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What Matters to Youth Workers in Rural and Regional Victoria 2018

June 2018

**About Youth Affairs Council Victoria**

YACVic is the leading advocate for young people aged 12–25 in Victoria. As a peak body, we work closely with young Victorians and the sector that supports them to deliver effective advocacy, events, training, resources and support – so that young people can live their best lives.

Our vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities. As Victoria’s youth peak body, we work across the state in the best interests of young people and the youth sector to:

* lead policy responses to issues affecting young people
* represent the youth sector to government
* resource high quality youth work practice
* research and advocate on youth issues.

We value our members and prioritise their needs.

**About YACVic Rural**

Young people and youth professionals in rural and regional Victoria often have unique insights and face different challenges to those in metropolitan Melbourne. In response, YACVic Rural expands our state-wide advocacy for young people in regional communities and the rural youth sector. We focus our presence across the Great South Coast and Southern Mallee regions.

We hope to continue expanding our state-wide services to get the best outcomes for young people throughout rural and regional Victoria.

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**Executive summary**

*What Matters to Youth Workers in Rural and Regional Victoria 2018* brings together the consultations and on-going conversations that the Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) have had with the Victorian youth sector over the last three years to present their concerns for the sector and young people, and to deliver a set of recommendations to the Victorian Government’s Office for Youth.

Since July 2015 YACVic has had over 2,000 separate conversations with youth workers and sector professionals from across rural and regional Victoria. YACVic knows the rural and regional youth sector is collaborative, innovative and committed, and works in formal and informal partnerships and networks to provide the highest quality of service provision possible. YACVic has also bared witness to the challenges youth workers are facing when trying to support and adequately address the needs of their community, and the young people within them.

Most recently in early 2018, YACVic’s CEO, Policy Manager, Rural Manager and Rural Policy and Advocacy Officer visited and consulted communities in south west and north west Victoria. In total YACVic met with 90 youth workers across the following six locations: Warrnambool, Portland, Hamilton, Mildura, Swan Hill and Robinvale.

YACVic heard directly from its stakeholders on the success stories of local projects and partnerships making a positive impact in the lives of young people, but conversations predominately focused on the issues facing the youth sector in rural and regional Victoria, including:

* Under-resourced local government youth service provision, and a lack of clarity around what youth services local governments should provide.
* Inequitable funding and grant application processes which limit rural and regional areas chances of success.
* Short-term funding cycles for youth service provision, at times these grants fund the only youth service provision in the area.
* Lack of clarity around outreach of youth services provided to smaller rural communities, and insufficient funding to do adequate outreach across large geographic areas.
* Metropolitan policy solutions being rolled out state-wide which do not work appropriately in rural and regional Victoria.
* A lack of acknowledgement that policies, and funding guidelines need to be adaptable to each area, one-size-fits-all approaches do not work across rural and regional Victoria on the whole.
* Difficulty in attracting, training and retaining staff in rural and regional areas.

While working within a challenging sector-environment, youth workers are also concerned about the challenges the young people they are working with are facing. They include:

* The education system, particularly for young people who have disengaged, or are at risk of disengaging from education, and a lack of availability of alternative education programs.
* The lack of employment opportunities for young people in their local communities, lack of training providers and insufficient careers advice provided in schools.
* The lack of crisis housing available in rural and regional areas for young people facing housing and homelessness, and the lack of private rentals available in some rural and regional communities.
* The lack of services available for young people going through times of mental ill health and wellbeing, and the need for community-wide interventions to reduce suicide rates.
* Insufficient access to generalist and specialist health service providers, including GPs and alcohol and drug rehabilitation centres, making it hard for young people in rural and regional areas to stay healthy and well.
* The impact high rates of family violence, child protection substantiations, and out-of-home care rates are having on the community with a lack of support services available.
* The lack of parenting knowledge and services available in the middle years for children aged 8 to 12, which is impacting on the number of young people in crisis at later stages.

To address the range of issues presented, the sector will need to work together. Service providers and policy makers need to be better supported to meaningfully collaborate across sectors in order to ensure that all young people are clearing the hurdles required to access their best future. Some of the first steps recommended by YACVic in addressing these issues include:

* Undertaking a comprehensive analysis of current youth service provision in rural and regional Victoria, including outreach to smaller towns to get a complete picture of the current service sector.
* Increasing investment into rural and regional youth services to meet demand and service gaps outlined through a comprehensive analysis of the current sector.
* Determining the roles and responsibilities of local government youth services and adequately resource them to undertake these roles.
* Develop funding agreements and grant criteria appropriate for rural and regional organisations which are flexible to cater to individual areas.
* Support and increase the capacity of rural and regional youth workers to ensure there is comprehensive workforce who can focus on working with and supporting young Victorians.

**Recommendations**

1. Increase investment into rural and regional services for young people to ensure services are adequately resourced to match demand and conduct comprehensive outreach to smaller rural communities.

**Suggested action:** Resource a comprehensive survey and analysis of the state of the current rural and regional youth sector to understand the current state of service provision. The sector should then be resourced to meet this demand and fill gaps in the current service system. This analysis should look at:

* The number of full time equivalent youth workers in local government and their qualifications
* The types of services for young people local governments are providing
* The types of services for young people provided by non-government service providers
* The number of types of workers providing services for young people
* The outreach schedules of workers
* The federal, state, and local government funding provided to services for young people

In 2011 similar work was undertaken by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Municipal Association Victoria. Youth workers have been requesting that this data and analysis work is undertaken to get a full picture of the current rural and regional youth services sector and to see if there are any hidden service gaps. This will also help the sector to see where more resources need to be directed.

