

DISCUSSION PAPER ON STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH SERVICES.

INTRODUCTION

Local government in NSW operates within the framework of the Local Government Act, and is guided by the Office of Local Government and national and state legislation and policies. Since 2009 all local government functions have been directed under the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework, requiring Councils to conduct extensive community consultation to contribute to the development of a ten (plus) year Community Strategic Plan which includes four year Delivery Programs covering each elected Council term.

Consultation with community members and stakeholders for the Maitland 10+ Plan identified that strengthening relationships, communication and partnerships is a priority for Council and, to achieve this, the 2013 -17 Delivery Program has an action for delivery in 2016-17: "Develop partnerships with opportunities for strengthening relationships with local young people and youth services" (2.4.1).

On 22 May 2012 Council resolved to utilise the principles of youth engagement to plan future civic engagement with young people, and include youth-specific tools and methods of consultation, engagement, communication and promotion in the wider Community Engagement 'toolkit'.

The Citizen Engagement Strategy 2016 identifies citizen engagement as a function of core business for Council, playing a vital role in planning and decision making for projects, plans and strategies across the city. The Engagement Guide 2015 notes that "findings from Council's annual community survey have shown that our community see engaging young people in planning" as a key community priority driving satisfaction with Council as a whole. (p 5)

The Social Sustainability Strategy (SSS), which is in development after extensive community consultation and demographic research, contains strategies and actions relating to young people, and this Partnerships Framework will support the implementation of several of the actions in the SSS. The SSS also contains detailed Community Profiles for Maitland and demographic information relating to young people drawn from the 2016 Census.

For the purposes of Council's planning, young people are considered to be those aged 15 – 24 years old.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY BACKGROUND

Australia is a signatory to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*, which includes young people to the age of eighteen. The core principles of the Convention include respect for the views of the child.

Legislation in all Australian jurisdictions endorses the importance of involving children and young people in decision-making (to the extent that their age and maturity enables) and of

consulting with and seeking the views of children and young people on issues affecting their lives. This legislation includes *The Anti-Discrimination Act 1977* and *The Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014*.

Council is also guided by the National Strategy for Young Australians 2010, which acknowledges the importance of a sense of connectedness and feeling empowered within their community for young people.

The Local Government Act 1993 and *Local Government (General) Regulation 2005*, set out the responsibilities and main functions of Local Government. Under the Local Government Charter (Section 8 Local Government Act, 1993), Council is required to: "facilitate the involvement of councillors, members of the public, users of facilities and services and council staff in the development, improvement and co-ordination of local government".

Of the twelve Premiers Priorities in *NSW Making it Happen*, four have targets and priority actions specifically for young people, aimed at improving their life circumstances and enabling them to participate fully in their community.

The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2016-2019, developed by the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, after consultation with over 4,000 children and young people across the state, has as its goal: "Children and young people are safe, connected, respected, healthy, and well; with opportunities to thrive and have their voice heard in their communities."

The NSW Department of Family and Community Services Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) Reform (February 2017) includes recognition that: "local and central governance arrangements will help build evidence-informed practice through shared-learning from experience, or practice-based evidence, continuous improvement, and by maintaining collaborative relationships for ongoing feedback from all stakeholders including children, young people, families, communities, and local service systems and networks."

Maitland City Council is keeping abreast of international, national, and state policy by making a commitment to improve the quality of relationships with young people, and the organisations which support them; and to developing formal processes whereby young people can contribute to decision making in their local community.

CONSULTATION

Extensive consultation has been conducted with young people, service providers and community members in a variety of engagement activities over the last two years, and information has been drawn from a variety of sources including the Maitland Youth Interagency Action Plan 2016, meetings of the Maitland and Cessnock Youth Interagencies, and from consultations conducted for the SSS. From March to May 2017, consultations were conducted at the Maitland Youth Interagency Partnership and Planning session (which included young people), Maitland Youth Interagency meeting, Rutherford Technology High

School Student Representative Council, and Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council Youth Group. Council staff members from various departments were also consulted. Although the consultations were conducted for varying purposes, they all included elements of determining what young people and service providers want, what was seen as important for relationship building, and what actions could improve things.

RESULTS

Not surprisingly, the main themes were about the importance of relationships, collaboration, networking, information and resource sharing amongst service providers; and the importance of being inclusive of young people in spaces, programming and planning. Council was seen as having a key role in networking and partnerships, and in contributing to the development of processes and skills in effectively engaging with young people and allowing their voices to be heard.

A common sentiment was that partnerships and collaboration, and sharing of knowledge and resources, achieves better outcomes for the community and for young people. All consultations identified areas of need for more services and programs, and of spaces for service provision; as well as for young people to just 'hang out' in a safe and welcoming environment. It was suggested that Council staff can assist in identifying and promoting funding opportunities and supporting partnership projects to achieve this. Also, staff in various Council venues expressed a desire to attract more young people to their spaces, and to provide programs that young people wanted, thus integrating young people into general public spaces.

