What we heard

Insights from NCOSS regional community consultations 2018

ncoss
NSW Council of Social Service

At NCOSS we know that our communities are one of the State's most important assets. They are strong, resilient and innovative and contain the solutions to the challenges they face. In 2018 we held consultations which shone a light on the kind of communities our sectors want to see and the key challenges facing us in achieving this.

Method

Our consultations are guided by the principles of recognised methodologies including the Harwood, World Café and Tamarack approaches to community conversations and engagement. We have used the principles of these approaches as a framework for our consultations to:

- encourage diverse, cross-sector contribution and perspectives;
- create a safe space for people to share their insights and experiences;
- understand the shared aspirations and values of a community;
- identify the strengths, assets and past successes of a community;
- identify changes and solutions that would assist in achieving a community's aspirations;
- develop public knowledge based on experience; and
- advance a strengths-based approach to community development.

Between May and August 2018, the NCOSS team visited 9 NSW districts:

- [Northern NSW](#)
- [Hunter New England](#)
- [Western NSW](#)
- [Far West](#)
- [Murrumbidgee](#)
- [Mid North Coast](#)
- [Central Coast](#)
- [Western Sydney](#)
- [Illawarra Shellharbour](#)

Within these 9 districts, NCOSS ran 15 consultation sessions with social and community service organisations. Over the course of the consultations, we spoke to 220 individuals who work in their communities with people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. We talked

to the people delivering crucial services that make a difference in people's lives. They represented a broad cross-section of the social and community sector, including non-government organisations and services funded by Health, Justice, Education and Family and Community Services.

We asked participants about the challenges they face and the solutions that will overcome these challenges.

Consultation sessions were recorded by note-takers, and the resulting data analysed thematically. The 17 themes we have identified are grounded in the experiences of the communities to which they apply. They are both unique between communities, and common across NSW.

This report is a reflection on the discussions held in each region.

Limitations: this report represents a point-in-time reflection of key issues facing participants in the NCOSS consultation sessions. This report cannot be a complete expression of all the challenges facing the sector, but is a grounded "snap-shot" of the realities facing regional and remote service provision in NSW.

Summary

'Listen to the community that has the solutions and place-based approaches.'

The tyranny of distance means that the community sector in regional and remote NSW face extra and unique challenges. The regional consultations undertaken by NCOSS showed a sector grappling with new funding models and arrangements that have moved away from welfare driven block funding that facilitates collaboration, to an individual, or 'person-centred', 'customer' focus. Funding arrangements that are disconnected from the community are having consequences for regional and rural service provision, and the sustainability of some service types is a real and present threat. While service providers appreciate the value that individualised support lends to self-determination and inclusion, there are unintended consequences affecting the fabric of the community services sector.

Increasingly competitive and regular tendering processes and the quasi-market of the national Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) are triggering change. We heard about shifts in the ability of service providers to work openly together. The historical practices of communication and collaborative working are being threatened by the increasing need for service providers to work in competition with each other. This finding is supported by recent research, which also describes that the flow-on effects of introducing a competitive environment negatively affects care coordination and service integration.[1]

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[1] Centre for Social Impact, UNSW (2018) Competition and collaboration between service providers in the NDIS, Sydney.

Indeed, care integration and community connectedness are found in these consultations to be the pride and driving force of the community services sector. NSW communities told us that despite the structural and resource limitations, the sector works well together by sharing knowledge and resources to better support vulnerable people in the community. In every region, we heard that communities are best placed to design solutions that will work locally.

This report 'spotlights' several place-based solutions that are having local success. To summarise the findings, the themes detailed in this report are broadly organised into four guiding principles.

Overall, we heard that:

Solutions to community challenges must **recognise the real-life impacts of multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage,** and therefore the unique barriers faced by individuals accessing supports. Support for our communities must be shaped by our communities; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, people with disability, LGBTQI communities, older people and younger people, and girls and women.

Aboriginal communities are best placed to understand local needs, and this is recognised by government.[2] Aboriginal communities and leaders know what their communities need and must be supported to self-determine at all levels of decision-making. Service delivery can be compromised if distinct local conditions are overlooked in favour of a 'one size fits all' approach. Our consultations illustrated the significance of **Aboriginal-led design and delivery**.

Local experience and expertise, along with **community sector connectedness** are key to success. "One-size-fits-all" approaches, designed without consultation with the community to which they apply, simply do not have the outcomes that community-owned solutions do. In every region we heard that communities should be empowered and resourced to come together and leverage cross-sectoral partnerships in order to design and deliver effective supports. **Place-based solutions** that are grounded in communities work best.

We heard that funding policies do not adequately account for the distance and time required of regional and remote support service delivery. Short funding cycles are undermining the attraction, retention and security of staff, and rural organisations are struggling to attract skilled workers.[3] **Targeted approaches to funding and investment** for regional, remote and rural communities would be well received.

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[2] NSW Government (2013) Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment. NSW Government Plan for Aboriginal Affairs: education, employment and accountability, p.22.

[3] Dew, A., Gilroy, J. & Lincoln, M (2016) A sustainable rural and remote workforce for disability. Research to Action Guide, Rapid Review. Centre for Applied Disability Research, p.10. Available here.

Domains

Seventeen themes emerged from the consultation series. These can be summarised into six key domains:

The key issues for service providers sit within these six domains:
Across the state, the **affordability, security, supply and suitability of housing** was the most referenced challenge facing communities.
Access to health and mental health supports and services is difficult and fraught. Timely early intervention and community based mental health services, particularly for youth, are described as inadequate across the state.
Isolation and lack of transport options have a significant impact on individual and community access to opportunity, services and supports. Transport services are currently overly complicated and under-funded. The sector urgently want **reform to health and community transport that gives service providers more autonomy and flexibility** to meet the needs of people living outside of regional centres.
Service gaps are threatening the safety of the most vulnerable in communities. People with mental health support needs are losing their access to services as a result of the NDIS. More detox and rehabilitation services where people can remain connected to their communities are needed, to avoid people being stripped of their supports when they are most vulnerable.
The cost of living, in particular high energy prices, is affecting vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Where children, young people, families and individuals find themselves in a home without electricity or gas, it impacts all other aspects of their lives.
Young people are identified as being affected disproportionately across all of the consultation themes. Missing out on key supports early in life sets young people on a path of disadvantage. Early learning, primary and high schools in regional and remote communities are crucial locations of community connectedness, and are an entry point to broader supports. **Schools that are well connected to their communities can change the trajectory** of vulnerable youth.

What is next?

We will use the findings outlined in this report to inform and prioritise our advocacy work on behalf of the Social and Community Service Sector and communities across NSW. Importantly, what we have heard from communities across NSW has informed our 2019 Election Platform.

Our journey across NSW has provided us with deep insights into the diversity and resilience of communities across regional NSW. We will use this report as a tool to share the voice and perspective of regional NSW with our stakeholders and decision-makers.

We hope that communities also get great use out of this report and can take these learnings and apply them to their own advocacy work. We hope that stories of successful initiatives will inspire communities to continue to be innovative in their approach to ending poverty and disadvantage in their community. Our communities are rich in diversity and local innovation, and when we learn from one another there is so much opportunity to do great things.

Northern NSW

Regional Overview

Northern NSW extends from Tweed Heads in the north to Grafton in the south. The population is ageing, and growth is slow at just 0.3% over 2015 – 2016.[4] The region includes areas of relative disadvantage[5] and is home to a higher than average proportion of people with disability, people receiving the disability pension and people receiving Newstart. There is a higher than average rate of homelessness in the region, at nearly 5%.[6]

NCOSS held consultations in Lismore and Tweed Heads, hearing from a range of organisations from across the region. Overall, the community consistently emphasised the importance of place-based community controlled solutions. In Lismore, participants lamented the lack of recognition by Government that there are multiple Aboriginal perspectives between different nations and cultures. As Aboriginal people have been relocated to different areas (for example for housing) the resulting "melting pot" has had an impact on cultural differentiation for Aboriginal communities. Moving people to services is an approach that doesn't work. As one participant explained,

Communities told us they need:

- Social and affordable housing stock, giving attention to particularly vulnerable groups
- Connection to country, community and culture, and better cultural competency from Government to local service providers
- Affordable community transport solutions for diverse needs
- Support for people with disability who are falling through the NDIS gaps
- More places and more affordable child care
- Sustainable resourcing for children's healthy food initiatives
- Resourcing to respond effectively to domestic and family violence
- Funding incentives for cross-sectoral partnerships
- Longer term and more flexible funding that recognises that change takes time

> *'People need to understand that connection to country, culture and community is everything to Aboriginal people. As an Aboriginal person, if you take that away from me, I am not going to be physically sound, I am not going to be mentally sound.'*

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[4] FaCS District Profile, Northern NSW, available here, accessed 7 August 2018.
[5] According to the ABS Index of Relative Socio-economic disadvantage, available here, accessed 7 August 2018.
[6] FaCS District Profile, Northern NSW, available here, accessed 7 August 2018.

We heard that Aboriginal people need to be connected with appropriate services that recognise the implications of different nations and different cultures. The need for locally driven and flexible solutions fed into all of the key issues discussed in our consultation.

While we heard about complex challenges facing communities in Northern NSW, we also heard examples of strength and innovation. Participants told us that this resilient region has strength in its uniqueness and diversity. We heard about a resurgence of proactive community development work as community members come together to explore new solutions.

Housing

> 'Affordable housing and homelessness is the number one issue here. If we had affordable housing, a number of these other problems would disappear, without a doubt.'

Spotlight: Early intervention trial addressing homelessness in Byron Bay

One Roof in Byron Bay has set up a referral only emergency campground to address the growing issue of homelessness amongst men in the region. The pilot is particularly targeted to those relatively new to rough sleeping and who seek change. An incorporated community association was set up in consultation with the Byron Shire Council and local service providers. The project engages men experiencing homelessness to develop skills and work on the factors that led them to experiencing homelessness. As part of the program, men build small mobile homes in which they can live on the program's campground. This program is an example of community creativity and resilience addressing a need in a locally relevant way. The One Roof team are currently fundraising in order to put the project into full swing.

We heard that proportionate to average income, housing is expensive and unaffordable in the region. Obtaining a rental is competitive, with private rental inspections attracting over 30 potential applicants. Competitiveness has driven up costs as demand exceeds supply. This has increased the demand for social and affordable housing.

Despite this, participants noted that no new properties have been built by the Government in the region for the past 2-3 years. According to participants, the region has seen approximately 30% less investment in social and affordable housing compared to Sydney metropolitan areas. We heard about the specific and pressing unmet need for housing for groups with particular and complex needs, such as people with disability and people leaving violence.

Participants told us that housing and supports for Aboriginal people are more successful when managed by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) and smaller organisations because they *'move faster and there's less politics involved.'* (ACCO, Lismore).

