Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

# From the Ground Up: Hearing from Victoria's Regions

## The Centre's Connecting Communities Regional Tour, July 2022 to May 2023









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Photography throughout taken by Nicholas Nolan, Simon Dallinger, and AJ Taylor.

# Acknowledgments

The Centre acknowledges and pays respect to past and present traditional custodians and Elders of this country on which we work. We held our Connecting Communities Regional Tour on the land of the Wadawurrung, Latji Latji, Barkindji, Gunaikurnai, Yorta Yorta, Wiradjuri, Gunditjmara, and Dja Wurrung people. During the tour, we were privileged to be joined by traditional owners who Welcomed us to this Country.

The Centre acknowledges the injustices and trauma suffered as a result of European settlement, the Stolen Generations, and other policies such as the forced removal of children from their families, communities, culture and land. We respect the resilience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the face of this trauma and respect their right to, and aspiration for, self-determination and empowerment.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare would like to express our sincere gratitude to the many individuals and organisations who made the Connecting Communities Regional Tour a success. We want to extend a special thank you to the community members who took part in the tour and shared their valuable insights and experiences with us. We couldn't have done it without your generosity and willingness to engage in important conversations about the needs of children young people, and families in Victoria.

We also want to acknowledge the valuable contributions of our member organisations who provided invaluable input and support throughout the tour. The Centre recognises the generous contribution of the following organisations:

- Child and Family Services Ballarat
- OzChild
- Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative
- Mallee Family Care
- Mallee Accommodation and Support Unit
- Quantum Support Services
- Berry Street
- Anglicare Victoria
- Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-Operative
- Family Care
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- The Bridge Youth Service
- Meli
- Mackillop Family Services
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Brophy Family and Youth Services
- Uniting Vic/Tas
- Junction Support Services
- Upper Murray Family Care
- Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation
- Bendigo Community Health Services
- Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative

## About the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, representing more than 150 community service organisations, students and individuals. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.

## Content Warning

This report includes discussions on topics that some readers may find distressing, including mental health challenges, suicide, self-harm, and family violence, and homelessness.

Please take care of yourself and seek support if needed.

- **Lifeline:** Call 13 11 14 anytime for confidential telephone crisis support.
- **Beyondblue:** Call 1300 22 4636 for confidential 24/7 support on depression, anxiety and related disorders.
- **Kids HelpLine:** Call 1800 55 1800 for telephone counselling service for people aged between 5 and 25 available 24-hour service.
- **BlueKnot:** Call 1300 657 380 for confidential telephone counselling for adult survivors of childhood trauma and abuse and professionals who work with them from 9am-5pm, 7 days a week.
- **Headspace:** Call 1800 650 890 for confidential counselling for young people aged 12–25
- **Parentline:** Call 13 22 89 for parents and carers with children from birth to 18 years
- **13 YARN:** Call 13 92 76 for confidential 24/7 support from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander crisis supporter.

# Introduction

Over the course of a year, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (The Centre) visited eight regions throughout Victoria to connect and engage with our valued members and sector partners. The aim of these visits was to identify the challenges faced by local communities and to learn about the great work being done to address them. We wanted to provide a forum for local service providers to share ideas and engage in important conversations about the evolving needs of the sector and how they can be met.

We were fortunate to receive valuable knowledge and insights from those who attended each community consultation, providing us with critical information about how children, families, communities, and sector organisations are faring across the state.

Our objective for the Listening Tour was to listen closely to the needs of practitioners and service providers, identify priorities for those working with perpetrators, and to report these to government.

As the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, we are committed to amplifying the voices of our regional colleagues. The Centre commits to ongoing listening and engagement with our regional colleagues so we can continue to respond to the needs of children, families, and our sector, wherever they may live.



# Where we went

Under the leadership of CEO Deb Tsorbaris, a team from the Centre travelled more than **3500 kilometres** across Victoria to meet with sector colleagues and partners in eight different regions.






# Who we met: Participant Insights

During the tour, the Centre engaged with a diverse group of people working within or collaborating with Victoria's community services sector. We had the privilege of meeting 589 sector colleagues and partners from 114 different organisations.

Local MPs and MLCs were also invited to hear first-hand about the challenges, service gaps and collaborative innovations happening in the child and family services sector in their community.