1. Adequately resource local government youth services and provide funding agreements and grant criteria appropriate for rural and regional organisations.

**Suggested action:** Undertake an evaluation of the application process and funding guidelines for all Office for Youth distributed grants including *Engage!, FReeZA, Empower* and *Victorian Youth Week* grants.

* Incorporate into this evaluation a comprehensive consultation with youth workers from around Victoria in regards to their experience being a part of, and applying for, these programs.
* Develop separate guidelines for metropolitan, rural, and regional areas that are flexible to each region, their geography, population and needs.

1. Support and increase the capacity of rural and regional youth workers to ensure there is a comprehensive workforce that can focus on working with and to support Victorian young people.

**Suggested action:** Increasing the number of trained, supported youth workers in rural and regional Victoria. YACVic’s Youth Work Matters campaign calls on the Government to do this by –

* Developing a state-wide youth work strategy so that every young person can access the right support in rural, regional or metropolitan Victoria.
* Implementing a new initiative to recruit, train and employ youth workers from diverse communities, focused on those where young people experience high levels of disadvantage, exclusion or crime.
* More youth workers employed to help address our state’s priority issues, such as employment, mental health, youth justice and education.

**Suggested action:** Providing funding support to access professional development, or provide financial incentives for professional development providers to deliver training in rural and regional areas.

**Introduction**

Young people, no matter where they live, deserve to have a life they value, including access to education, good health, meaningful employment and having the ability to move though transitions while being connected to the community, family and friends and gaining independence. Sometimes there are hurdles that appear and present a barrier for young people in accessing a life they see for themselves. Sometimes young people can clear these hurdles on their own. Other times they need some support, and without this support can be stuck behind the hurdle for an extended period of time. Some young people turn to family members or friends. Some young people don’t have access to these supports, so they turn to youth workers and supportive adults in their lives to help them clear the hurdle and get on with their lives. In many areas youth workers are pillars of the community; they work with young people and their families to help strengthen and contribute to the community more broadly.

Funded by the Victorian Government, the Youth Affairs Council Victoria’s Rural Presence Project, known as YACVic Rural, has been on the ground in regional Victoria since 2016. YACVic Rural has a physical presence in the Great South Coast and Southern Mallee and works across rural and regional Victoria to facilitate lasting improvements for young people and the sector that supports them.

YACVic Rural has held training for hundreds of sector professionals, held numerous policy roundtables, and has had countless conversations with those who work and volunteer with young people across Victoria. We have developed a large number of strong relationships and partnerships with youth workers across the state, as well as working with existing networks such as Local Learning and Employment Networks, and the YACVic Rural State-wide Rural Youth Reference Group to truly understand what matters to youth workers in the context of rural and regional Victoria. These interactions have all contributed to YACVic’s state-wide advocacy and has helped develop a clearer picture of the current state of the sector in rural and regional Victoria.

**The state of youth work in rural and regional Victoria**

Approximately 22 per cent of all young Victorians live in rural and regional Victoria. Young people and youth professionals in rural and regional Victoria often have unique insights and face different challenges to those in metropolitan Melbourne.

In rural and regional Victoria there aren’t always qualified youth workers available to fill positions and it can be difficult to attract and retain qualified staff on a long-term basis. In rural and regional areas it is common for a range of different service sector professionals to undertake roles that incorporate what is typically thought of as youth work, such as housing support workers, alcohol and drug workers, or community engagement workers.

Whilst YACVic recognises and highly values trained youth workers, in this paper when we talk about ‘youth workers’ we are referring to any individuals who work or volunteer with young people. This can include community workers, social workers, teachers, healthcare professionals and anyone else who engages with, or works to provide opportunities for young people. They are people who are motivated by seeing young people adequately supported and celebrated from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Youth workers who hold a Bachelor of Youth Work qualification, as well as those who do not, are all expected follow the *Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector*.

**Youth Workers have concern for their work and the sector**

Youth work exists in many aspects of rural and regional communities. It’s not just local government undertaking activities with young people. Community service providers, healthcare professionals, schools, and grassroots community organisations all provide services and programs which are considered to be a part of the youth sector in rural and regional communities. All of these types of providers face similar challenges in working with young people in a rural and regional setting; however the state of youth work in rural and regional Victoria cannot be discussed without firstly focusing on the erosion of youth service provision from local governments.