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

In both consultations, participants expressed concern about service gaps created by the roll out of the NDIS. Participants talked about community members with disability who are ineligible for an NDIS plan. For this cohort, 'mainstream supports' have not been available, accessible or adequate. This included people aged over 65 years living with disability, and people with complex mental health needs who had previously been supported by Partners in Recovery. Participants said that families have strongly felt the closure of Ageing Disability and Home Care as they no longer receive the supports they used to, and the NDIS hasn't done a sufficient job of picking up that support.

We also heard that there has not been enough support for the community to learn about, understand, and therefore meaningfully access, the NDIS. This has impeded its effectiveness. Many services have had to spend time and resources providing information to the community which they are not necessarily funded to do.

Aged care services

We heard that there are limited aged care spaces in the region, despite the ageing population, and no aged care facilities that offered culturally appropriate care to Aboriginal people.

Spotlight: It takes a town to raise a child

In Murwillimbah NSW, one in five children are growing up experiencing poverty, and nearly half the families in the area who are renting their home are at risk of financial hardship (according to the 'It Takes a Town' logic model, here). The community has responded with a project to develop a culture of generosity and give all children the environment they need to thrive. 'It Takes a Town' project has enabled community members, by signing up to a common agenda, to come together and share skills and expertise. On a child-centred level, the project works with families building circles of support. On a community-centred level, the project encourages the creation of more opportunities for "good stuff" like community celebrations and events. 'It Takes a Town' hopes to see new collaborations, more volunteers and more acts of support helping children experiencing poverty.

The project is coordinated by 'Thrive 2484', and is one project of a broader initiative aiming to inspire regional communities by bringing them together and sharing skills, projects, events and ideas.

Early childhood education and care

20% of the Northern NSW population is aged between 0 and 17 years.[7] Participants emphasised the undersupply of early childhood education and care places in the region, and how this disadvantaged vulnerable children and their families. In Lismore, we heard that the new activity-based arrangements for childcare subsidies disadvantage families living in rural and remote areas where there are fewer activities. In Tweed Heads, we heard that as the population moves from rural to coastal areas, the undersupply of childcare places in these areas is more harshly felt. One participant noted that a lack of childcare had forced a local parent to decline a full-time job, thereby showing the economic impact a shortage of childcare has on parents and the broader community.

Participants told us that vulnerable families would benefit from extra subsidies to access childcare. At present, children need to be identified as 'at risk of harm' to access extra funding. We heard that this deficit-focussed approach has meant that many families experiencing disadvantage, who would benefit from more support in the form of connecting with a childcare community, are missing out.

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[7] FaCS District Profile, Northern NSW, available here, accessed 7 August 2018.

Transport

In Tweed Heads, participants highlighted that community transport is a critical service that is becoming more difficult to access as a result of the NDIS and My Aged Care. The removal of block funding for transport means that consumers have to pay rates which are not necessarily covered in their support plan. Some community members are out of pocket to the extent that they are delaying crucial healthcare procedures because they cannot afford to travel. The lack of affordable transport also means that young people in Murwillumbah are effectively shut out of community supports like Headspace and TAFE.

Healthy eating

Childhood obesity is a major concern for disadvantaged communities. In Lismore, participants told us about healthy eating programs that are working well to educate schools and communities. For example, the Red Cross runs the opt-in Food-Redi program, offering a 6 module course on food literacy in schools. This is a positive move from breakfast programs to building life skills and sharing knowledge. Communities told us that even where programs like this exist, the lack of long term funding is a barrier to their impact.

Domestic and family violence

In Tweed Heads, participants noted the need for community service providers to focus on women and children in relation to domestic violence. We heard, as in other regions, that the Staying Home Leaving Violence program is a promising scheme which has encouraged collaboration and reshaped how the community sector supports women and children. However, the funding required to implement the program fully and effectively has not been attached to the reform.

A participant noted that more needs to be done in response to domestic and family violence in the region, stating *"women can't be fearful in their own communities because they're subjected to crime, it's just unacceptable"*.

Sector and workforce

> *'Listen to the community that has the solutions around place-based approaches'.* -Women's health service, Lismore

We heard that service providers feel they are constantly 'reinventing the wheel'. Providers are asked to tender for 'new programs' rather than carrying on or adapting existing ones. We also heard, as in other regions, that short term funding is problematic. A participant in Tweed Heads commented "we've set the programs up to fail". For Tweed Head providers, one year contracts mean that they are not given long enough to show impact in order to gain further funds.

'Word of mouth is often the main way regional communities hear about services or programs, but this takes time and it isn't in time for the funding to last!' – Disability and aged care provider, Tweed Heads

The consequence is workforce insecurity and an administrative burden that takes away from program delivery.

'Services spend so much time searching for Government grants. It's very competitive and highly restrictive in what you can apply for.'- Community service provider, Casino

Participants told us that the 'one-size fits all' centralised approach to program design is problematic. We also heard that there is not enough recognition that small, flexible Aboriginal controlled organisations are most successful at working with Aboriginal communities. Participants told us that small, Aboriginal controlled organisations support their communities best, and that the community would benefit from more investment in Aboriginal businesses and organisations.

Spotlight: Reduce emissions and the cost of living

Energy affordability is an issue facing people all over NSW. High prices are leading people to resist using their electricity, heating or air conditioning, and for some people impacting on their ability to cook for themselves. North Coast Community Housing and Enova Community Energy received a NSW Government grant (from the Climate Change Fund under the Energy Affordability Package) to tackle the issue by providing solar energy to those in the community who would benefit. Social housing tenants who had solar energy systems installed saved $400 a year. Beyond the financial saving, tenants felt liberated from the anxiety of power bills. Addressing Australia's emissions reduction targets is a social justice issue and this local partnership delivers effective solutions with both social and environmental benefits.

Hunter New England

Hunter New England covers a diverse geographical area which encompasses a metropolitan centre, densely populated coastal areas and regional and remote inland communities. With a population of 920,370, this region has a higher than average proportion of residents that are 65 years and older. The Hunter New England region is home to a higher than average proportion of people receiving the Newstart allowance and Disability Support Pension. [8] It is also home to nearly twice the average NSW rate of children in out-of-home care and a high rate of 'risk of harm' reports.[9] These factors influence the key issues service providers identified in our consultation sessions. NCOSS travelled through the region and held consultations in Singleton, Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Tamworth and Armidale.

Communities told us they need:

- Social and affordable housing stock, including transitional housing and supported tenancies
- Free and affordable mental health services, including more face to face services in places with poor internet connectivity
- Longer term contracts for pilot programs to more effectively measure impact
- Drug and alcohol supports, including detox and rehabilitation, embedded in local health services, particularly for young people
- Lifelong learning and equity in education, including school-based wellbeing programs for early intervention with young people
- Targeted, quarantined funding for regional communities, including more support for inter-agencies and collective impact initiatives

Housing

In all five centres, we heard about the challenge of securing safe and affordable housing. Each place had complex and unique housing needs due to the local cultural and geographical context. We heard in Singleton, Newcastle and Tamworth that there is insufficient social housing stock on one hand, and high rental prices on the other. The available stock is in poor condition, unsuited to people's needs, or in neighbourhoods where people do not feel safe. For coastal communities like Newcastle, gentrification of the area has put downward pressure on the housing market and is making housing less affordable and pricing many people out. For communities like Singleton, the mining industry has had

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[8] FACS Statistics, Hunter-New England District profile, viewed 23 July 2018

<https://public.tableau.com/profile/facs.statistics#!/vizhome/DistrictProfile-HunterNewEngland/Dashboard1>

[9] FACS Statistics, Hunter-New England District profile, viewed 23 July 2018

<https://public.tableau.com/profile/facs.statistics#!/vizhome/DistrictProfile-HunterNewEngland/Dashboard1>

an impact on housing availability. The rental market has tightened for families moving into the area, making it more expensive and competitive. We heard Armidale faces a similar struggle with additional stress placed on the rental market during periods of seasonal work in the agricultural and renewables industry. Consultation participants informed us that the cost of rental properties is so high that there is nothing affordable for young people or those accessing income support.

The communities were concerned that where the private rental market is tight, no-grounds 90 day eviction notices are throwing vulnerable families into crisis.

6% of the Hunter New England population receive the Newstart Allowance,[10] which makes affordable housing a bigger challenge. We heard across the region that there are no affordable and suitable housing options for young people. Singleton participants told us that young people often do not meet the criteria for temporary accommodation. One participant told us about a 16 year old client who is homeless and still trying to attend school every day, while not knowing where he will sleep each night. In Tamworth we heard there have been over 600 young people in the last 12 months in desperate need of accommodation.

> *'There is a total lack of services and they get left out there with virtually nothing.'*- Community service provider, Singleton

> *'There are more young rough sleepers than you think… and we have a lot of young people couch surfing.'*- Local police, Maitland area

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Spotlight: Transitional housing

In Newcastle we heard about the successful [This Way Home](#) program which provides transitional accommodation to clients for a maximum of 2 years, during which they are supported by a range of services before moving into independent housing arrangements.

One client commented, "I am 100% more stable – within 6 months I have a house full of furniture, with a beautiful atmosphere, a fridge full of food, and happy kids. I couldn't have asked for anything more." Another commented, "Overall I feel more stable – exactly right – in a boarding house you get kicked out any day. They knock on your door you gotta go. It's a big thing, feeling more secure."

We heard examples of young people's mental health deteriorating while waiting over a year for housing. We heard of people experiencing homelessness in Singleton being referred to Parramatta in Western Sydney for the 'closest' crisis accommodation. There were several

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[10] FaCS Statistics, Hunter-New England District profile, available [here](#), viewed 23/07/2018.

examples of people in crisis being asked to leave their community, schools and networks in order to access accommodation, which is not a reasonable option for people in crisis, especially if they are young and vulnerable.

In Armidale and Tamworth, we heard that social housing properties are often in areas perceived or stigmatised to be 'unsafe'. People who are offered a social housing property in these areas often turn them down, choosing less stable but comparatively safe housing over unsafe housing.

> *'One woman refused a property…because she knew that if her ex was to come over, no one in the neighbourhood would call the police.'* – Service provider, Armidale

> *'Even caravan parks are unaffordable at $600 for a week... these places are not safe and secure, you wouldn't put a young person there.'* – Housing provider, Upper Hunter

Newcastle services highlighted the fundamental importance of transitional accommodation as a pathway to secure housing. We heard shared housing models for young people have been tried in Tamworth without much success. It was felt that the shared housing model is not appropriate in some regional areas because everyone knows each other and there may be historical relationship issues which make sharing a home complicated and undesirable. In Armidale, service providers were concerned that even where there is transitional housing, the six or twelve week period is insufficient to help break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. There is also concern about families who are evicted from social housing and have nowhere else to go.

> *'If you want to change intergenerational disadvantage, six week supported tenancies won't help, people will be straight back on the street.'* – Service provider, Armindale

We heard a strong preference for Youth Foyer and transitional housing models that provide wrap around supports to young people at risk. Youth Foyer models situate education and employment pathways together with stable accommodation and other supports. As in other regions, this demonstrates participants' overall wish for communities to design and implement models of support that suit their area.