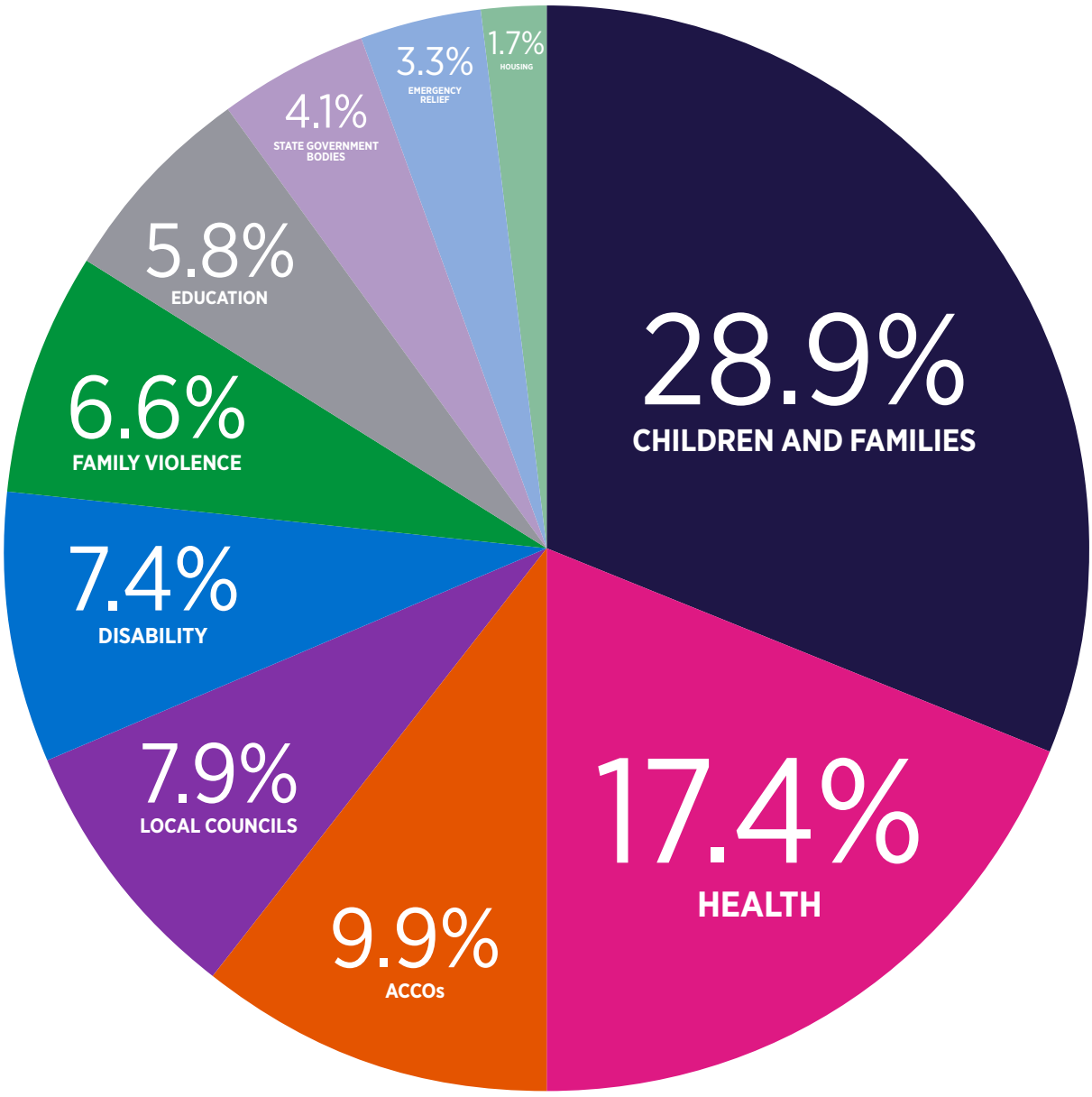



**Figure 1:** Chart representing Attendees of the Connecting Communities Regional Tour by Sector or Group (Percentage)

# What we asked

The Centre designed a consultation process to elicit open communication between participants at each event.

Sessions commenced with a panel discussion between community leaders, lived experience voices, and local trailblazers who shared the current challenges and opportunities they were seeing in their work.

At the conclusion of the panel discussion, the event shifted to a collaborative consultation session with attendees through interactive surveys and table-based discussions.

We asked participants the following key questions:

- What are the **most pressing issues** facing children, young people, and families in your local area?
- What programs or innovations **already exist** in your community that government could fund, scale up or build upon?
- If you could choose one **investment** for the government to make this year, what would it be and why?