***Local government youth services in rural and regional Victoria***

Throughout recent consultations with the rural and regional youth sector, YACVic has heard that local government youth workers are under great pressure. As discussed in the recent Victorian Parliamentary *Inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria’s rural and regional councils* (referred to as the Inquiry) rate capping and other budgetary pressures on rural and regional councils has led to a decline in youth service provision and employee numbers in youth worker/youth service provision roles, alongside community expectation of increased service provision.[[1]](#endnote-1)

While rate capping isn’t unique to rural and regional councils, the impact on rural and regional councils has been disproportionate to their metropolitan counterparts. As outlined in the Inquiry, a number of factors have impacted on rural and regional councils’ ability to raise funds.[[2]](#endnote-2) Due to this incapacity to raise funds, councils have had to review their service provision in order to be financially viable, and unfortunately youth work and youth service provision has been heavily reduced or distributed across a number of councils. Through their submission, Rural Councils Victoria highlight that cuts to expenditure on community services will be felt through the reduced number of youth support programs[[3]](#endnote-3). For example, in 2016 Buloke Shire reported they no longer provided youth services[[4]](#footnote-1), and Towong Shire also reduced their youth events’ budget by $9,000 in their 2016/17 budget due to lower rate increases. [[5]](#endnote-4) [[6]](#endnote-5)

While the Inquiry provides a high-level overview in what is going on in rural and regional councils and touches on the impact it is having on youth service provision, speaking to rural and regional youth workers, particularly those in roles with local government draws a more detailed picture.

Local government youth workers have reflected that due to rate capping they are facing a reduction in full-time equivalent staffing, which is not matched by a reduced workload. Increased workloads can lead to a number of negative consequences which affect the entire workforce such as burn out, and in some cases, worker withdrawal from the sector.

Some workers have lamented that due to reduced staffing capacity and the detail required in funding applications, they have been advised not to apply for funding and grants unless the amount they will receive outweighs the costs of applying for, and reporting back against, the grant funding. Youth services workers stressed that when they do receive funding such as *FReeZA*, *Engage!,* and *Victorian Youth Week* funding they receive the funding to roll out the programs but cannot support an increase in staffing to adequately resource the program. This adds to youth services’ workers increased workloads and doesn’t allow them to adequately undertake all of the requirements of the program such as a thorough evaluation, undertaking extensive outreach to smaller communities in their local government areas, or re-applying for funding when the program lapses.

For some rural and regional councils, State Government grants such as *FReeZA* and *Engage!* grants are the only external funding sources which fund youth service provision in local government areas. These grants provide three and two years of funding per-cycle respectively. This is not considered ‘long-term’ funding and creates instability for providers and young people. This instability impacts on youth service workers’ ability to provide meaningful, long-term programs and interventions which could lead to long-term outcomes for young people and the community on the whole. Sometimes these grants are not refunded until the previous block of funding has lapsed. We heard from youth workers that in rural and regional areas this leads to a lack of job security for, and continuity of, staff as they cannot be retained without the funding being guaranteed. This further exacerbates the challenge of appropriately staffing youth services in rural and regional Victoria, as mentioned previously. Furthermore, short-term funding tends to disrupt the lives of young people taking part in the programs when they are stopped just when they are starting to gain traction and produce positive outcomes in the community. Due to a program success and/or community expectation, in many instances, local governments continue these programs even once the funding has lapsed with little or no additional resourcing which can be highly problematic.

The Inquiry found that non-metropolitan councils have a higher dependence on grants as a means to raise revenue. Over 40 per cent of rural-sparse, and over 30 per cent of rural-dense council’s revenue comes from grants (compared to over 10 per cent of revenue in metro councils coming from grants).[[7]](#endnote-6) The criteria around many grants are metropolitan-centric and aren’t always appropriate to apply to rural and regional councils which disadvantages them in grant applications. If rural or regional councils are successful it can be difficult for local governments to attain the expected outcomes due to guidelines and criteria not being appropriate for, or catering to, a rural or regional setting.

While the Inquiry offers a number of recommendations to address the suite of issues raised, recommendations 6 and 7 are particularly relevant to the youth services space. To better understand where youth services sit in the local government space, a detailed review must be undertaken of councils’ current responsibilities. If local governments are found to be the main provider of youth services, this must be funded and resourced adequately. Additional rural and regional specific grant programs would also assist rural and regional councils in providing a minimum level of youth services with criteria and guidelines that are achievable and specific to a rural and/or regional context.

It’s hard to get a clear picture of the exact state of youth services in local governments. This is because there is no recent data on local government expenditure on youth services and infrastructure, number of full-time staffing positions for youth services, and no mapping done on the outreach that rural and regional councils do to smaller towns in local government areas. However, a mass of anecdotal evidence suggests local government youth services in rural and regional areas are struggling and need significant support.

***Challenges to youth work in rural and regional Victoria***

There are some inherent challenges in working in rural and regional Victoria which all service providers must face. Workers often refer to the ‘tyranny of distance’ and lamented that they weren’t adequately resourced to do comprehensive outreach in the areas that their work was mandated to cover. For example, if a worker is scheduled to provide one day of outreach per week, to a town located a 1.5 hour drive away from their normal place of work, this would take one day of outreach down to 4.6 hours. Once factoring in administrative tasks, this may only leave a couple of hours for the worker to have face to face contact with young people. Even when distance and outreach are taken into account when allocating resources, we have heard that due to increasing workloads and/or unrealistic outreach requirements youth workers are finding it difficult to achieve their objectives in this area.

It can be difficult for youth workers and decision makers to make the case for increased investment in youth services in rural and regional Victoria as there is often little data collected on the need of some communities. There is limited data available on service gaps as if a service is not provided locally young people will often travel to a service, and no data is collected on where they are coming from. While local youth workers know that these gaps exist, they are not reflected in the data. This makes it difficult to make the case in funding and grant applications which can lead to increased investments. Even when data is available, it can present a challenge to rural youth workers as it crudely reflects numbers, not the need of a community. A larger regional area may have higher numbers of young people requiring a service, whereas a smaller community might have smaller number, but the needs of these young people are just as great. This creates a challenge for youth workers in smaller rural communities trying to obtain funding and grants as it does not look like the need is that significant compared to a larger area, so they may miss out on funding available.