In Singleton, we heard that there are vacant properties around, and there is land available for more housing. Participants discussed the need to incentivise the use of land for social and affordable housing. Service providers also suggested that 'corporates' such as the mining companies that are changing the social fabric of the areas that they move into, need to deliver on their social responsibilities and plan for the impacts of housing needs on local communities.

'Shouldn't Government put pressure on corporates? For example, embed requirements for housing into planning?'- Service provider, Singleton

Economic development and jobs

Participants told us that there are limited employment opportunities in the area, particularly for people with disability and people with mental illness. We heard that Singleton Council has advocated that a mining company employ more local people instead of flying in people from other regions.

'Getting employment would solve a lot of issues, including mental health, interaction and social inclusion… the real problem is not having an income, particularly because we're talking about cost of living and affordable housing.'- Youth support service, Singleton

Cost of living

At the time of consultation it was the beginning of winter. Unaffordable gas bills were identified as a growing concern in New England. We heard about the impact of high power prices for vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Where children find themselves in a home without electricity or gas, especially in the winter, it impacts their health, including their mental health. Services in Armidale were generally supportive of the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) scheme, however were concerned that there is still no EAPA assistance for liquid petroleum gas bills.

Mental health

The Hunter New England region is experiencing an urgent need for more funding and support to deliver effective mental health services. Participants identified a particular gap in prevention and early intervention services.

Additional support with mental health issues was raised as being one of the greatest needs for children and young people in the region. Services agreed that the wraparound support model works really well in Tamworth, however services often have difficulties obtaining and retaining qualified workers. In Singleton, we heard that the closest mental health facility is in Newcastle, over an hour away by car. The nearest Headspace, in Maitland, has a prohibitively long waiting list. Participants told us that geographical barriers need to be broken down so services can be grounded in the community where they are needed.

There are many people with disability and mental illness who are not captured by the NDIS and have slipped through this service gap. People who are not eligible for NDIS are turning to non-disability specialist services for help, such as community centres and community legal centres. These services do not specialise in disability or mental health support, nor are they funded to do so. This feedback demonstrates that 'mainstream' support services, while

16

intended to support people with disability not eligible for NDIS, are not yet in a position to do so. Further disability inclusion planning and action must take place.

Support can also be limited to those that can afford to pay for private services:

> *'Some services are not allowed to charge clients just for the payment gap – clients are expected to pay the full fee before getting reimbursed, which many clients cannot afford to pay.'* – Youth mental health provider, Tamworth

The community welcome a new Headspace facility in Armidale and Gunnedah, however are disappointed that these services are reportedly underfunded. This impacts their capacity to offer the full suite of services.

Spotlight: Increasing connectedness through cross-sector collaboration and partnerships

In Tamworth we heard about the Youth Hope program effective collaboration between local community services, schools and FACS to support children and young people at risk of significant harm, as well as their families.

We also heard about Inverell's Linking Together Centre, which builds a strong community partnership base and also connects community members to a range of services in an environment where they feel safe and comfortable.

Lake Macquarie's You're Kidding Me program was also highlighted as a great initiative where families can connect to a range of health, education and family services at their local library.

We heard that the stigma of mental illness needs to be further broken down in the Hunter-New England region, so the community can *"talk about it more"* and come up with local solutions before crisis point. There are examples of this happening, such as through the 'Where there's a Will' charity, which aims to develop the ability of local schools to build student's personal resilience. The charity also works with established local services and programs to improve awareness, including organising mental health first aid courses.

Spotlight: Telehealth providing access to mental health assessment

Port Stephens has a pilot program known as PAEMHATH (Police Ambulance Early Access to Mental Health Assessment via Telehealth). The aim of the program is to reduce unnecessary and often traumatic transportation of 'mental health consumers' to Newcastle Hospital. The program works by providing ongoing training and iPads with assessment checklists to police and ambulance staff undertake mental health triage on-the-spot for people experiencing mental illness at the scene of the emergency. Police and ambulance staff are also able to connect to the Newcastle Mental Health Contact Centre via the iPad. The team work directly with the service user. A decision is made whether admission or community-based follow up are the appropriate pathways in each circumstance.

The program has been successful and will be run indefinitely in the Port Stevens area. Singleton Police, we heard, have been pushing to implement the program. Participants told us that this model would be perfect for the region's particular needs.

Alcohol and other drugs

We heard about high levels of addiction to alcohol and other drugs. In Tamworth, services reported that there are insufficient or no supports for young people with drug and alcohol dependency issues. The closest detox or rehabilitation facility to Tamworth for young people suffering from addiction is in Coffs Harbour or Dubbo, both over 300km away. These options are not utilised because it is inappropriate to send a young person so far away from their home and support network.

Local health and community services strongly supported the need for rehab or detox service to be embedded into existing health services located in the region.

In addition to the development of rehab services, participants in Tamworth felt that more could be done in youth drug and alcohol prevention. It was acknowledged that while Tamworth Headspace offers excellent services in drug and alcohol counselling, this could be expanded upon, along with more education in schools and the broader community.

'Young people are never in a position to move forward, because they don't understand the consequences of illicit drug use.'- Foster care provider, Tamworth

Transport

Cited as a huge issue for young people, participants in Singleton told us that transport is critical for access to opportunities and services. We were told, for example, that a TAFE hub has moved from Singleton to Kurri Kurri, but there is no transport to help students get there. Young people need support to get their drivers licence. Given the 120 hours of supervised driving required for gaining a licence, often volunteers need to drive with young people who are learning. Insurance and compliance for volunteer driving supervisors are a big barrier.

Drought

Services in Tamworth were concerned about the impacts of the current drought. Participants reported that they are seeing the effect that drought has on families through an increase in domestic violence and mental health issues.

Sector and workforce

In Tamworth and Armidale we heard that the community and health sector are struggling to fill specialist positions because they cannot offer adequate incentives. Attracting the necessary skilled workers in regional areas is challenging without competitive salaries or job security. Funding contracts are too short.

There was a strong call for longer term contracts by the sector in Hunter New England. The benefit of long term contracts to both staff attraction and retention, and the programs themselves was highlighted. It takes time for programs to become established and well-known in the community, and for the community to build strong and trusting relationships with the service.

Drawn-out administrative and referral processes are a barrier to getting clients into programs in a timely way, despite significant levels of demand on the ground. This compounds the challenge posed by short funding contracts.

'How do you pilot something with a lack of clients and delays in evaluations? If you're not giving pilot programs a fair go, then they're never going to work.' – Foster care provider, Tamworth

A need for flexibility of funding contracts and more freedom to implement place-based, custom-made community service programs was widely felt. In Newcastle, the community talked about the power and potential of interagency partnerships, collaborations and

communication. Interagency work allows the community sector to be more proactive and engage in collective impact program design that tackles some of the biggest challenges in the community.

Community Sector Connectedness

While we heard about complex challenges facing communities in Hunter New England, we also heard examples of strength and innovation. Participants passionately discussed the success of early intervention and wellbeing programs and student support officers in Singleton, Morisset and Newcastle high schools. We heard that these programs and approaches had a positive impact on student wellbeing and were effective at identifying youth at risk of issues like mental health and contact with the justice system.

Spotlight: Collective impact through building the evidence base

Griffith University are leading a new research project that aims to improve child wellbeing in nine disadvantaged communities, including some in Hunter New England.

Using a model that blends human and digital resources, the project facilitates collaboration between schools, families and community agencies. The research builds on existing findings demonstrating that evidence-based and data-driven early prevention strategies can reduce the corrosive effects of poverty on the life chances of children.

The children and young people living in economically deprived areas drop out of school, become trapped in cycles of welfare dependence, and entangled in the child safety or youth justice systems at much higher rates than their counterparts in more affluent communities. The project aims to demonstrate that when community agencies and schools are empowered and resourced to engage more effectively with each other, and with families and children, they can achieve a collective impact on child wellbeing.

Expected outcomes include sustainable learning, e-resources for community organisations and ongoing partner engagement. The project should strengthen both workforce capacity and policies that cost-effectively reduce the impact of poverty and improve child wellbeing.

Discussions in Newcastle indicated enthusiasm for school-based support services and programs throughout NSW as a soft entry point for at-risk youth and their families. We heard that Student Support Officers in schools work well because they have relationships with both students and support services. Service providers want these positions to be fully funded, and full-time. The key in these cases is the community services sector connecting with each other and working together. Participants told us that the sector in this region

could get even better at working together, and that doing so would help their communities navigate the complex service system.

Western NSW

Regional Overview

Western NSW encompasses regional centres, inner regional, outer regional and remote communities. Home to around 291,000 people, there was actually a 0.7% drop in the Western NSW population from 2015 – 2016,[11] although the various communities in the region are experiencing a range of population growth rates,[12] including an increasing migrant population. 11.1% of the total population identified as Aboriginal or Torres Islander.[13]

NCOSS travelled across the region, holding consultations in Bathurst, Orange, Dubbo and Parkes. We heard from a broad range of organisations about the strengths and challenges that are common across the region, as well as many that are specific to certain communities, and where place-based solutions are key. The community service sector describes itself as flexible and resilient, community focussed, person-centred and able to respond to challenges. We also heard about new types of pressures including drought, a regressing rural economy, an evolving housing market, increasing drug use and significant changes such as the NDIS.

Communities told us they need:

- More affordable housing in configurations that reflect community need, particularly
- Reform to health and community transport that gives service providers more autonomy and flexibility to meet the needs of people living outside of regional centres.
- Better mental health supports as the NDIS service gap widens:
    - Local drug and alcohol services, including detox and rehabilitation;
    - More investment in public health services models of funding and delivery.

Housing

Western NSW currently has a comparatively low rate of homelessness, but lower than average wages and more people on Newstart (5.9%) and the Disability Support Pension (4.2%) than the state averages.[14] Participants reported that housing crises and homelessness are growing challenges in the region. Across the consultation sessions we

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[11] FaCS Statistics, Western NSW profile, available here, accessed 27 July 2018

[12] NSW Health Local Health Districts, Western NSW profile, available here, accessed 27 July 2018

[13] NSW Health Local Health Districts, Western NSW profile, available here, accessed 27 July 2018

[14] FaCS Statistics, Western NSW profile, available here, accessed 27 July 2018.

heard about insufficient and inappropriate affordable housing that is failing to meet growing and changing need, and how this insufficiency is pushing people into homelessness. Service providers put this partly down to the costs of living, such as high energy prices. Providers have also observed a movement of people from rural areas into regional centres in order to access health and support services. The flow on effect of moving away from home is disconnection from family and informal supports, leaving people in precarious or overcrowded housing or rendering them homeless. Finding more affordable housing is service providers' highest priority to address poverty and inequality.

Participants reported a particular lack of affordable and transitional housing for young people. We heard about the need for more flexibility in the configuration and location of housing according to the individual needs of families, as opposed to a 'one person per bedroom' approach, which doesn't suit larger and more complex family structures, nor single people.

