

Australian Youth Forum Outreach Report

Sale, Victoria event
on 30 May 2009



The Australian Youth Forum

The Australian Youth Forum (AYF) is run by the Australian Government as a communication channel between the Government, youth people (aged 15-24) and the organizations that work with, for and on behalf of young people (also known as the youth sector). It is about engaging young people and the youth sector in on-going public debate and getting their input on important issues and practical solutions that affect young people's lives now and in the future.

The AYF engages young people through its website, and also in person at forums and community activities. It brings young people, the youth sector and the Australian Government closer together, and gives them an opportunity to be heard.

Overview

This is a summary of the comprehensive report on the discussions and other information collected, that has been provided by the professional facilitator for the event.

The event was held on Saturday 30 May from 9.00am to 12.00 noon.

Approximately 53 young people attended the event that provided them with the opportunity to meet with and ask questions directly of the Hon Kate Ellis, MP Minister for Early Childhood Education, Childcare and Youth. The Minister played an active role in leading a session on young people's involvement in community and a final question and answer session. The Mayor, Cr Darren McCubbin, also attended to hear the views of the young people from his community.

The topics discussed were:

- Employment;
- Improving our community (local and Australia);
- Public safety; and
- Open question and answer session

The discussions centered on the participants' local experience of these topics.

While public safety and employment are important to young people in Sale, the experiences, relative importance and richness of discussion were different to that identified at other AYF Outreach event locations.



(Photo: Some of the participants at the AYF Sale Victoria Outreach event)

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

In Sale, the emotion and passion of the room centered on the need to secure a pathway and resources that will enable young people to make a successful transition to higher education and meaningful employment.

The conversations drew a strong link between education and training and employment as well as financial support. These are common themes that have emerged from the consultations conducted elsewhere.

Focus in Sale was drawn toward issues of access to university and other training opportunities that reflect difficulties faced by young people in rural and regional areas generally. Part of this conversation was about the distance from institutions and service providers and that public transport does not adequately meet the needs of people living in rural areas.

The other part of the conversation related to how young people can afford to study and live away from home. The issue of Youth Allowance is important to young people and it is clear that many are not comfortable with recent changes. There is a strong sense that the changes serve to put young people in rural areas at a disadvantage for reasons both of having to meet the criteria of additional work hours and difficulties in finding work in the current economic climate.

It is felt that there is less work available, with reduced hours for young people. Lack of previous work experience and suitable qualifications were seen as barriers to young people accessing employment as well as decreased availability of employment in certain fields of study.

There was a concern expressed in the conversations that workplaces were not 'friendly' to young people. This relates to perceptions that young people are discriminated against both in the workplace and by employers. The issues of youth wages, inconsistent pay, workplace safety, a lack of awareness of young people's rights and reduced bargaining power were seen as important to this group of young people.

There was an awareness of global issues relating to the current economic downturn and the impact this has on availability of work, as well as the impact industry has on the environment and practical impacts of carbon reduction and emissions targets. It is clear that this group sees that the employment landscape will be different in the future as these challenges are met.

What's not working and needs changing? Ideas to improve education and employment.

The key issues identified were:

- access to unis and courses – distance to campuses and work;
- changes to Youth Allowance (new rules re gap year) make it very difficult for regional school leavers to go to uni! They won't be able to live at home;
- hours of available work are being cut due to the recession. Need for qualifications to get a job;
- transport – not suited to rural needs;

- Yr 12 no time for part time job.

Other issues included:

- work place safety – young people educated about their rights;
- other employment themes;
- access to Youth Allowance – max earnings;
- Government policies on carbon reduction – supporting industries which pollute should not be supported – need to support clean jobs;
- bullying, harassment, discrimination;
- job availability – related to certain study areas;
- young people not being aware of rights – jobs not paying correct rate of pay.

Suggestions put forward:

- give us Youth Allowance;
- more funding for higher education will enable young people to get the training they need to be innovative and economically productive;
- the education system needs to include more on sexuality education, sex ed (sexual health) for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer young people – impact on participation.

OUR COMMUNITY

What we love about living in Sale

There was a sense of optimism and comfort that young people have in living in Sale. The young people value the sense of community this brings to them both at a personal level where people know each other and will work together, and at a community level where young people are involved in events and activities.

There is a range of structured supports for young people including the youth council, youth events and forums and a feeling of engagement of young people by the local council. Scouting activities, sporting clubs, youth and peer leadership programs in schools, mentoring and opportunities for volunteer activities were seen as positive ways that young people could participate in their community.