Youth workers report feeling frustrated that due to program, funding and policy restraints they are often only allowed to intervene and work with young people at crisis points. They cannot focus on prevention approaches and feel like they can only intervene when it’s ‘too late’, due to either policy parameters, or lack of capacity. On a policy level, some report a lack of local service coordination and feel that the sector could provide stronger prevention strategies if it worked together.

One way youth workers can work together more effectively is by meeting young people where they are at, but this also has its own challenges. Providing youth services in schools is a common way of meeting young people where they are at, but youth workers reflect that schools complain they are already overloaded with content and programs so they turn them away. Youth workers in some areas report they have been told to no longer contact school principals. While Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) are partnership brokers doing important work to bring together schools and service providers, in some places these roles are under resourced and could be lost if funding lapses.

Funding reallocation also provides a challenge for rural and regional youth workers, especially those in smaller rural towns, as funding reallocation is changing how rural outreach is being conducted. For example in Robinvale, approximately 90 kilometres from Mildura, former funding for alcohol and drug programs from YSAS has been redistributed to the headspace centre in Mildura. Workers in Robinvale are no longer sure if that service will reach Robinvale, and no outreach services are currently being provided by headspace Mildura.

***Metro solutions don’t always work in rural and regional Victoria***

Throughout our consultations with the sector, we heard repeatedly the struggles workers were facing in implementing government programs that were developed for all Victorian communities, but in reality do not work in a non-metropolitan context. State-wide programs and funding blocks often have rigid guidelines and restrictions which don’t always work in a rural or regional community. Sometimes they don’t take into account the geographical size of a local government area or region, or the key performance indicators are based on numbers that make sense in population dense areas but don’t translate to smaller, sparser communities. Even in communities of similar sizes, the same solutions are always viable. In delivering programs to get positive and long-term outcomes for their community, workers struggle to reconcile the need to report against strict program guidelines, while doing the work which will cater to and meet their specific local needs. For example, just because Sale and Horsham have a similar population, it doesn’t mean that the same programs will thrive in the two areas and will be able to adhere to the same guidelines.

We heard rural and regional workers complain about the lack of consultation when programs and funding guidelines are being developed or that their feedback is often ‘left behind’ when metropolitan decision makers develop the final guidelines. The people who are on the ground delivering the programs feel disconnected from policy makers which is putting a strain on the sector and the workers themselves.

Case Study - Changes to youth justice   
“A recent change to youth justice policy has demonstrated the disconnect between policy makers and our sector. We are facing challenges in developing a plan to implement new youth control orders which require young people to be supervised from 7am to 10pm. The staffing model is based on levels and availability of full time and casual staffing available in metropolitan areas and is not adaptable to regional communities where the number and availability of qualified staff is not there to supervise those young people. The geographical spread across thousands of square kilometres of the young people subject to those orders makes getting staff out to them virtually impossible.”

*Youth service provider, Great South Coast*

***The difference between rural and regional***

It is vitally important to the Victorian youth sector that rural and regional areas are not simply seen as a single entity. Equally important is that the responses to the concerns and issues identified in this paper are tailored to the requirements of both rural and regional Victorian communities.

Larger regional cities and smaller rural areas are not comparable. For example, the City of Greater Geelong covers 1,240 km2 and hosts a population of 233,429, whereas the Shire of East Gippsland covers 20,931 km2 and has a population of 45,040. East Gippsland is more than 15 times the size of Geelong with a fifth of its population. While both are areas outside of metropolitan Melbourne, to put them in one category as “rural and regional Victoria” simplifies the complexities and diversity of the individual communities.

Rural areas that are smaller by population and more population dense regional cities can face different challenges in different degrees, and require unique response. Similar to highlighting how metropolitan solutions won’t work in rural and regional Victoria, solutions that suit regional cities are not going to be appropriate for smaller rural areas. Workers in smaller rural areas, with larger geographies, have vast distances to cover to order to provide services to young people. Sometimes these services are simply not available to young people in smaller communities, or minimal outreach is undertaken on a sporadic basis. Furthermore, several grants and funding applications are divided into metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, however, when looking at the diversity of non-metropolitan areas, smaller areas may struggle to develop competitive grant applications compared to larger regional centres.

Case Study - *FReeZA 2019-21 Program Grant Guidelines*   
The *FReeZA 2019-21 Program Grant Guidelines* outline that there will be different performance targets for regional and metropolitan providers.[[8]](#endnote-7) The grant guidelines state that that ‘The level of FReeZA 2019-21 funding offered to organisations will be based on their capacity to meet the following performance targets’ (See Table 1).



**Table 1**

While this target scheme does acknowledge there is a difference between metropolitan and non-metropolitan providers, albeit to a limited extent, there is no scope for smaller regional providers with smaller populations to amend these targets to cater to their local populations. Using two non-metropolitan local government areas, City of Greater Geelong and Shire of East Gippsland, we see how these targets create a barrier for smaller rural areas to be competitive in securing grants which lump all non-metropolitan areas together.