> *'Aged clients, such as women leaving their husbands, need solutions so that affordable housing is available to both them and others.'*- Community support provider, Orange

A participant described a family with very complex health care needs that lived several hours outside Dubbo. The support services were in town. The frequency and level of care required, with no meaningful transport options available, meant that the primary carer of the children and disabled partner could not work. They decided to move into Dubbo but could not access emergency housing for over 6 months. They faced a waiting period of 3 – 5 years for social housing. Participants reflected that in cases like these, families frequently:

- move into the homes of other family members, which on one hand is often culturally appropriate, but also puts immense pressure on residents to cover food and electricity; or,
- move into untenable housing that is not affordable, even after rent assistance, making them unable to cover the costs of living.

Intensifying the need for social and affordable housing, we heard about difficulties accessing the local private rental market. Participants told us that Airbnb is having an impact on price and availability, and that real estate agents are reluctant to lease properties to vulnerable people, particularly young people. We also heard about incidences of 'no-ground evictions', placing people at risk of homelessness and putting their name on the tenancy database. We heard in Bathurst that service providers have built a good working relationship with some real estate agencies, however no such relationship exists between the service providers and the agents in Dubbo.

> *'Some real estate agents won't engage. It seems to come down to the specific individual that you talk to. We have one who calls and asks who*

23

would be suitable for a lease; they appreciate that we can assist with the tenant also.' - Housing support service, Bathurst

The community has developed innovative responses to these particular challenges. In Bathurst, an education program for real estate agents and owners now helps disadvantaged youth to access private housing. The community service provider assists by supporting disadvantaged tenants, landlord and real estate agents to resolve issues which may arise.

Spotlight: Place-based collaboration

We heard about the value of solutions that are developed in response to the community's particular needs. For example, the Housing Network Meeting is held regularly amongst services around Orange. Service providers work together with particular cases where a complex response is required.

> *'The organisations juggle the cases to fit the puzzle pieces together. This works in our community'*

Safer pathways are part of the NSW framework for responding to domestic and family violence.

Orange Safety Action Meetings sees local relevant services such as local police, FaCS, drug and alcohol and mental health services come together and discuss current issues and how risks in the community can be reduced in a coordinated way.

> *'This approach removes red tape and has enabled the different sectors to work together for fast and positive outcomes. We built that to suit our town and the people…'*

On the other hand we heard about the challenges of applying standard programs. Participants said that state-wide approaches that don't acknowledge local networks and collaborations are damaging to the local service landscape. For example, the NDIS was rolled out in the region based on age groups. This meant that disability service providers weren't able to work with entire communities, but had to rework their messaging several times over as the roll-out developed.

Providers in the region also run the 'Doorways' program, through which NGOs lease properties to disadvantaged youth (aged 16-24) for 3-6 months, enabling them to get a rental reference, while providing other supports.

Cost of living

We heard, as in other regions that families struggling to get by are cutting back on food in order to keep the lights and heating on. This has a flow-on effect.

'The need for heating is particularly acute – kids need the heat and if not they end up in hospital, or play up at school because they're not getting sleep. They end up being reported to FaCS etc…' Community support service, Dubbo

Out-of-home care and leaving care

Almost a quarter of the population of Western NSW are aged under 17 years, and the rate of children and young people in out of home care is more than double the state average, at just over 2%. There is also a significantly higher rate of risk of harm reports for children in this region than across NSW on average; 101 for every 1000 children, compared with 52 for every 1000 in NSW.[15] Despite this, we heard that there are very few dedicated and funded after-care programs in Western NSW.

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The NDIS became available in Western NSW in July 2017. Our feedback indicates it has been a double-edged sword across Western NSW. In Bathurst we heard that the NDIS has led to a growth in disability service provision. Service shopfronts are popping up and providers have more presence in the area. We also heard that despite the growth, as Ageing Disability and Home Care (ADHC) withdrew from service provision in the area, particular service gaps have appeared. Participants reported that without ADHC, there isn't anyone to turn to and discuss service needs and eligibility.

The NDIS market model encourages competition in a community that prides itself on working together. Some participants felt that services are not connecting and working together like they did previously due to the new competitive nature of the industry. It was reported that providers and the people they support have in many cases struggled to prepare for the NDIS transition and are feeling alienated by the process.

The view in the consultation sessions was that where people with disability are able to access the scheme and effectively advocate for themselves, it works well. However those who cannot self-advocate or who do not have people to advocate on their behalf, are falling through the cracks.

In Orange, we heard that people are waiting 9 months to see an NDIS planner, and there is no funded supports to fill the gap that ADHC left. At all regional consultations, two service gaps were commonly reported:

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[15] FaCS Statistics, Western NSW profile, available here, accessed 27 July 2018

- The need for transport funding to reflect the real cost of service delivery in regional and remote areas; and
- The need for better supports for people with psycho-social disability.

Spotlight: Volunteers making driver licences a reality

The ability to drive impacts employment options and access to support services. A driver license mentoring program, funded by bequests to Uniting Care runs in Dubbo to help young people gain their licence. Volunteers partnered with learner drivers to complete the 120 hours required for license. 51 new P platers – predominantly disadvantaged young people migrant women – have completed used this service. This program has been particularly important for young people in out-of-home care for two reasons. First, this group is typically disadvantaged in accessing the expensive and time consuming process of getting a licence and service providers aren't funded to do this work with young people. Second, the benefits of consistent contact with a driving volunteer provides a stable relationship over time, in addition to the opportunities provided by achieving a driver license.

Sector and workforce

We heard from participants that there are concerns that community based organisations are missing out on funding contracts. Some participants felt that large non government organisations are awarded contracts because they are well resourced, rather than being the best organisation for the job. Participants said that a significant part of their workload is lobbying for funding for work they know they can do, against providers who are unfamiliar with the community and inexperienced in the service.

> *'Government moved a contract to another organisation who couldn't deliver, and now we are sub-contracting that service and they are taking a cut. How good is that outcome?'*- Service provider, Bathurst

Participants talked about the need for funding to better reflect the realities of their day-to-day service provision and the needs of their employees. We heard about the challenges of attracting and retaining staff in every consultation. As in other regions, the need for longer funding contracts was raised, in order to provide stability and security for staff. We heard some services are operating on contracts as short as three months, undermining sustainability, referral confidence and outcomes.

> *'The spill and fill of tenders every year means that employee safety is undermined.'*- Service provider, Bathurst

'Government needs to trust service providers and give latitude to make decisions.'- Service provider, Bathurst

Spotlight: Piloting wrap-around leaving care support – challenges and opportunities

In January 2016, the Premier hosted a Roundtable that focused on reducing youth homelessness by addressing service system gaps, barriers, challenges and opportunities for new initiatives. Participants identified prevention and early intervention as key to reducing youth homelessness and proposed that approaches include a model aimed at diverting young people leaving out-of-home care from the homelessness service system. Following the Roundtable, the NSW Government committed $10 million p.a. over 4 years for the Premier's Youth Initiative pilot to divert young people leaving out-of-home care from entering the homelessness service system in NSW.

This pilot is funded until 2020, which is only 18 months away. [Veritas House is delivering the program](#) in Western NSW in partnership with local education, employment and housing providers. The evidence based program provides young people with advice, education and employment mentoring, transitional accommodation and support to secure long-term accommodation.

The set-up is promising, however only 80 young people will be supported throughout the pilot.

More skilled staff are sought by service providers in the region. We heard that community support practitioners are being stretched to do a lot of work, over a large area, and this can lead to burn-out and high turnover. Participants identified shortages in allied health professionals, aged care workers and childcare workers. Better promotion of the benefits of working in regional areas was suggested as a solution to these shortages, as was service providers working together to create full-time positions out of several part-time roles. We heard that staff moving into the area need support to 'break in', adjust, and build networks in local communities.

'We need skilled people, but NSW Health can pay better.' – Service provider, Orange

'We have trouble retaining staff because of our short contracts. Skilled staff go to organisations that have long term funding.'- Service provider, Bathurst

Participants discussed the challenge to provide professional development opportunities in regional areas. FaCS training is apparently free but has a heavy cost in time, travel and

accommodation. It is not an option for many regional and rural services. Participants suggested a funding loading to account for extra costs.

Despite these challenges, the sector works together to ensure that seats are filled in any training brought into the area. Across the region we heard examples of community collaboration. Participants described that even though there is an inevitable tension in competing against each other for funding, they support and capacity build together because the best interests of the community are what drives them.

> *'FaCS came in and asked everyone to complete service capability statements so that they could identify partnerships for us… but we are already excellent at partnering!'- Service provider, Orange*

> *'FaCS might think that we don't come because we don't want training, but it's because the method of delivery is too expensive… bringing people in is cheaper.'* Service provider, Orange

Participants said the real solution is more flexibility in their funding contracts, and an allowance to deliver training in community, rather than paying the high cost of travel and accommodation to attend training in Sydney.

In Dubbo we heard about the Walan Wirringah Women's Group, a collective of five organisations and several volunteers who developed their own unfunded learning program to respond to their community needs. A women-led collaboration, they determine community learning needs based on their connection to it. They hold activities such as cooking and gardening using community gardens.

In Bathurst we heard about a multi-disciplinary chronic disease clinic targeted to the Aboriginal community funded by the Royal Flying Doctors Service. People attend the clinic for a specifically referred health issue, but are able to access broader health and psycho-social initiatives because local services work together. We heard that the service was efficient and effective, to the point that the clinic was being used (inappropriately) as a back-up referral point for patients due to very long hospital wait lists.

> *'There is nothing to be gained by hiding away in your own workplace and expecting other service providers and indeed new service users to just walk in the door, especially when we are working with vulnerable, hard to reach families. You have to be seen out in the community in places that these families are likely to frequent. It can take weeks, months or even years to establish credibility and trust. It is not a quick process... funding bodies need to appreciate the need for this time before any real work can take place.'-* Service provider, Dubbo

Far West

Regional Overview

Bordering three states, the Far West Local Health District (LHD) covers 194,949 square kilometres in remote NSW. The District is sparsely populated, with 62% of its approximately 30,000 inhabitants living in Broken Hill. The remainder of the population live in agricultural towns along the Murray River, in small remote communities of 80-800 people or on stations throughout the District. The Far West LHD and has the highest proportion of Aboriginal residents (12%). The population is decreasing, ageing and experiencing significant morbidity related to lifestyle factors and chronic illness[16].

Communities told us they need:
- Recognition that rural and remote communities face different and unique challenges, and have different and unique strengths.
- Local solutions for effective housing options and service delivery.
- Funding arrangements that reflect the real cost of providing services and allowing flexible application specific to communities.
- Funding cycles that properly account for the needs of organisations to provide consistent services, to travel long distances and spend meaningful time to deliver services well and achieve real positive outcomes.
- More autonomy and ease of access to funding for services, in particular health transport.

We held a sector consultation in Broken Hill and visited a number of services and community members in Wilcannia. A range of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community service providers from Broken Hill were represented in our discussions.