Networking through Interagencies, and information sharing were seen as key elements of strengthening relationships; and a valuable resource is the Maitland Dungog Youth Development Officer role (YDO), auspiced by the Samaritans, which, among other things, coordinates the Maitland Youth Interagency. The purpose of Maitland Youth Interagency is to: "provide opportunities and promote effective relationships between the Maitland Youth Sector to improve information sharing, support and outcomes for young people." A main objective is to: "foster and maintain close working relationships between Council, government agencies, and non-government youth agencies and services, schools, community groups, families and young people in the Maitland LGA." These aims are closely aligned with those of Council, and we can both promote this role within Council; and can work in partnership with the incumbent to identify opportunities for funding, training, collaboration, and project development.

One way of building relationships with young people that was identified was through building and maintaining relationships with schools, service providers, and the YDO; but it was often noted, particularly by Council staff, that the connection could disappear if the individual person moved on. This framework can be an opportunity to develop processes and communication lines within Council, so that staff know where to go and who to go to, to connect with specific service providers and groups in the community. Another was to build Council's role as a potential employer by expanding and promoting work experience, traineeship and volunteering opportunities for young people. Another was to actively

promote the achievements of young people in the LGA through awards, social media and public media campaigns.

Inclusion of young people was seen as having several dimensions: including them physically in public spaces, events, and activities; engaging them in developing programs and events; and involving them in broader community planning and developing leadership skills through participation in forums, reference groups, and other consultation processes. Several Council venues wanted to encourage more use by young people, but felt that their programming, and sometimes the physical space, wasn't attracting them. They wanted input by young people, but were unsure about how to engage with them. Some mentioned the desirability of having a youth council or reference group, but young people themselves were not interested in a formalised regular meeting, preferring more of a forum style on specific topics that could be seen as a learning opportunity; or for people to come to their groups (such as Student Representative Councils and youth groups) to talk/consult on specific projects. Young people also suggested that social media was a good way to communicate with them, or to get information through to their schools, to be promoted through the school media.

CONCLUSIONS

Our aim to “develop partnerships with opportunities for strengthening relationships with local young people and youth services” has two separate components: relationships with young people; and relationships with service providers. The service providers which contributed to the consultations all valued collaboration, networking, relationship building, communicating and sharing knowledge and resources. There are already both general and youth-specific Interagencies, and the Maitland Dungog Youth Development Officer, to foster communicating, networking and development of partnerships; Council can make a commitment to playing an active role in these and in being a strong partner with the Samaritans and the YDO. Consultations with young people conducted by the YDO (who coordinates a Youth Committee which provides input into the program) indicate that young people value connections with community, youth-led activities, and “having a voice”. Maitland “headspace” (run by the Samaritans) facilitates a Youth Reference Group which could be supported to broaden its membership and explore ways of expanding its function to enable the young people participating to contribute to community activities and decision making in ways they find enjoyable and worthwhile for them.

We need to remember that only a small proportion of our population of young people engages with specialised service providers, apart from schools and other education institutions; and therefore engagement and relationship building strategies need to be developed with and aimed at the whole community of young people. There has been a strong focus in these consultations on specialised service providers, many of which already have a relationship with Council; a challenge in developing partnerships within the broader community will be in identifying and building relationships with other entities in the community with high youth involvement, such as sporting clubs and other specialised activity groups; employers of large numbers of young people; popular social media sites etc.

Internally, a beneficial approach would be to strengthen partnerships within Council, to ensure everyone who has an interest in including young people in their spaces, programming and planning has appropriate processes and procedures in place.

These investigations allow us to develop a foundation on which to base Council's approach to developing partnerships and strengthening relationships with local young people and youth services, to enable us to implement actions in the Delivery Program and Operational Plans, and deliver on the Maitland 10+ Plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Formalise a partnership with the Samaritans to work closely with the Maitland Dungog Youth Development Officer (YDO) and "headspace" to optimise and strengthen current partnerships and engagement opportunities with youth service providers and young people.
2. Engage directly with already established groups of young people, such as the "headspace" Youth Reference Group, the YDO Youth Committee, the Mindaribba Youth Group, and school Student Representative Councils, to consult with and include them in developing effective and capacity building processes for young people to contribute to Council planning, programs and activities, and to the community generally.
3. Develop internal processes to improve opportunities for Council staff in relevant areas to connect directly with young people and engage them in planning spaces, programs and events, and contributing to strategic planning processes.
4. Identify community groups, clubs, and organisations in the broader community; and develop and build relationships and partnerships to enable young people who do not need specialised assistance in their lives to contribute to Council planning, programs and activities, and to the community generally.
5. Ensure Council's website, media campaigns and social media are attractive and accessible to young people to provide relevant information and encourage their participation in consultation activities, and promote the achievements of local young people.
6. Expand Council's capacity to provide work placement, traineeships and volunteering opportunities for young people; and promote Council as an attractive and varied employment possibility for local young people.

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