inverell Shire is concerningly significantly above the state average for a number of offences including theft, break and enter, sexual assault, drug offences and domestic violence.

Policing

According to the NSW Annual Police Report, in 2022/23 there were a total of 17,062 police officers which equates to a police officer to resident's ratio of 1:489. The lack of resources is evident when comparing with other states (Queensland 1:326, Victoria 1:319, South Australia 1:301) for the same period. The lack of police resources is further exacerbated in rural and regional areas where there are significant difficulties in attracting officers to fill roles.

Policing in Inverell Shire is considerably under resourced due to a combination of long-term sick leave, unfilled vacancies and other routine commitments (prisoner transfer etc.). In recent times the Inverell station had been operating at approximately 60% capacity. This is made worse given a significant number of the voids were in senior positions such as Sergeant level which has a considerable impact on the overall experience of the police force on the ground. A 'revolving door' of police acting in the Officer in Charge role does little to develop continuity and strong links with the local community.

A lack of police at the Inverell station also impacts on other smaller stations in the Shire. Often Yetman, Ashford, Delungra and Tingha are left without a police presence as officers assigned to those stations are seconded to Inverell for duties.

Much of the communication from the NSW Police is from their centralised media unit with little if any comment coming from local officers. It is considered important that the local Officer in Charge be given the autonomy and encouraged to engage with the local community. The people of the Shire want to hear from an authoritative source and understand the police response to crime in their local area.

Recidivism and the Justice System

In many instances, particularly in the case of youth crime the deterrent handed down by our local court simply does not reflect community expectations. During 2023, 50.5% of youth (those aged under 18) in the New England North West region reoffended after a court appearance. In Inverell over the last 5 years, there has been a 23.2% increase in those breaching bail conditions.

Operation Mongoose conducted by the NSW Police is a high visibility response to property crime in regional areas. In March 2024, police reported that of the 150 persons that had been charged in the preceding 6 months of the operation, 109 of those were juveniles and 67% of those charged were already on bail.

Whilst it is acknowledged that punitive actions only form part of the response to the current regional crime epidemic, the community must be adequately protected from serious and repeat offenders. In instances where there is a high degree of confidence that an offender will reoffend than bail must be refused.

It is important that the NSW Government deliver upon the proposed legislative reform to the Bail Act and strengthen the test for bail including for youth charged with serious offences.

Social Considerations

It has been broadly acknowledged that policing alone will not overcome the current crime problem confronting regional NSW. The arrest comes after the crime is committed and post the physical, psychological and financial impacts suffered by the victims of crime. The Inverell Shire community has been badly shaken by the brazen, intimidating, at times violent and repeated nature of crime on their doorstep in recent months. To provide some context, an article from the local *Inverell Times* of the 4 April 2024 has been **attached** to this correspondence. The article describes the violent home invasion of an 82-year-old local whose house that he has lived in for over 60 years has been broken into on 5 occasions in recent times. The article describes the level of fear that resonates amongst local residents as a result of such crimes.

The over representation of youth in regional crime statistics has been significantly attributed to the 'post and boast' phenomenon. This sees young offenders recording their crime and pursuit and posting such to social media. The June 2023 BOSCAR report titled '*The increase in motor vehicle theft in NSW up to March 2023*' supported this analysis noting much of this sort of crime committed by young people appears to be opportunistic with them, subsequently uploading videos to social media showing themselves joyriding at high speeds, involved in police pursuits and breaking into people's homes to steal cars and keys. The same BOSCAR report shows a significant increase in motor vehicle theft offences in regional NSW since 2021. In fact, between April 2022 and March 2023, the New England North West region had the highest number of car thefts recorded, totalling 682 across the region (77 of those in Inverell). It is considered important that the legislative reform around new 'post and boast' laws are implemented by the NSW government.