Overall, we heard that the Far West grapples daily with the tyranny of distance, including funding contracts that do not accurately reflect the true cost of service delivery in remote areas.

The lack of NSW and Australian Government presence in the region has unsurprisingly manifested in a general feeling among the health and community service sector that 'Sydney' does not understand the real challenges in the region and nor does it care. The

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[16] NSW Health, Local Health Districts: Far West, available here, visited 23 July 2018

unique challenges of distance and the region's strong Aboriginal culture requires local solutions and a flexible approach to service delivery.

'The Government needs to fund the real cost of services.' Service provider, Broken Hill

Sector and workforce

Feedback during the consultations was clear that standardised or 'one-size-fits-all' policy frameworks, funding approaches and service delivery systems do not reflect the strengths of these communities, and are not up to overcoming the challenges facing them.

The discussions we held reflect the findings of a now 5 year-old report on Far West service provision; that relationships between marginalisation, health, crime, education and employment are complex and interrelated, so we must stop thinking about individual services, the specific roles of levels of government and delineating who provides what.[17] Rather, cross-service strategies, built from the bottom up on the basis of a community-led understanding of strengths and challenges will produce the outcomes to whom Far West communities are entitled. Communities in the Far West need to be nimble in how they problem solve. They find current funding arrangements too prescriptive, and limiting to a service's effectiveness.

Housing

We were told that as a region with unique demographics and environments, Far West communities have the best solutions to meet their own housing needs. Participants in our consultations described how 'homelessness' in Aboriginal communities presents differently to other communities, and responses must reflect this.

> *'Homelessness is everywhere but it is hidden in Aboriginal communities because we look after our own.'* - Aboriginal Controlled Organisation, Far West NSW

We heard that Grandmothers and Aunties run and prioritise the household resources based on the people in the home at any given time. The food and necessary amenities may be prioritised over paying their electricity bills because they have to feed everyone.

> *'A matriarch should be able to have as many people as she likes in her home.'* - Aboriginal Controlled Organisation, Far West NSW

Participants also told us that overcrowding in Aboriginal housing is a very real issue and much more investment in safe and affordable housing is desperately needed.

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[17] Final Report of the NSW Local Government Independent Review Panel, 2013, Strengthening Far West Communities, A pathway for change, p.3

It is essential that Aboriginal communities are at the heart of decision-making when it comes to housing policy, to ensure the policy is responsive to housing needs while respecting Aboriginal culture.

Sector Contracts

In all the conversations we had in Far West NSW, we heard that Government need to hand more responsibility over to the community so that they have the necessary flexibility to respond to their communities.

Funding services on a per capita model is unrealistic in this environment: The funding model of the NDIS and personalised aged care supports are presenting particular challenges. The relatively small and dispersed population of remote communities makes it impossible to achieve economy of scale and therefore viability in service provision.[18] Furthermore, current NDIS pricing structures make service provision in remote areas virtually impossible. As a result, service providers all over the country, particularly in remote areas, are questioning whether they can continue to provide services, or manage to operate at a loss and subsidise using other services or fundraising.[19] Investment in industry development is needed to support market growth, or, a rethink of approaches to rural and remote NDIS funding to keep services viable in remote areas are required. The NDIA has produced a Rural and Remote strategy, and are trialling new approaches in other states, however the NDIA expect the impacts of these to be gradual. However, market failure is immediate and very real for Far West communities.

Short term service provision funding contracts aren't working: As in other regions, short funding contracts mean a lack of long term security for the workforce and the relationships built in community. A regular loss of institutional knowledge and important networks and relationships is an expensive setback that has a real impact. It takes time for programs to become established and well-known in the community, and for the community to build strong and trusting relationships with the service. Funding cycles need to recognise this.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

West of Dubbo and the Great Dividing Range there has not been enough education provided about the NDIS. We heard that communities need access to information about the NDIS; what it means and what support is available. Health and community service staff also need to be educated on disability broadly, its implications in a remote setting, and the NDIS. Specific challenges are posed by the largely online platforms from which the NDIS operates, making it realistically unavailable to many.

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[18] National Disability Services, 2017, State of the Disability Sector Report

[19] Pro Bono News, 10 July 2018, "The NDIS, Why 'Customer-Centricity' Counts", available here

> *'NDIS is inaccessible. Internet is terrible and it is challenging for people with disability to navigate.'* – Service provider, Broken Hill

Transport

Participants reported that funding for health transport is difficult to navigate, patchy and insufficient. There are at least four different funding sources that, amongst other things, are meant to connect Aboriginal people with chronic diseases with services. The challenges of accessing enough money to fund a transport service are often insurmountable. We heard from Aboriginal Controlled Organisations that if they gave their staff the permission to go out and service all the people that need it, it would send them broke.

> *'The real cost of service delivery in remote NSW is not understood by decision-makers in Sydney. Government forget that fuel is more expensive and it takes a long time to get from place to place.'* – Aboriginal Controlled Organisation, Broken Hill

People from remote areas have to travel so far to get dialysis and other vital care that we heard they often need to leave their home and move to regional centres. During our Wilcannia consultation, we heard the story of a man who had to move to Broken Hill to receive health care. Local service providers believe he died from a broken heart because he was not on country and did not have his family and community right by him.

Mental Health

We heard that the Far West needs more of the full spectrum of child, adolescent and adult mental health services. Currently, there are nowhere near enough services and those that exist are incredibly stretched financially. We heard that in attempting to meet need in the regional centre of Broken Hill, local organisations have no resources left to provide supports to the greater region. There are huge gaps in the region where people are not receiving services, and we were told that the gaps are widening. Ivanhoe, Whitecliff, Louth, Tilpa, Waanaring are not getting serviced at all.

> *'Service providers are doing a wonderful job but the logistics just make it remarkably challenging.'*- Service provider, Broken Hill

Murrumbidgee

Regional Overview

The Murrumbidgee region in southern NSW has an estimated resident population 242,840.[20] The projected population growth is slow, just over 1.5% per cent. The area is considered inner and outer regional, and includes one remote area.

The Murrumbidgee has an ageing population[21]. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population makes up 4.8% of the total population. It has much lower than average cultural and linguistic diversity, at just 9% of the population from a diverse background, compared with 27% average across NSW.[22] However, service providers tell us this is changing. The homelessness rate is low, nearly half of that of the state on average.[23]

NCOSS held consultations in Wagga Wagga and Albury, hearing from a broad range of organisations. We heard that although considered one region, the Murrumbidgee's communities, demographics and service landscape vary greatly. Participants were clear that something that works in Albury, will not necessarily work in Griffith or Hay. The participants in our consultations are proponents of 'place based solutions' to community challenges.

Communities told us they need:

- Place-based solutions that are as unique as the various Murrumbidgee communities
- More social and affordable housing stock, that reflects the needs the community
- Investment and reform to health and community transport that gives service providers more autonomy and flexibility to meet the needs of their communities
- Resources for services that support youth engagement with the community, such as mentoring
- Resources for services to target, engage and support local carers
- Incentives and programs that will attract and retain Aboriginal community support workers and other skilled staff
- Provision for inter-agencies that facilitate better knowledge of available supports and services

Housing

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[20] NSW Government Local Health Districts Information, available here, accessed 26 July 2018.

[21] FaCS Statistics, Murrumbidgee profile, available here, accessed 26 July 2018

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

Participants identified that affordable living is likely to become a significant issue as the population evolves and demographics change. In Albury, service providers said that the need for targeted housing and community support infrastructure is becoming more pressing as refugees and new migrants settle in the area.

> *'Disadvantage grows, there's no support or infrastructure.'*- Service provider, Albury

As is the case in other regions, the wait for social and affordable housing is unacceptably long. The supply is too little and the need is too great. Strict eligibility criteria are leaving some who need support without any affordable options.

> *'Elderly women are sleeping in cars as housing places won't accept pets.'* – Multicultural service provider, Wagga Wagga

Transport

Participants recognised community transport as a vital form of early intervention, providing access to social connections and supports. Participants told us that services are often an hour or two away by car. However community transport is a major challenge for service providers and residents. In Wagga Wagga, participants said that community buses only run in work hours and on Saturday mornings. We heard that the community transport that is available only goes to some areas in the community, and that the more vulnerable areas are not serviced at all. There is no public transport between communities at all. Participants pointed out that there is no train to Canberra for people who need specialised health services which are not available locally. Privately owned bus services have not been receptive to bulk ticket purchasing so that users can save money on fares. Taxis are expensive and unreliable (particularly given the long distances) and the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Program (IPTAAS) perceived as overly bureaucratic.

Spotlight: multicultural community connecting and skill building

The Wagga Wagga City Library hosts a 'Language Café' three times a week. Community members are encouraged to attend and practise English language conversation skills in a friendly environment. Refreshments are provided for participants. This opportunity allows the culturally and linguistically diverse community to connect, and develop vital skills for joining the local workforce.

In both Wagga Wagga and Albury, despite their differences, we heard that this lack of transport options is exacerbating disadvantage. Those who cannot afford cars struggle to access the community, and poor transport services are affecting health outcomes for vulnerable people.

> *'A cohort of people with no cars and who can't afford transport simply can't go anywhere!'-* Service provider, Albury

We heard that people with disability are particularly disadvantaged by a lack of accessible transport in an NDIS environment. Transport assistance in the NDIS is complex and there are issues that require urgent resolution. These are being experienced first-hand in the Murrumbidgee region. Where a participant is assessed to be able to access public transport, no funding is provided in their NDIS plan for transport, regardless of the actual availability of public transport. Where a participant cannot access public transport because of their disability, funding is provided, but at rates that have been repeatedly labelled by the sector as completely insufficient.[24]

Carers

In Albury, we heard that there are many carers in the community, of all ages, who are often forgotten by 'the system'. Carers themselves tend to minimise the impact of their important role. Participants told us that they can support carers, but many carers are isolated, difficult to reach, and do not know about services that are available to them.

> *'A lot of them say "I'm not a carer, I'm just doing what I have to do..." currently we are going to them.'-* Service provider, Albury

Health

The lack of access to community transport in the Murrumbidgee and other regions prevents people from accessing community centres and health care services. Poor or deteriorating health, participants said, has an impact on cultural connections, engagement, and the ability of informal carers to undertake their important work.

We heard in Albury that there is significant need but long waiting lists for public dental care, particularly for children. Private dental care is not accessible or affordable to many people in the Murrumbidgee communities.

> *'…not much education around dental care for adults… and any information around this issue would be available at community centres, but most people do not have access to transport to get to community centres!'-* Service Provider, Albury

Childhood Obesity

We heard that childhood obesity is a major concern in the region.

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[24] National Disability Services, 2018, NDS Policy Brief: Getting Transport Back on Track.