If these two local government areas looked at applying for funding for six events, with the target of 1,350 young people attending, the Shire of East Gippsland would have to get 22.6 per cent of their youth population in attendance, whereas City of Greater Geelong would only require 3.3 per cent of their youth population to attend. This simple analysis highlights how rigidity in funding schemes limits smaller rural areas potential effectiveness in applying for, securing and delivering on grants which lock them into set guidelines or targets. Table 2 outlines this data along with two other comparison local government areas.

The increased funding available to regional providers is a nominal amount compared to what is offered to metropolitan providers to undertake work in a much larger, and sparser geographic area. Still looking at the performance targets for six events over three years, a regional provider can only access $600 more than a metropolitan provider. This would not be a sufficient amount of money to undertake comprehensive outreach across three years, and would not be able to subsidise travel to and from multiple events for young people in smaller towns.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Local Government Areas. | Population of young people (12-25 at 2016 Census) | Percentage of youth population that would have to attend FReeZA event to reach attendance targets (at 6 events over 3 years) |
| **Shire of East Gippsland** | 5,979 | 22.6% |
| **Swan Hill Rural City Council** | 3,510 | 38.5% |
| **City of Greater Geelong** | 41,232 | 3.3% |
| **City of Greater Bendigo** | 20,133 | 6.7%  **Table 2** |

***The rural and regional youth services workforce***

In the face of the challenges the sector is dealing with, dedicated, passionate and pragmatic youth and community services workers in rural and regional Victoria are the reason programs are implemented and young people are supported. The workforce’s strength and commitment to young people does not make it immune from a number of challenges that impact on staff wellbeing, retention and development.

Reduction in hours in youth work roles is common across youth service providers. While this reduction in hours is increasing workloads in the time left, it’s also changing the type of work youth workers are expected to do. Workers who would typically be delivering programs on the ground indicate they also have to drive strategic work and spend parts of their role advocating for not only additional program funding, but their own roles, and demonstrating the impact their roles are having on young people and the community. While a decline in hours for youth sector staff is worrying, it was concerning to hear from several workers that when colleagues in the sector leave their position, in some circumstances they are not being replaced and the position is lost all together.

While there is a desire to increase the capability and capacity of rural and regional youth workers many find it difficult to access professional development. Most workers have professional development budgets but the majority of opportunities are provided in Melbourne or in regional cities, so the costs of attending training sessions or forums can quickly multiply. For example, if a youth worker from Swan Hill attended a 1-day long professional development session in Melbourne, it would cost about 8 hours in travel time, fuel or public transport costs and one or two nights of accommodation in order to safely complete the trip home. This turns full-day training into two to three days out of the worker’s regular role – something which most workers cannot afford to do due to high workloads. YACVic Rural has worked hard to address the professional development gap, by taking training sessions to rural and regional areas.

The rural and regional youth sector is struggling to attract and retain qualified staff. A large proportion of youth workers in the rural and regional youth sector do not have a Bachelor of Youth Work or similar qualification. Some regions are struggling to attract qualified staff for a number of positions. One challenge raised in the Great South Coast region is that the majority of roles in the sector are part time or for fixed-term contracts which makes attracting, as well as retaining staff difficult. Some workers are starting to focus on developing local young people to fill roles, by creating pathways to undertake higher education and then return home to work in the communities they understand best, their own.

In order to develop local youth work capacity, there needs to be more pathways in rural and regional communities, including youth work qualifications at rural and regional TAFEs, and placement opportunities available locally. Youth workers have highlighted that these pathways need to be articulated earlier, so that young people can see a future for themselves in youth work.

Due to the large geographic spaces they cover, some workers face isolation and disconnection from the sector and their peers. Due to population density in metropolitan areas there might be several workers similar roles. However in a rural or regional area there might only be one worker to cover a significant geographical region. The limited number of workers in a region also creates issues such as a lack of confidentiality and lack of choice in service providers. While youth workers should understand their ethical commitments and act professionally in working with young people and their families, there are challenges when working in smaller towns where communities are more interconnected. For example, a rural school-based worker highlighted that on several occasions they had made reports to child protection and during the investigation, the child protection worker told the family the name of the school-based worker who made the initial report. Living in a smaller community meant these families knew this school-based worker. These kinds of confidentiality breaches make it difficult for workers to do their jobs effectively and puts the workers’ health and safety at risk.

Workers also have concerns that if certain people leave their roles in the sector, their ability to provide high quality services will be diminished. Due to their dedication and commitment to their positions, rural and regional youth workers often go above and beyond their defined position description in order to provide the best outcomes and if these people leave the sector there is concern from other sector members that programs will cease to exist. Simply said, many aspects of the rural and regional youth sectors are successful due to the goodwill of good people, and if these people, programs, and organisations aren’t adequately resourced there is a risk that these services will cease to exist.

***The rural and regional youth sector is collaborative, innovative and committed***

It’s clear that the rural and regional youth sector is up against some significant challenges, and unfortunately a lot of these sector challenges aren’t necessarily new. However, the sector has adapted and innovated to ensure that young people in their communities are still receiving high quality and meaningful youth work support and services.