Unfortunately, it is often vulnerable and disadvantaged youth that are disengaged with their community and responding to negative peer influence getting involved in anti-social and criminal activities. Sometimes for these young people, home is not a safe place and they therefore escape onto the streets with their peers committing crimes. It is vitally important that there are adequate resources to re-engage such youth in pro-social activities in the community such as employment, education, training, cultural and sporting activities. The sad reality is there are currently insufficient services and supports for vulnerable and disadvantaged youth in our region. Unless engagement and diversionary services are adequate these youth will continue to commit crimes into adulthood, continuing a cycle of disadvantage and criminal offending.

The NSW government must take the lead in ensuring that adequate programs are in place to prevent youth related crimes and to divert youth at risk away from becoming criminals. The coordination of agencies providing services in this space is vital to ensure that scarce public funds are being judiciously allocated. The Committee would likely be aware of the recent analysis of service provision for community services in the domains of crime prevention and justice, education, health and healing, housing and youth undertaken by Moree Plains Shire Council. The analysis clearly highlighted inefficiencies, duplication and a lack of coordination amongst agencies and resolving this issue must also be a priority for the government.

Conclusion

The crime problem currently facing Inverell Shire and regional NSW is a complex social issue that will require a multi-faceted response led by the NSW state government. It is totally unacceptable that people residing in rural and regional areas of our state are subjected to crime rates well above that of our metropolitan cousins. The response must be swift and comprehensive looking at all aspects including policing, the judicial system, youth support services and support for victims of crime including domestic violence.

Inverell Shire as a member of Country Mayors Association of NSW fully endorses and would support each of the 24 recommendations made in their submission dated 20 May 2024.



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\$2.20 inc GST

Liftoff for NDIS students taking part in drone program

NDIS participants in Inverell have honed their drone flying skills thanks to a new program of courses delivered by TAFE NSW. Members of Individual Ability Supports (IAS) Inverell received their Statement of Attainment in Introduction to Drones after a three day course in February. Full story page 2



Individual Ability Supports Inverell students complete a TAFE NSW introduction to drones course. Picture by Kunja Warrior/Facebook.

Break-ins distress

COMMUNITY
BY JACOB MCMASTER

BREAK-INS continue to be a primary concern for residents of Inverell with at least two people reporting injuries to friends or family as a result of a burglary in recent weeks.

"The community of Inverell has been shaken by a series of break-ins, culminating in a violent home invasion at the residence of an 82-year-old local, John Paul

just last week," Leeseey Wighton told the Inverell Times.

Members of the 'Inverell Crime' Facebook page have also raised concerns, with one reporting a home invasion where someone was attacked with a machete.

Earlier a woman had told the Inverell Times she was concerned for her mother living in aged care in the region as they had also endured break-ins.

She said the family was

worried as they were several hours north of the border should their Mum need assistance.

For Mr Paul, the latest break-in is the fifth time his home has been targeted and friends have launched a GoFundMe campaign in an effort to improve the security at his home.

"I hope we can raise money to install Security Cameras and Sensors around his home and to install security

windows," Ms Wighton said as part of her appeal.

She said Mr Paul had lived in the same home for almost 60 years and that his family were "living in fear" after five break-ins in 2023 alone.

His car had already been stolen in 2023.

So far, the campaign has secured more than \$1600 in donations, around \$500 has also been made in private donations.

"This reflects the commu-

nity's resolve to support its vulnerable members," Ms Wighton said.

"The local Crime Watch Facebook group continues to be proactive, engaging with media and authorities to address the broader issue of crime in the area," Ms Wighton said.

"The spirit of solidarity in Inverell is evident as residents rally together to ensure safety and justice within their community."

Members on the page also reported a number of attempted thefts had been thwarted by security systems, with one account of a car alarm spooking would-be thieves and another where robbers attempted to access a property via a sliding door, but motion cameras triggered an alarm.

Residents are reminded to ensure cars, doors and windows are locked at night.



EMU Australia
72 BYRON STREET INVERELL (02) 6722 1822
204 GREY STREET GLEN INNES (02) 6732 4686