> *'Childhood obesity is rife in the community. We are way above the average obesity rate. Tackling this issue is a Premier's priority, and we are not winning at the moment.'*- Service provider, Wagga Wagga

Participants acknowledged that local school canteens are improving. The sponsorship of children's sports games by McDonalds was generally thought to be inappropriate, because winning teams receive McDonalds vouchers, promoting unhealthy eating. Participants noted that the club is 'between a rock and a hard place' with sponsorship though, as there are few other options available.

Creative in their approaches, participants told us solutions that best address the health of children are designed based on the characteristics of local communities. For example, children in one area are being encouraged to walk home, accompanied by volunteers, instead of catching the bus. Another local primary school is growing a vegetable garden. Westside Community Centre in West Albury hosts regular mothers groups that teach practical skills such as healthy eating on a budget. Food bank is also a regular feature on the Westside Community Centre program. Participants emphasised that these solutions could be scaled up and applied with flexibility across the whole community.

Mental Health

Murrumbidgee service providers are concerned about the psychosocial needs of the community. We heard that there aren't enough social workers in the area and clients feel unsupported. In Wagga Wagga we heard that psychology services are available only once a month, and the need far outstrips this limited supply. While 'telehealth' has been flagged as a possible solution to community-based mental health supports, participants said that effective and reliable internet connectivity is a challenge.

Youth and community engagement

There are complex challenges facing children, young people and their families in the Murrumbidgee. Indeed, nearly 10% of the Murrumbidgee population is receiving Newstart or the Disability Support Pension,[25] indicating a significant challenge for the community with the cost of living.

> *'…youth might have a roof over their heads, but their parents might not be able to afford food.'*- Youth service, Albury

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[25] FaCS Statistics, Murrumbidgee profile, available here, accessed 27 July 2018.

Where families are disadvantaged and struggling with the cost of living, some young people are pulling away from community connections and this is impacting their wellbeing. Supporting these families is challenging. The community have identified the period between late primary school and early high school where no specialised services exist as *'the forgotten age bracket'*. Service providers discussed that these children and young people might avoid contact with support services because of stigma and confidentiality issues. In Albury, we heard that the community has been unable to obtain funding for services like youth mentoring, which would help reconnect these young people. Despite the challenges, there are also many examples of connectedness and innovative programs working towards youth inclusion and empowerment.

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Spotlight: early intervention model for young people

We heard that local Albury service provider 'Yes Unlimited' will be replicating the Geelong Project applying the partnership model to local services. The Geelong Project, based in the Barwon Region of Victoria is a pilot partnership aimed at intervening early with young people at risk of disengaging from or leaving school, becoming homeless and entering the justice system. The partnership includes Swinburne University, Headspace Geelong, the Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network, and three schools. It is a robust, evidence-based program which connects schools and community services and provides young people with support from an interdisciplinary team of youth, family, education and employment, disability, mental health and drug and alcohol professionals. Interim evaluations are showing that there has been a significant (40%) reduction in youth entering the homelessness system in the pilot areas. Most children supported by the program who were at risk of homelessness remained in their home, and in 20% of cases they experienced significantly improved home life.

The Yes Unlimited program is currently getting off the ground and the Albury community is optimistic about its potential impact.

'There's one agenda, with the kid at the centre.' – Youth service, Albury

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Digital inclusion

In Wagga Wagga, participants talked about digital literacy. Cultural and language barriers were cited as a challenge for the culturally and linguistically diverse community, as Centrelink and Service NSW services shift increasingly to online and smartphone platforms. Some families don't have access to smartphones, not everyone trusts technology with personal information and MyGov can be difficult to set up and navigate without support. Where technology is a barrier to applying for financial and other supports *'some families have to go to Centrelink for a whole day… people are time poor… we are trying to figure out how to engage them'* (Multicultural Service, Wagga Wagga).

Spotlight: Young people lead communities against violence

LOVE BiTES is a school-based family violence and sexual assault prevention program in Albury and Wodonga high schools. As part of the program, students develop artworks that raise awareness of family violence. These artworks are displayed on local buses in Wodonga and Albury during an annual 16 days of activism.

The **Step Out Against Violence** event, started by a community member who experienced assault, is now a key part of the LOVE BiTES program of activism. This is an annual peaceful protest against domestic violence that brings together residents, businesses and community organisations in Albury-Wodonga in a show of solidarity for survivors and for people living with family violence. The community march raises awareness and empowers people to say NO to violence. The LOVE BiTES and Step Out programs are well supported in the community and by the community sector.

Sector and workforce

As in other regions, we heard that short funding cycles limit the ability of services to attract workers, lay foundations, build relationships and establish effective supports in the community. Re-tendering for funding is disruptive and creates insecurity for workers. We heard that extra incentives and allowances would be useful for service providers to attract a quality workforce.

> *'Regional and rural areas have the difficulty of finding someone to do the job, especially if the contract is short term. There should be regional loading or attractive packages and enticements.'*- Service provider, Wagga Wagga

Services in Albury reported experiencing some difficulty engaging with the Aboriginal community, and put this down to their difficulties recruiting and engaging Aboriginal workers.

Mid North Coast

Regional overview

The Mid North Coast is one of the fastest growing, and ageing populations in NSW. It has an estimated population of more than 211,000 people, with 21% of residents over the age of 65.[26] Residents of the Mid North Coast are nearly twice as likely to be receiving Newstart or the Disability Support Pension as in NSW overall. [27] The Mid North Coast is also home to a higher proportion of Aboriginal people than NSW on average, at 5.7%. NCOSS held consultations in Coffs Harbour and Kempsey, hearing from a broad range of organisations from across the region. While we heard about complex challenges facing communities in the Mid North Coast, we also heard examples of strength and innovation.

Communities told us they need:

- More social and affordable housing stock that reflects the needs of the community.
- Local jobs creation that takes advantage of infrastructure and construction projects in the region.
- Easier access to more community and public transport.

Housing

In Kempsey and Coffs Harbour we heard about a range of challenges to keeping people safe and securely housed.

There is a shortage of affordable housing throughout the region, made worse by the seasonal tourist economy and the rise of Airbnb. Participants told us that locating affordable housing appropriate to the varying needs of individuals and families is difficult. Participants reflected that it feels really unfair that people who turn down a housing offer because the accommodation is totally inappropriate to their needs are sent to *'the end of the queue'* for any future social or affordable options.

Overcrowding in Aboriginal housing was described by consultation participants as a 'hidden homelessness issue' that needs to be addressed. Participants recommended that a local, specific and effective Aboriginal Housing Policy be developed. We heard about challenges associated with the maintenance and standard of both affordable and privately rented

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[26] NSW Local Health Districts, Mid North Coast profile, available here, accessed 31 July 2018.
[27] NSW Local Health Districts, Mid North Coast profile, available here, accessed 31 July 2018.

housing. Participants reported that real estate agents were perceived in some cases to act against the interests of tenants and even contribute to the disadvantage faced by vulnerable groups. Agents are seen to operate as 'gate-keepers' for landlords and even withhold services from those with the fewest resources.

Participants from Coffs Harbour emphasised the particular disadvantage faced by ageing single women. For example, a 75-year-old woman whose health was damaged by the poor state of her privately rented unit felt she had no recourse for action. The tenant had enough money to cover the rent, but feared asking for improvements to be made, as her tenure was insecure and she had no other housing options.

Participants told us that they expect the demand for transitional, social and affordable housing to rise significantly due to several local factors. The down-the-line impacts of the new Grafton Gaol will include families moving into the area to be closer to loved ones, and people requiring support to transition back into the community upon release. Participants questioned the impact this will have on *'already stretched infrastructure and services.'* Settling refugees and young people were also cited as growing groups for whom social and affordable housing was a need. One service provider pointed out that the Nambucca Bypass has increased local housing prices, squeezing more of the community out of the private market.

> *'Supply is it. There are simply not enough houses in the social and affordable categories.'*- Service provider, Kempsey

We heard that there is land available for housing development, plans exist for appropriate homes that will incorporate employment for local people in their maintenance. What the region requires is investment. We heard that dispersed, small-scale investment in this regional area is difficult to attract because private businesses and developers are tending to look for larger opportunities.

Cost of living

We heard that a cohort of working poor who are locked into poverty by a long term lack of wage growth and opportunity live in this region. Service providers see that addressing the basic needs of a home, food and clothes is stretching this part of the community. Participants told us that these individuals and families often feel without hope.

As in other regions, the cost of power was cited by participants as a key challenge. Combined with unaffordable rents, we heard that power payments simply cannot be met by

families experiencing disadvantage. Participants told us that the focus of supports should simply be on helping people access their basic needs.

Spotlight: Community working together leaves no kids hungry

The Saving Place is a cooperative family food hub in Kempsey. The Saving Place runs the 'No Kids Hungry" project. The service targets excess food stocks from local businesses and donations. They create food packages for local individuals and families in need, which are picked up once a week by schools and community organisations around the region. An unfunded initiative, No Kids Hungry reportedly feeds up to 900 children a week in the Macleay Valley.

Economic development and employment opportunities

We heard that infrastructure and other development projects in the region are not necessarily benefiting local people with new employment opportunities. Planning for big projects such as the construction of Grafton Gaol, the redevelopment of Coffs Harbour and Macksville Hospitals and the construction of the Coffs Harbour Bypass do not specify where most of the labour should come from, nor where the benefits should flow. These are opportunities to employ local people and invest in local businesses.

> *'It needs to be built into the framework of these projects that a proportion of the beneficiaries are local.'*- Aboriginal community controlled organisation, Mid-North Coast

Participants also told us that there is a lack of Aboriginal-identified employment opportunities for the Aboriginal community. In particular, Aboriginal identified roles in the community service sector aren't funded, despite a largely Aboriginal client-base. Participants said that Government and other community services employment opportunities should *'reflect the community'* and ensure more Aboriginal workers are engaged and given opportunities in the sector.

Early childhood education and care

Early childhood education and care is a crucial element of community connectedness. Early education and pre-schools provide a central location for holistic responses to the needs of families. In Kempsey, Dalaigur Preschool was highlighted by participants as an excellent example of this model. The service runs Aboriginal language and culture programs, and provides some internal supports for children with additional needs as well as referral to other services.

Early childhood education and care is also seen as a lever to increase school completion rates. In response to the low school completion rate in Coffs Harbour, the community has developed a program of playgroups and events to help parents engage with their child's development.

Spotlight: Flexible education environments developing pride, identity and cultural awareness

Macleay Vocational College is located in West Kempsey, and believes in a holistic approach to supporting young people. The College caters for students who have fallen out of mainstream education for any number of reasons. Its mission is to see education in the context of the whole person in a way that supports students to become resilient, tolerant and self-confident participants in society by providing an academic and work-education. Macleay College is linked with a legal service, a mentoring service, Aboriginal language classes and other services such as the local PCYC. Kids who are experiencing disadvantage are often provided with food so they are in the mindset to learn. The College is funded from a number of sources, including some Government funds, assistance from local private schools and other sources. The school holds regular BBQ days where students, their families and communities can come together on the grounds of the school and get to know one another, and what the school has to offer.