A key strength of the rural and regional youth sector is the ability for service providers to collaborate, network, and work together to deliver holistic programs. Partnerships between services are valued and are essential in order to provide high quality service provision. Workers stressed that networks are highly valued in a rural and regional context and without resources dedicated to developing these partnerships, such as LLENs and YACVic, these partnerships may cease to exist or not retain the strength they currently have. These networks have a valuable role in connecting services providers in a region and assist in developing innovative, place-based solutions to local problems.

In rural and regional areas there tends to be significant buy-in from the local community, who are seen as a partner in effective youth service provision. The community, youth service providers and other community service providers work together in collaborative and innovative ways in order to provide services that they know are needed in their community, even if there aren’t the necessary resources available.

Case Study - Live4Life in rural and regional Victorian communities

Live4Life is a place-based, local, innovative program created in response to a reported increase in anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide amongst young people in the rural communities of the Macedon Ranges. This whole-of-community approach to youth mental health education and suicide prevention work with young people, teachers, parents and community members. Since its inception in 2010, over 16 per cent of the In Macedon Ranges population are trained in mental health education. The local approach, and community buy-in have led to the program’s success, and due to this success the model has been adapted by the community in the Rural City of Benalla and Shire of Glenelg.

**Youth workers are concerned about the issues young people are facing**

Youth workers have a unique perspective on the issues that young people are facing. While young people themselves are experts of their own experience, understanding what matters to youth workers in terms of the challenges young people are facing gives us a professional insight into how the service systems are and aren’t working for young people. This paper focuses on what youth workers have told us; however, we value young people’s voices and to hear directly from young people about what matters to them, see the Youth Affairs Council Victoria’s paper *What Matters Young People in Rural and Regional Victoria 2018*.

Youth workers are observing that the service system is difficult for young people to navigate and there isn’t always a clear pathway for them to follow in seeking help and support. An additional challenge in seeking support in rural and regional areas is the impact that living in a smaller community has on a young person and their identity. Unfortunately sometimes young people in a community can be stigmatised for their past actions and behaviour, or reputation of family members. Workers reflect that some young people are not offered employment opportunities or housing through private rentals due to this stigma. Workers in Mildura stated that they knew of young people who had changed their last name once turning 18 to escape the stigma of their family name.

Youth workers also highlighted that there is an identity crisis in some young people from rural and regional Victoria who reflect that they feel ‘lesser’ than their metropolitan peers. Stigmas surrounding rural and regional communities impact young people’s willingness to stay in their community, their sense of pride, and affects their mental health. Workers are also seeing that young people who stay in their community and don’t travel to Melbourne or another city to pursue further education are stigmatised for their choices. Working to reduce and remove these stigmas would increase pride in young people in their communities, increase buy-in to the community from young people, and potentially help ensure that young people are committed to working and contributing back to their local community.

This is not an exhaustive list of the challenges young people are facing in rural and regional Victoria, and the issues discussed do not delve comprehensively into all facets of the issue. These issues are complex and do not have one single cause or solution. The topics discussed reflect what youth workers around Victoria have expressed to us as their main concerns. In many of these issues there are additional challenges youth workers and young people are facing, but these are the issues that youth workers have identified as getting in the way of making progress, and allowing them to support the young people in their communities.

***Education***

Youth services workers we spoke with, including education based workers and Department of Education and Training staff, voiced concerns about young people at risk of, or who have disengaged from education, the lack of prevention programs available, as well as lack of alternative education facilities.

As highlighted in the 2017 Victorian Ombudsman’s report into school expulsions, expulsion can have a long-lasting impact on a child or young person’s life.[[9]](#endnote-8) Expulsion can be particularly challenging for rural or regional young people who have limited education options, and after expulsion will either disengage from school completely, or have to travel significant distances to another school. There are also limited flexible learning options available in some rural and regional communities, and the ones that do exist do not always meet the needs of the community. Youth workers are also seeing an increase in young people undertaking distance education as some young people don’t believe that the school they have access to is meeting their needs.

Youth workers are also concerned at the number of young people being moved onto secondary education with ‘basic’ knowledge which means they fall further and further behind once in secondary education. NAPLAN results show that inner-city students are up to two years in front of regional and rural students in some areas, and educationally disadvantaged students need targeted interventions to increase numeracy and literacy levels.[[10]](#endnote-9)

Seeing young people fall through the education system, the rural and regional youth sector is developing its own place-based approaches in order to support young people to stay in education and to build a positive culture around education in the community.

Case study: Beyond the Bell

Beyond the Bell is a collective impact initiative that engages with all sectors in Victoria’s Great South Coast community to improve educational outcomes for young people in six local government areas. It is a community led response to the comparatively low rates of year 12 or equivalent completion.  The place-based community wide approach works with philanthropic and state government funding to coordinate innovations and improvements across the continuum from conception to young adulthood. Collaboration at the local area level has led to successful initiatives that align with the priority arears of early literacy, social and emotional wellbeing, disadvantaged young people, and engagement with learning. From Nurture Rooms to Little Book Boxes, Live for Life and Continuum of Need, communities across the region are taking action on the barriers to young people achieving their educational goals.

***Employment***

Employment is a key issue raised when talking to rural and regional youth workers. Youth unemployment is generally higher in rural and regional areas.[[11]](#endnote-10) When discussing employment most youth workers focus on the lack of employment opportunities for early-school leavers and lack of employment pathways for young people who stay in their community.