Young people in Sale are justifiably proud of the Teenagers in Emergency response where local teenagers got together to provide support to those teenagers affected by the devastation of the Victorian bushfire tragedy.

- Walking down street and say hi.
- Support for forums - events organised by youth for youth; coming together today.
- Availability of community services.
- Access to higher level accommodation.
- Council does a lot of stuff for young people – engaging.
- Industry support for higher education.
- Teenagers in emergency – fires – powerful response by local group of teenagers to support teenagers affected by fires.
- Young people sharing experiences; talking to and supporting younger Yr8 students; mature age students coming back to school; school leadership.
- Trainee opportunities – involvement in charities – St Vinnies – bbq at Maffra.
- Volunteer work – involved – different generations who volunteer time.
- Student unionism.
- Peer to peer mentorship.
- Sense of community.
- Access to higher education and industry support for higher education.

There was a strong sense of linking school to higher education and employment and of using 'real life' examples. This ranges from inviting people to come into the schools to talk about work and life to students, learning about youth issues and human rights to mentoring and learning about 'wonderful people' as happens in Traralgon.

Again the issue of access was raised. This relates to young people's access to information about their options in education and training, access to accommodation, health and assistance services and to employment.

There was a genuine sense of young people caring for each other and their community in Sale. This was illustrated in the example above but also in responses relating to empowerment of young women and farmers who are struggling through tough times. There is a view that both farmers and young people need more

opportunities and access to health services so they can talk about how they feel on the inside and when dealing with issues like mental health and depression.

Suggestions for improvement

- More assistance services available for young people leaving school – e.g., Centrelink, Medicare and where to start.
- Create a Youth space.
- Need young people to be more often accepted for property rentals – at the moment it's who you know.
- The three secondary colleges need to have more interaction.
- Don't forget Maffra and other smaller communities.
- More Vocational Education and Training (VET) information and more info about options other than uni or TAFE.
- Empowerment forums: Inspiring young women to raise aspirations, leadership empowerment in schools.
- Info on youth and human rights – secondary schools – built into the curriculum.

Message to the Prime Minister from the young people of Sale about what we would do to make a difference in Australia

Sale's young people are concerned about their ability to be independent -- want better public transport infrastructure (to the city and between rural communities) and the ability to find employment in country areas.

This also relates to the view that there is a drain of young people from rural areas - they need to be encouraged to come back by providing education opportunities for rural students as well as incentives encouraging local employment.

Young people are concerned with the abuse of drugs and alcohol and feel that more needs to happen in regards to education in harm minimisation and peer support for young people.

Equity of access to housing and projects that target discrimination of marginalised young people including same sex attracted young people.

Educational programs in primary school about climate change and older youth about harm minimization if using drugs, including alcohol.

Provide information about aid organisations and encourage individual involvement.

Minister Ellis asked for suggestions about improving communication with Government and the Prime Minister.

There was a clear acknowledgement that there is a shared responsibility between the community and government to improve communication. This was seen to be about integrating education about civics, government and political processes in school with opportunities for representation through Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and youth councils. IT was also having government representatives come and participate in public debates and discussion, and actively seeking young people's views.

Suggestions included:

- plugging into youth meetings and councils;
- Ministers – coming out to local communities;
- public debate and discussion;
- websites – if provide an option to write to government is good, but never got a reply;
- a representative from each local community – to go to the Federal Government and discuss ideas with them there – conveying to all in parliament;
- political nights – protocols – civics education – even human rights consultation via mobile phone;
- school SRC – more knowledge of things we can say at school – every school gets to do that;
- Sale SRC - if anyone has an idea in our community – sending it off formally – Youth Councils should agenda every item;
- we can get stuff to Youth Councils – need more youth council promotion;
- if you write to the Minister – need to know they will reply, everyone needs to understand the protocols so if you speak to this person, that you will get an answer;
- text hotline;
- publicise the connection between school and Youth Councils / Youth Mayors
- let people know that Youth Council's exist e.g. posters in schools, but what about those not at school;
- increase in Government youth housing in rural and metro areas – affordable housing for young people;
- funding for research / action projects targeting same sex attracted young people.

VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC SAFETY

There was a mixed response among the participants about their perceptions of the importance to them of public safety. It was noted that violence wasn't seen to be a huge issue in country areas; that alcohol is a contributing factor; and that reports of violence tend to be anecdotal in nature.

A conversation about cyber bullying drew similarly mixed responses with some young people identifying this as a serious issue to them personally, but the majority indicating that this is not a huge issue.