The College is an example of a support service that was built by local community groups to address unique support needs. It has grown and formed links with other services, allowing wrap-around support for vulnerable young people.

Out of Home Care

For every 1000 children in the Mid-North Coast region, there are 17 in out-of-home care, this is higher than the NSW average.[28] Participants told us that the child protection system

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[28] FaCS Statistics Mid North Coast profile, available here, accessed 31 July 2018.

seems to them to be "upside-down". They advocated a shift from a punitive approach of removal to a pro-active, early intervention approach.

> *'Money is going to the wrong end of the issue… there can be no solution without the empowerment of the people involved.'* – Service provider, Kempsey

Communities emphasised the need for long-term commitment to engaging with at-risk families, advocating for them and educating them. It is parents, they say, who must be the centre of any solutions developed to keep children safe and keeping families together. Participants highlighted that there needs to be systemic change and that up until now we have built a service system that relies on people remaining poor and disadvantaged.

Spotlight: Strengthening the participation of the local Aboriginal community in child-protection decision-making

Grandmothers Against Removal (GMAR) NSW worked with the New England FaCS district and the NSW Ombudsman's office to develop the Guiding Principles that apply to child-protection decision-making in the Mid-North Coast region.

The Guiding Principles inform collaboration and cooperation between FaCS offices across NSW and Aboriginal communities on child protection matters. They highlight the role of Local Advisory Groups through which local Aboriginal communities participate in decision making regarding the care and protection of Aboriginal children. Local Advisory Groups provide a platform for Aboriginal communities to have input into service delivery and help to ensure compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principles.

We heard that in this region the GMAR group is respected for upholding the child placement principles and working productively in difficult circumstances with service providers, helping to keep children in their community.

Domestic and family violence

51 people in every thousand residents of the Mid-North Coast have experienced a domestic assault.[29] This is 14 people higher than the state average. We heard that the NSW Government Domestic and Family Violence Blueprint for Reform has effectively increased

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[29] FaCS Statistics Mid North Coast profile, available here, accessed 31 July 2018.

reporting and safety initiatives for supporting people experiencing violence. However, we heard that despite a doubling of caseloads, funding has not increased to match the need.

We heard that service providers want to do more with communities, they want to be funded to run programs that take a proactive approach to dealing with community expectations around gender, and invest in programs and supports that address men's behavioural change. They currently lack the resources to do this important work.

Addressing domestic and family violence and the culture in which it occurs *'is specialised work and it cannot be done without true investment.'* - Service provider, Coffs Harbour

Spotlight: Aboriginal community driven initiative focused on young people and sexuality

"It's OK on the Macleay" is a program funded solely by donation. In October 2017 a community event celebrated diversity. The 'Dreamtime Divas' performed, and stalls showcasing local LGBTI talent were held. The community were welcomed to a free BBQ lunch. "It's OK on the Macleay" was an opportunity for local businesses to show they are supportive and inclusive of diversity in the region. As a donation only initiative, the administrative load of fundraising has thus far been challenging and the event is yet to be planned for 2018.

Community sector connectedness

Community connection is a critical issue for the region. Participants emphasised that Aboriginal Elders are key to strengthening connectedness, and to the development of local solutions. We heard that neighbourhood and community centres are also critical to community connectedness, but are typically underfunded, if they are funded at all.

Participants suggested that cross-sector funding needs to be available to contribute to community connectedness. Participants suggested that streams of funding from Health, FaCS and federal programs should take account of the value of bringing people together.

Tribal Waves in Kempsey was highlighted as a good example of local connectedness. It comprises of eight local decision making committees who run forums to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

*'Relationships, people, connectedness is what makes a place feel like
home… a place and space offered to come share, eat, talk, to be together.'*
- Service provider, Coffs Harbour

Spotlight: Healing communities

Healing Together organises events and activities that promote healing within the
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities of the Macleay Valley. Four Aboriginal
organisations have collaborated to organise a monthly calendar of community events
focused on connection. The events bring the community together on common ideas and
values. Events have included opportunities for education, such as a workshop to help the
community understand the child protection system, free film screenings and fun runs.

Central Coast

Regional overview

The Central Coast is located between Sydney and Newcastle and comprises numerous diverse communities. Due to its close proximity to the Sydney metropolitan area, it is increasingly attracting young families and retirees. The region is experiencing a higher than average population growth, particularly in some areas. The area has a high rate of low income, one parent families, and a larger than average population of people 65 years and older.[30]

NCOSS held a consultation in Ourimbah which was made up of a broad range of organisations from across the Central Coast region. We heard that the community sector is flexible and resilient, holding its own between the cities of Sydney and Newcastle. Participants told us that the sector collaborates well, has a strong volunteer culture and comes together on important issues. We also heard that the rising population growth rates on the Central Coast commuting to metro centres to work is having an impact on the social fabric of the area. People are engaging less with their local communities, and often do not have support networks around them.

Communities told us they need:

- More resources for community responsive mental health services, particularly for young people.
- More affordable housing, transitional housing and new approaches to dealing with private rental availability.

Housing

The high cost of living is an issue on the Central Coast as it is in other regions. As in other coastal and popular holiday NSW destinations, we heard about 'seasonal homelessness' and the effect of Airbnb, where rent increases in the holiday season due to the excess demand created by holiday makers. We heard that property owners are often more interested in holiday rental opportunities over secure tenancies. Consequently, there is a shortage of affordable housing in the region. As one participant commented:

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[30] FaCS Statistics Central Coast profile, available here, accessed 31 July 2018.

> *'A lot of properties sit empty during the week and are filled on the weekends.'* - Community support worker, Central Coast

In terms of homelessness, we heard that there is a need for transitional housing options which support people as they rebuild their lives following a period of crisis.

> *'If things go wrong, you fall down a hole. Then afterwards there's nothing to transition from that to being back on track.'* - Mental health support provider, Central Coast

Participants suggested some solutions. For example, to create more housing, local council should encourage people to build granny flats in their backyards, as is occurring in Victoria. Participants also suggested that property owners be incentivised to lease their houses to community housing organisations for longer periods of up to 10 years to create secure, affordable tenancies. The group suggested a percentage of money from private community developments should be used to fund affordable housing. There was significant support for the strategies offered by the [Everybody's Home Campaign](#).

It was noted that the Central Coast would be a good site for the expansion of Justice Reinvestment policy. Justice Reinvestment is an evidence based approach that diverts funding from the justice system to programs and services in local communities which aim to address systemic disadvantage.[31] The approach addresses income equality and provides stable housing and employment opportunities, with the view that financial and housing stability reduces crime.

Mental Health

We heard that gaps exist in mental health services and that young people are particularly disadvantaged. Wrap-around services and outreach services are inadequate for the demand; there is a waiting list of up to 10 weeks for young people to access Headspace. Participants told us that many young people with mental illness reach their mid-20s before they even access supports. We also heard that crisis supports are dysfunctional; people are turned away from hospital emergency departments when they have acute mental health care needs. This is an insufficient response to youth in crisis. Services said that in this stretched environment they must work creatively.

This community needs flexible funding for mental health services. Participants lamented that funding was provided using a framework based on an outdated, medical model. Such an approach creates barriers to holistic, person-centred supports. As a participant from an Aboriginal controlled organisation commented:

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[31] See 'Justice reinvestment: investing in communities not prisons' [here](#) for a summary of evidence.

'If you fund by disease you are never going to close the gap, you aren't looking at what works, you're waiting until there's a problem.' - Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, Central Coast

We heard that a holistic approach to supporting people's health would be well received, but that the resources are not available, particularly in light of the way NDIS funds supports, for

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Spotlight: healing together

Healing forums help communities identify the issues that are causing disharmony and imbalance in their lives. They provide an opportunity for interested Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to define healing, understand the impacts of colonisation in their local context, discuss their healing needs, share information about local healing work and develop healing strategies.

In November 2017, The Healing Foundation and NSW Government Aboriginal Affairs delivered an Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment (OCHRE) Healing Forum in Terrigal. Consultation and collaboration with key community groups defined the program. 150 people from across the community came together to recognise the process of healing and participate in the event. Aboriginal young people lead the discussion on key issues for the local community. Issues included employment and training opportunities, homelessness and identity.

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services to take this approach. Service providers described the NDIS as having heralded the loss of mental health services on the Central Coast.

Other health priorities included greater access to dental, eye and reproductive health and more investment in women's health in light of the high rate of domestic and family violence on the Central Coast.[32]

National Disability Insurance Scheme

There is uncertainty and fear about the future of supports for people ineligible for the NDIS who were previously receiving from the Department of Ageing, Disability and Homecare (ADHC). Where people are not supported by the NDIS, there are significant service gaps appearing. Mental health services and supports for carers were highlighted as particular challenges.

Family and connections to culture

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[32] FaCS Statistics, Central Coast Profile, available here, accessed 7 August 2018.

The Central Coast has a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population at 3.8%, higher than the national average.[33] The median age of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the region is 21 years old.[34] Participants told us that many young Aboriginal people are in out of home care and that their placements challenge their connectedness to culture.

Participants highlighted that FaCS rarely consult with Aboriginal organisations when they decide to remove a child, despite the Aboriginal Placement Principle. Participants urged that consultation be mandated (rather than recommended) in the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998,* and that the Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment (OCHRE) Plan for Aboriginal Affairs in regional NSW be meaningfully implemented.

The participants noted that the community would really benefit from a appropriate physical space for families and children to get together.

Sector and the workforce

Participants emphasised that methods of funding for the community sector have decreased community connection. As one participant commented:

> *'We used to have an unofficial no wrong door policy. And now we don't…. Government has pushed us to think about the 'marketplace'.'* – Service provider, Ourimbah

We also heard that decision making about community support becomes less effective when it occurs outside that community. Participants emphasised that community connectedness needed to be examined at a Government level, even floating the idea of a Minister for Vibrant Communities.

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[33]Census, 2016, Quickstats, Central Coast NSW, available here, accessed 7 August 2018.
[34] Ibid.

Western Sydney

Regional overview

Western Sydney is one of the state's fastest growing areas, with more than 1.3 million residents estimated by 2031.[35] The community is highly diverse across economic, social and cultural domains. The area is characterised by wealth at one end of the spectrum and significant social disadvantage at the other, bringing with it a range of complex health needs and social circumstances.[36] About half (46.8 per cent) of residents were born overseas. A total of 50.3 per cent of people speak a language other than English at home and nearly 200 languages are spoken in the region.[37]

The 2016 Census indicates about 13,400, or 1.5 per cent of the Western Sydney (health district) population is Aboriginal, and many live in socio-economically disadvantaged areas.[38]

Currently, a higher than average proportion of the population is under 17 years old, at 24.7 per cent. 32 per cent of families in the region include children under the age of 15.[39] However, the population is ageing. With a 59 per cent increase in people aged 70 years or over, and a 54 per cent increase in people aged 85 years and over forecast from 2016-2026.