Different communities we spoke to are facing different challenges when it comes to employment. Many communities are struggling with the lack of jobs available in the community generally. In these situations, young people, and in particular young people with no experience and who have left school early, are at the bottom of employers’ lists. Employment workers and agencies struggle to find young people work as it seems that employers aren’t keen to give them a go and eventually the young people stop trying. Other communities are facing an alternate challenge. Local employers are willing to provide employment opportunities, but young people aren’t engaged or interested in the roles.

Rural and regional youth workers are finding that there are limited employment and training pathways available for young people, and even when these pathways exist they can fail to provide meaningful opportunities for young people that get them work ready. While a community may have a TAFE facility, it may only offer a handful of courses and doesn’t necessarily offer a full range of employment pathways. Structured workplace learning programs delivered by local LLENs are working well in some communities and are delivering a high number of placements for smaller rural areas. Youth workers are also finding that some young people from rural and regional Victoria perceive that there are limited employment opportunities, such as fruit picking, or farm work, as being the only jobs available to them. However, this isn’t necessarily the case, and workers are trying to remove this stigma of working in rural and regional communities.

Careers education was a common issue discussed between youth workers, with several discussions reflected in the submissions and hearings provided to the ongoing *Inquiry into careers advice activities in schools*. While the recent reforms around careers education introduced by the Department of Education and Training are welcome, they do not provide enough support for rural and regional students. Some youth workers highlighted that young people from the community will go to Melbourne or a larger regional city to undertake school-based work experience, as they don’t believe there are any opportunities for them in their own community. Sometimes the students who stay in their community don’t undertake any work experience. Some schools do not have careers advisors and outreach isn’t done from larger regional centres. Other schools have careers advisors but they are generally holding multiple roles within the school and do not have time to fully commit to the role. Careers education not only has to ensure young people are looking towards meaningful employment, but must be coupled with a shift in perceptions around work in rural and regionals areas, and an increase in meaningful local employment pathways available for young people to access.

***Housing***

Homelessness and housing stress are real concerns for rural and regional youth workers. Youth workers are concerned at the increasing rates of homelessness in young people, particularly the increase in young people who are ‘couch surfing’ and living in informal housing arrangements for long periods of time. In rural areas, it is more common for people experiencing homelessness to be temporarily staying with others compared to those in metropolitan Melbourne.[[12]](#endnote-11)

Youth workers we spoke with were exasperated by the lack of youth focused crisis and non-crisis housing options available for young people who are at-risk of or are facing homelessness. Youth and housing workers in some areas felt simply out of options; with no crisis accommodation available, all they could do is provide information to young people on how to stay safe in times of homelessness, safe places to camp in the community, or direct them to a local caravan park. Beyond supported accommodation options, youth workers were also concerned about the lack of private rentals available in the community, and when private rentals were available, young people are often at the bottom of the list.

***Mental health***

Mental health and wellbeing in young people is a priority concern for rural and regional youth workers. Across the state there has been an increase in young people reporting feelings of depressive symptoms and an increased demand for youth mental health services. [[13]](#endnote-12) Youth workers we spoke with are concerned about the impact social media is having on young people in their communities. They had concerns that inappropriate social media use and online bullying are creating a complex environment of peer pressure and poor mental wellbeing.

Workers reported seeing an increase in wait times for young people to access both general and specialist mental health services in their communities, with insufficient outreach conducted by mental health support services to smaller towns. Sometimes the nearest service for a young person is a 90 minute drive away which may not be accessible by public transport, or the service may not stay open long enough after school hours for young people to travel to. Some rural areas have no access to mental health services after hours and young people have to travel long distances to access this service. Across the health and wellbeing space there has been an increase in online and telehealth facilities available, however there is not always sufficient internet connections to access this service, and they are not always a suitable treatment option.

Workers, along with the community more broadly, are concerned with youth suicide rates within their communities. The suicide rate is higher in regional Victoria compared to metropolitan Melbourne.[[14]](#endnote-13) Workers are finding that community driven, collaborative and prevention-focused interventions are effective in dealing with this issue as demonstrated by the Live4Life program.

***Physical health and wellbeing***

Youth workers are also concerned about the physical health and wellbeing of young people they work with. Workers reflect that there are limited whole-of-community health promotion and prevention approaches and few programs in place to target high rates of chronic disease and obesity in young people. Workers are alarmed about young people participating in unsafe sexual relationships and activities, and are concerned at the increased birth rate in teenage young people, which is higher in rural areas of Australia.[[15]](#endnote-14)

Of great concern is the lack of access to GPs in some rural and regional communities. We heard from youth workers in rural towns and regional centres that in some instances local GPs are so busy that they will not take bookings for any new patients. This limits young people’s ability to access basic healthcare. Some areas also do not have relevant healthcare professionals on call at local hospitals so in an emergency, young people and their families have to travel long distances to access help.

Youth workers are alarmed at the increased use of alcohol and other drugs in rural and regional areas and the lack of residential detox and rehabilitation facilities available to young people in their community, or even in a nearby community.[[16]](#endnote-15) Victoria’s Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice service, YoDAA, report that there are large areas of rural and regional Victoria that have no dedicated youth alcohol and drug services, for example from Swan Hill to Echuca and surrounds.[[17]](#endnote-16) They is also concern as dedicated youth alcohol and drug service provision have been absorbed into adult services which do not provided specialised support.[[18]](#endnote-17) There is also concern around the violence rate in the community including peer-to-peer and family violence.