What are the **most pressing issues** facing children, young people and families in your local area?

cost of living → Navigating the system
housing
transport
kinship care
career pathways for young people
gap purpose of education & delivery
not many young peoples needs
LGBTIQ+ safe spaces.
cultural safety with community
Service delivery, employment
education. (Racism)
Regional advocacy → Social isolation
covid technology.
cyber bullying via social media.
access to appropriate mental health
allied services OT, speech, psych
Home based cares, staffing res care
TAFE/Uni programs not aligning with young
people needs
Access to early intervention
models of care for YP & children in
OOHC
(aboriginal cares, grouphome, professional
foster care

What programs or innovations **already exist** in your community that government could fund, scale up or build upon?

Aboriginal Repair Power trial project
needs to be funded ongoing.
Stepping Stones funded in warrnambool
Take Two focus for Southwest
Bropwis accomadation for youth project
Bropny TCI-F & TCI
Bropny want to do modelling and foster
Bropny care model
Local government initiatives that
could connect Regional initiatives
"Explore Southwest" DFFH to
create a regional connection
co-lab / forum / network meeting
- Youth services directly.

If you could choose **one investment** for the government to make this year, what would it be and why?

- Aboriginal cares & focus
on Aboriginal child placement
principles
- Revolve the kinship care
system in Victoria & on
crisis supports to kinship
- Allied health directly.

#ConnectingCommunities23

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**Figure 2:** Question Sheet from Connecting Communities Regional Tour Event, Great South Coast

# What we heard

Throughout the tour, we heard that local communities in rural and regional areas are working together to provide high-quality services to children, young people, and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. These services are often place-based and draw upon community resources and knowledge to provide tailored support.

We also heard that our regional members and sector partners are being affected by a number of common pressure points, which tell a story about how our regional communities are faring.

We were told that there is a critical need to:

- **Address the shortage of safe, affordable, and stable housing**
- **Improve the coordination and accessibility of regional service delivery**
- **Support our regional workforce to be the best they can be**
- **Foster the educational and employment aspirations of young people in the regions**
- **Ensure disadvantaged families have access to high quality services and an adequate income to thrive**
- **Shift the balance from crisis response to early intervention**
- **Support parents and carers**
- **Improve access to regional mental health services**

## Address the shortage of safe, affordable, and stable housing

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the Connecting Communities Regional Tour was housing. Service users, our workforce, and people of all ages are struggling to find housing that is affordable, stable, safe, and suits their needs.

More social housing is needed in regional areas. Communities called for more transitional housing for young people and families, including innovative housing options for young people leaving care and women and children impacted by family violence.

## Improve the coordination and accessibility of regional service delivery

### Service Coordination

The child and family services sector often works together to find innovative solutions to complex problems.

Our sector wants to build stronger networks and move away from a siloed approach to regional service delivery. Regional communities told us that they want to build more formal partnerships and networks to ensure supports are integrated.

### Service Accessibility

Communities told us that services need to be more accessible. More investment is needed to do outreach in remote areas and allow creative responses to the challenges of regional service delivery. Many service users are struggling to get timely access to support due to service boundaries, backlogs, and waitlists.

## Support our regional workforce to be the best they can be

Our sector is lucky to have highly qualified and skilled workers who provide expert support to children, young people, and families. However, many service providers are struggling to attract and retain appropriately skilled graduates to meet the challenges of regional service delivery.

We need to support quality experiences for students undertaking tertiary studies in the regions to attract them to the sector. We need more opportunities to upskill our regional workforce through meaningful training, collaboration, and supervision.

People told us that competitive remuneration, longer-term funding arrangements, and early confirmation of funding extensions would assist service providers to retain talented workers.

## Foster the educational and employment aspirations of young people in the regions

Regional communities spoke about the importance of fostering youth aspirations by providing clear pathways to employment and education in the regions. Our regional communities want to find innovative ways to tackle educational disengagement and exclusion. They want young people to have better access to employment supports and meaningful work in the regions.

## Ensure disadvantaged families have access to high quality services and an adequate income to thrive

Victorians are facing a cost-of-living crisis. COVID-19 has weakened the financial resilience of households and many families in the regions are struggling to make ends meet. We heard that families are struggling to access the essentials, including affordable food and transport.

Regional communities want supported local responses to material hardship and continued investment in initiatives to combat poverty. This includes a greater investment in family services to enable our sector to be responsive to the evolving needs of families in rural and regional areas during this crisis.

## Shift the balance from crisis response to early intervention

We know that the child and family services system is overwhelmed by acute demand. It is critical that we invest in early intervention responses to support children and families before they reach a crisis-point.