NCOSS visited Blacktown and talked to service providers who communicated that their community is vibrant, changing and growing. It is a community with a range of strengths and skills, and service providers are committed to provide "help" based on the specific needs of the people they support.

Housing

The impossible cost of purchasing and renting homes privately in greater Sydney by people on low incomes was raised as a major local concern. Low supply and high prices push people into crisis. As a result, and a common theme in many regions, we heard that there is a need for more social and affordable housing, and a variety of housing that will suit different needs.

Participants told us that the current range and type of crisis accommodation available, does not fit the demographics of people in the community who need it. For example, one participant identified that there needs to be crisis and temporary housing suitable for fathers who become primary carers of their children and who need support. We heard that

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[35] Western Sydney Local Health District, 'Western Sydney', available here, viewed 25 September 2018.
[36] Western Sydney Local Health District, 'About Us', available here, viewed 24 July 2018.
[37] Ibid.
[38] FACS Statistics, Western Sydney Profile, available here, viewed 24 July 2018.
[39] .Ibid.

there is also a need for housing options for people exiting prison, many of whom have very complex support needs.

Service providers are concerned that crisis housing programs such as Link to Home can in practice perpetuate the trauma of crisis and homelessness. Participants told us that very short-term crisis accommodation models tend to cycle people and families through, but do not provide them with enough time or support to find medium or longer term options. For families with immediate and urgent needs, crisis support options with various eligibility requirements can be unapproachable and complicated. Unfolding crises can reduce people (and the services that support them) to securing the next night, or week of safety rather than longer term stability.

> *'The over-complication of programs is causing a lack of big picture awareness.'*- Housing support provider, Western Sydney

Participants felt that a Housing First approach, with its goal of sustainable and long term accommodation would better suit the needs of the Western Sydney community over temporary accommodation.

Mental Health

We heard that people with psychosocial disability who are ineligible for the NDIS face a troubling service gap as funding for the Personal Helpers and Mentors (PHAMS) program is absorbed into the Scheme. Participants in Western Sydney are concerned about the consequences for residents of a greatly reduced community-based mental health support presence.

Short-term support and service pathways post prison release

Service providers in Western Sydney provide support to people exiting prison. As a group, people leaving the justice system are particularly vulnerable as they often experience a range of intersecting issues such as mental health, homelessness and unemployment. Unless this vulnerable group are given effective and consistent support, there is a very high chance that they will reoffend and return to prison.

Adequate and secure housing is essential, and is a serious challenge for those released from prison. Research indicates that assisting ex-prisoners to find stable housing immediately post-release should be a priority, and should happen in tandem with other essential supports to access welfare, education and employment.[40] Participants discussed the shortcomings of services that are only accessible to ex-prisoners for three months, and

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[40] Baldry, E (2007) Recidivism and the role of social factors post-release, Precedent, Issue 81, p.5

where there is no clear pathway for clients to access other supports such as health and Centrelink. People need longer-term, wrap-around support that includes stable housing.

Creative supports for local communities and families

Our consultation participants in Western Sydney provided several examples of support programs and services that were working well and providing positive outcomes to residents, particularly families and children.

Spotlight: Helping kids get active and social

Active Kids is a federal Government program through which families of school aged children can apply for a $100 voucher toward the cost of registration, participation or membership to a registered sport organisation.

Participants reported this scheme works well to encourage families to take up community team sports, which provide a regular opportunity to connect with other local families and community members.

Participants said that more work should be done to raise awareness of the program, and due to its potential for connecting people, the same sort of program should apply to other community groups and activities.

Spotlight: Health organisations working together for local families

Thrive@5 in Doonside is an eight week intensive support program for vulnerable children. It is delivered by two health organisations who have formed a partnership and together funded a program manager who established and now coordinates the program.

The program aims to increase the efficiency, quality and collaboration of local health and early childhood services. It supports residents, community members and services plan together to improve the wellbeing of neighbourhood children.

Thrive@5 in Doonside is an example of a partnership that shares the costs of service coordination to drive locally relevant solutions. Participants suggested that this model is easily replicable.

Illawarra Shoalhaven

Regional overview

The Illawarra Shoalhaven region is a catchment area extending about 250km along the southern coastal strip, servicing a population of more than 400,000 residents. This region has a higher than average proportion of people aged 65 and over, and people with disability.[41] Newstart and Disability Pension recipients also make up a higher proportion than the NSW average in this region.

NCOSS held consultations in Shellharbour and Kiama which were attended by a range of organisations from across the region. Participants in Illawarra Shoalhaven consultations talked about the strengths of the community services sector as a result of its strong networks and relationships. Collaboration occurs from senior to grassroots levels, and community members take initiative to provide supports to each other. Participants talked about the value of service coordination through such relationships. We heard that it is a high priority for service providers to have the time and resources for this vital aspect of their work in their day to day schedules.

Communities told us they need:

- More social and affordable housing stock that reflects the needs the community.
- Longer funding cycles for programs and services.
- More support for people with disability who are not eligible for an individual NDIS plan.
- More access to publically funded dental services.

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[41] Recorded as under 65 years old who need assistance, Census 2016, and FaCS Disability Clients, FaCS Statistics, Illawarra Shoalhaven District Profile, available here, viewed 23/07/2018.

Housing

Housing affordability, and the suitability of social and affordable options were the key issues for participants in our consultations.

We heard that very little private rental housing in the region is appropriate or affordable for people on low incomes or receiving Government income support. Those who are in private rental accommodation are reaching out to support services because they are finding it tough to make ends meet.

Participants described further challenges with private renting, for example disadvantaged tenants being placed on an "undesirables" list for 6 months after having an issue with a tenancy. This makes it difficult for them to secure their next rental. This practice has particularly affected women who have experienced domestic violence.

5.2% of the region's population lives in social and community housing and Aboriginal housing.[42] Consultations held in this region endorsed the need for long term commitment from Government to fund the building of a variety of flexible new social housing options.

The importance of locally informed solutions to housing issues was widely felt among participants. Participants felt that private developers may not be as alert to a community's unique needs as much as locally driven projects. The perceived increase in influence on planning by larger housing developers would mean a loss of 'place-based' planning for appropriate housing options. Participants felt that more 'power' for local government regarding affordable housing decisions would improve the situation. However, participants also noted that there is variation in the influence of local governments, depending on their particular community services and housing focus.

In Shoalhaven, we heard that there was not enough diversity in social housing; participants emphasised that the current style of apartment blocks did not suit families, especially large families, and much of the available affordable housing did not meet the needs of single older women. This is particularly problematic where there is an ageing population, with many older people trying to survive off their aged pension in an unaffordable private rental market.

Kiama based social services are particularly concerned about a unique but growing trend that is seeing homeless and transient young people traveling to Kiama on the train and either using the train as 'accommodation' or sleeping rough in Kiama Park before leaving in the morning. These are not necessarily local young people so providing support is very challenging. So far the local Government's response has been to charge the young people

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[42] FaCS Statistics, Illawarra Shoalhaven District Profile, available here, viewed 23/07/2018.

with a fine; an ineffective response to youth who are homeless and unemployed because it further entrenches their disadvantage through a build-up of fines.

This region supports a 'housing first' approach to homelessness supports. Participants in Kiama reported that early intervention, based in the community, particularly for mental health issues can prevent housing crisis and homelessness. Recent funding reductions to community centres and community-based supports are resulting directly in missed opportunities for early intervention, increasingly complex issues and a higher need for crisis support.

Mental Health

In the Shoalhaven, the community emphasised the need to expand community mental health services rather than clinical services. Wait times are unacceptably long, forcing people into crisis. It was emphasised that community centres are the preferred location for mental health supports, as places where mental health as well as other health issues could be identified and addressed.

Sector and workforce / community sector connectedness

We heard about the challenges associated with a variety of program funding requirements. Current arrangements are described variously as unwieldy and unresponsive to community needs. The challenges articulated focussed on three types of funding. Participants felt that the service tendering model may fail to build services that meet real community needs, meaning more complex people and those living on the margins are '*slipping through the cracks.'* There was concern that larger organisations have the resources to make many tender applications that this may not reflect their actual capacity to deliver services, while excluding smaller more flexible organisations that lack the resourcing to apply.

We also heard concerns that a singular emphasis on outcomes focussed approaches to funding can result in service delivery organisations focussing on 'easier' clients. Avoiding more complex situations in order to manage service 'performance' is a real risk and unintended consequence of this model, participants said.

Finally, as service systems shift away from bulk funding and into a person-centred, fee-for-service landscape a common thread throughout consultations, and commented specifically on in this district, is that collaboration between service providers and networking is no longer a 'funded activity'. Participants reported that networking and collaboration is happening in people's personal time.

> *'A business model culture… isn't working. It needs to change.'* - Service provider, Kiama

> *'We can't build relationships or be creative or advocate on behalf of our clients.'* - Service provider, Kiama

The region's providers identified that there is in fact a benefit to service overlap and chasing efficiency is a threat to this.

> *'I'm a big advocate for duplicating services. There is no one size fits all, it's OK if there is overlap.'* - Service provider, Kiama

> *'We are very good at managing resources anyway. We already have very little wastage.'* - Financial counsellor, Illawarra Shoalhaven

As in other districts, there was a call for longer term contracts by the sector in Illawarra/Shoalhaven. Funding in three year increments results in a lack of long term security for the workforce and consequentially a regular loss of institutional knowledge and important networks and relationships. The benefit of long term contracts to the actual programs was also highlighted; it takes time for programs to become established and well-known in the community, and for the community to build strong and trusting relationships with the service.

> *'Consistency of funding allowed for ongoing relationships, services that knew their communities and good intellectual property retention… now it's all about the dollar and these soft skills have been lost. It doesn't fit.'* - Service provider, Kiama

Spotlight: Increasing access and connectedness through funded cross-sector collaboration and partnerships

Communities need effective information in order to be knowledgeable about the services available to them. Capacity building and coordination roles have ensured that programs and services can work together with the local community. The National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) Program for Illawarra and South East NSW works strategically with cross-sector stakeholders to assist people with disability access and participate in tertiary education and subsequent employment.

Recently, the NDCO facilitated collaboration between tech start-up Briometrix, the University of Wollongong, Wollongong City Council, people with disability and various disability services in the region. Together, using technical and research expertise alongside local knowledge and skills, they built an accessibility tracking app that helps wheelchair users to navigate Wollongong city. There is real potential for this successful partnership to be applied widely.

The NDCO has also commenced a 'Repair Café' start-up in the region. The Café invites local people to bring broken items to a designated time and location, and receive help to repair their belonging. The Repair Café is a collaboration between Flourish Australia, Ability Links, the NDCO Program and others including Registered Training Organisations, Disability Employment Service Providers, independent practitioners and more. This collaboration has produced employment opportunities for people with disability in the area, in addition to countless new relationships and networks.

Coordination roles like the NDCO have the capacity to take a bigger picture view of the policy and practice landscape and can identify and align the synergies between these robust and innovative cross-sector collaborations and partnerships achieving significant impact.