***Family violence***

In 2016–17 children and young people from rural and regional areas were the subject of child protection substantiations at higher rates than those in major cities, and 44.3 per cent of Victorian children in out-of-home care were from rural or regional areas.[[19]](#endnote-18) Youth workers reflect high rates of child protection intervention in rural and regional Victoria has led to higher exposure levels in the community.

A main concern from rural and regional youth workers specifically is that some young people lack the understanding and knowledge that an act of family violence is unacceptable behaviour. Family violence can sometimes be so culturally ingrained that young people in the situation don’t report or disclose the behaviour as those actions are normalised in the community or family. Workers are also seeing some young people taking on the role of a carer when family violence is occurring which limits their capacity to fully participate in educational and recreational activities. Family violence is also forcing some young people into housing stress and homelessness. Those supporting young people facing family violence find it difficult to assist young people in accessing support due to a lack of counselling and mental health support available in rural and regional areas.

***Parenting and the middle years***

Beyond family violence, many youth workers reflected a general concern about local parenting behaviours and knowledge. In our consultations, when looking at the issues some local young people were facing, youth workers tended to look back on that young person’s childhood development and discussed how the parenting and guardianship they received may be causal factors behind several of the issues young people are currently facing.

Workers from across the community services sector have also reflected that a lack of focus on the ‘middle years’ is leaving a crucial gap at a time when young people need additional support. For example, most local governments offer child and family services from birth to children aged 6 to 8 years old, and then offer youth services for young people from ages 12 to 25. This is leaving a gap for children aged 8 to 12 to access support. This is normally a time where children are transitioning between primary and secondary school, children are developing a greater independence from their parents’ oversight, which can lead to taking on additional responsibility, and is a time of significant physical, emotional, neural, cognitive and social development.[[20]](#endnote-19) This is a crucial developmental stage where preventative support and programs are needed to ensure that young people are supported and to hopefully decrease rates of crisis interventions being required in later years.

**Final thoughts**

The rural and regional youth sector is strong. In the face of these challenges workers are providing young people and the broader community with high-quality services in order to support and engage young people in their communities. The value of youth work cannot be understated. Working with young people at this life-stage ensures that they can develop into healthy resilient adults who can contribute to and thrive in the community.

As we can see, these challenges need to be addressed in order to ensure that the rural and regional youth work sector can grow and continue to deliver effective programs and interventions. Taking a look at the rural and regional youth work sector as a whole has raised some questions. Who is responsible for youth work? And where is outreach happening? Is local government responsible for youth services provision? If so, are they being adequately resourced to do the work and reach long-term outcomes? How can we make sure they are resourced appropriately? How can we ensure that the sector and the workforce are being adequately supported to do the best work they can? YACVic Rural is committed to working towards answering these questions with the sector. We are interested in mapping youth service delivery in rural and regional Victoria and developing a more in-depth understanding of the current service system, in order to understand how we can serve it best.

**Recommendations**

1. Increase investment into rural and regional services for young people to ensure services are adequately resourced to match demand and conduct comprehensive outreach to smaller rural communities.

**Suggested action:** Resource a comprehensive survey and analysis of the state of the current rural and regional youth sector to understand the current state of service provision. The sector should then be resourced to meet this demand and fill gaps in the current service system. This analysis should look at:

* The number of full time equivalent youth workers in local government and their qualifications
* The types of services for young people local governments are providing
* The types of services for young people provided by non-government service providers
* The number of types of workers providing services for young people
* The outreach schedules of workers
* The federal, state, and local government funding provided to services for young people

In 2011 similar work was undertaken by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Municipal Association Victoria. Youth workers have been requesting that this data and analysis work is undertaken to get a full picture of the current rural and regional youth services sector and to see if there are any hidden service gaps. This will also help the sector to see where more resources need to be directed.

1. Adequately resource local government youth services and provide funding agreements and grant criteria appropriate for rural and regional organisations.

**Suggested action:** Undertake an evaluation of the application process and funding guidelines for all Office for Youth distributed grants including *Engage!, FReeZA, Empower* and *Victorian Youth Week* grants.

* Incorporate into this evaluation a comprehensive consultation with youth workers from around Victoria in regards to their experience being a part of, and applying for, these programs.
* Develop separate guidelines for metropolitan, rural, and regional areas that are flexible to each region, their geography, population and needs.

1. Support and increase the capacity of rural and regional youth workers to ensure there is a comprehensive workforce that can focus on working with and to support Victorian young people.

**Suggested action:** Increasing the number of trained, supported youth workers in rural and regional Victoria. YACVic’s Youth Work Matters campaign calls on the Government to do this by –

* Developing a state-wide youth work strategy so that every young person can access the right support in rural, regional or metropolitan Victoria.
* Implementing a new initiative to recruit, train and employ youth workers from diverse communities, focused on those where young people experience high levels of disadvantage, exclusion or crime.
* More youth workers employed to help address our state’s priority issues, such as employment, mental health, youth justice and education.

**Suggested action:** Providing funding support to access professional development, or provide financial incentives for professional development providers to deliver training in rural and regional areas.

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