(Photo: The young people positioned themselves in the room to indicate how important / big an issue violence / public safety is. They were spread fairly evenly through the room in relation to public safety)

Reasons for relative priority of issue ranged from:

- people unaware they can kill when they hurt someone;
- in the country this is not a huge problem;
- can depend on time of week – Friday / Saturday night;
- larger towns – violence is a problem a massive problem in Australia;
- depends how drunk you and friends are;
- verbal abuse is a bigger issue – including verbal sexual abuse;
- personal experiences were raised including being followed home and uncertainty about whether and when to call police (will I be taken seriously?);
- was keen to go clubbing in Melbourne (not any more) because heard about friends getting bashed;
- maybe more perception than real;
- need to help young people put away fears when coming from war zones – no need to carry a machete here in Australia for protection;
- media tells us young people are the perpetrators – but mostly victim.



(Photo: Most young people move to one end of the room as an expression of lower concern about cyber-bullying)

Most young people indicating that cyber bullying was not a huge issue. This was set against a backdrop of some young people communicating serious concern about cyber bullying issues.

For those dealing with cyber bullying:

- it is a big issue for those experiencing it;
- suggest trying to ignore those not nice to you; can change number;
- support young people to take control;
- anyone can be targeted – will become a big issue.

Safe Spaces: what does a safe space look like?

Safe spaces were identified as being ones that were welcoming to young people, had a diverse range of activities and things to do and were designed and built by young people.

Safe spaces for young people also encapsulated ideals such as trust, honesty, tolerance, individuality, diversity and inclusion. There was a feeling that improved relationships with Police contribute to this as well as positive role models, youth leaders and having adults around. A feeling of belonging, equality, security as well as interesting activities and resources such as rehearsal and performance spaces, sporting equipment and Internet access also contribute to a safe space.

Creating a Safe Space – a vision / key features

- A safe place is: warm and welcoming, trusting, mellow, security, sunny, enclosed, colourful, calm, experienced leader, free entry, accepting (but not just that – looks to deepen understanding, develops relationships / dialogue – CELEBRATING PEOPLE.

- A safe place is a rehearsal space for music, sporting equipment for athletes, zero tolerance of violence in that space; education about how to cope independently; activities for a whole range of interests; Internet access and resources for study.
- Security, culture (not above the law), attitude, respect, personal space, accountability.
- A safe space – name the place, interact with real people, people bring friends, warm, inviting, people you know and trust, enclosed, contribute to décor, help make it a reality, clean – not sterile – don't call it safe space.
- A safe place – Equality (all ages, all races, male/female, all incomes, all backgrounds, all religions and families) freedom to make own choices, close to home, music, opinion is respected.
- Features – lead by example, equality, belonging, cops, no discrimination, clean and people care about it; input from everybody; adults around.
- A safe space: do things youth enjoy; where you can be yourself; feel like you belong; knowing your safe; go and not be picked on or bullied; somewhere you feel comfortable; positive role model and leadership – more leadership empowerment in schools – education on youth rights (workshops), health services.
- Celebrating the individual – diversity; cultural understanding and awareness of cultural experience of violence.
- To get young people to design, build and involved in space – more likely to come and respect it - not trash it.
- Campaigns against homophobic abuse -- same sex attracted young people are 4-6 times more likely to self-harm and suicide.
- Face to face communication.
- Knowing people are looking out for everyone.
- Positive role models and leaders – create a safe and comfortable environment – if you have them you get everything else.

OTHER ISSUES/FINAL DISCUSSION/QUESTIONS TO MINISTER

The final discussion amplified a sense of optimism from participants and a desire expressed by both participants and the Minister that this should not be “a one-off”. Encouragement was provided to and by young people to use the day as a beginning for more youth led action.

However, the biggest topic for the final discussion was Youth Allowance. Points raised by young people included:

- don't know exactly what's changed so need for more details on changes and impact of rural young people;
- proving need to live away from home or lack of support from parents;
- perception regional young people will be unfairly disadvantaged – based on distance to travel – regional tests – farm assets;
- if have taken a Gap year to save money, then with the changes, there is a significant fear of perceived loss of higher education opportunity;
- increase the amount we are allowed to earn before allowance cut back;
- challenges of working full time and study at night course;

- examples of where young people who lived away to study had to come back due to financial pressure;
- concerns about increased hours and period of time to prove independence;
- wanting a help out not hand out;
- want to contribute - life is a 2 way street, so what can we do to help ourselves but also what can you (the Minister/government) contribute.

Minister Ellis provided overview of changes indicating that they:

- are not cost saving measures (they are revenue neutral);
- are an attempt to ensure that young people who need assistance get assistance;
- include increased parental income threshold meaning that many more are now eligible;
- include a relocation allowance, with details provided to participants via information sheets.