Regional communities told us that they want to see more evidence-based supports in the first 1000 days of a child's life, with an increased focus on perinatal and infant interventions.

## Support parents and carers

### Support for parents

We need proven and promising programs that support people to be better parents. Our regional communities want to see more holistic family work, parenting programs, healthy relationships programs, and supporting men's behaviour programs. They want parents to have better access to childcare and want to see more specialist supports for young parents, and parents in custody.

### Support for carers

Victoria's foster, kinship and permanent carers provide safe, stable, and loving homes when children are most in need of this intensive care in their lives. They must be recognised and supported to continue to provide this essential care.

Regional communities want to see increased care allowances to relieve the financial pressure on kinship carers. Carers need more respite options to ensure long and stable placements, and more resources are needed to recruit and retain foster carers in regional areas.

## Improve access to regional mental health services

Victoria has seen a wide range of reforms to improve mental health services in recent years. However, we know that there is more work to do to improve quality of and access to mental health services in Victoria's regions.

Regional communities want to see accessible and affordable mental health services, including specialist services for children and young people, people of CALD backgrounds, and more whole of family mental health supports.

**While we identified common themes among Victoria's regional communities, challenges and opportunities manifested differently in each region.**

**Highlighting these differences was crucial to ensure the accurate representation of each community's voice in this report.**

**Recognising the uniqueness of every region enables the develop of tailored, place-based responses that meet community need.**





# Central Highlands

## WADAWURRUNG, DJA DJA WURRUNG, TAUNGURUNG, AND WURUNDJERI COUNTRY




July 11 2022

Mercure Ballarat Hotel & Convention Centre, Ballarat

This consultation was attended by 96 people from 29 organisations.
Our panel members for this event were:

- Wendy Sturgess – CEO, Child and Family Services Ballarat (CAFS)
- Rosemary Aldrich – Medical Director and Public Health Physician, Grampians Public Health Unit
- Karen Heap – CEO, Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative Limited

## What we heard in the Central Highlands

**Key Challenges for the Central Highlands region include:**

Access to Housing: Many participants had concerns about the availability and affordability of housing. Participants called for increased availability of public housing beyond Ballarat and transitional housing options for larger households. Participants expressed concern about housing options for community members impacted by family violence, citing limited housing options for families with adolescent boys fleeing family violence and rental blacklisting as a lasting impact of family violence.

Service Access and Coordination: Participants identified long waitlists and service boundaries, particularly in mental health and alcohol and other drug (AoD) spaces. Rural and remote areas heavily rely on services in Ballarat, leading participants to call for increased funding for services and outreach in rural communities in the Central Highlands.

The community stressed the need for improved service coordination and integration, given the complexity of the current system. With 360 programs provided by 96 agencies in Ballarat alone, clearer information on service providers and their offerings is necessary to streamline access and provide efficient support throughout the region.

The Cost-of-Living Crisis: Participants raised concerns about the cost-of-living crisis, which is impacting the community in numerous ways. They highlighted challenges for children and families such as limited access to affordable and nutritious food. We heard that the community is feeling the burden of Medicare gap fees and are finding it difficult to  and access affordable healthcare services.

Mental Health and AoD Supports: Limited access to mental health and alcohol and other drug supports emerged as a significant concern, with participants calling for low-cost or no-cost mental health services. The impact of COVID-19 on mental health, including unresolved trauma, was highlighted as a significant issue in the community.

Transportation Exclusion: We heard that there is a need for improved connectivity and transportation services in rural and areas in the Central Highlands to ensure better access to essential services.

Cultural Diversity and Inclusion: Participants want to see more support for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families. We heard that there is a need to address language and cultural barriers and develop more culturally appropriate programs and approaches in the region. Participants want to build culturally inclusive leadership, and they want organisations to be culturally safe and competent to respond to the changing population in the Central Highlands.

Disability Supports: More support for individuals with disabilities are needed, particularly for community members who are ineligible for support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

**Opportunities in the Central Highlands include:**

Meaningful Partnerships: Collaborative partnerships were highlighted as important for building culturally safe and inclusive services in the region. Examples such as the strong partnership between BADAC and CAFS were mentioned. The Centre saw a strong appetite for more collaboration across the Central Highlands region.

Innovative Place-Based Programs: Many examples of innovative programs that address local needs were mentioned, including Van Go, Berry Street's Mother Infant Village, CAFS' Thread Together, and BADAC's Baarlinjan dance group. The human services sector in the Central Highlands is delivering creative, tailored solutions to meet community need.

Support for LGBTIQ+ Youth: Participants told us that they are striving to build an inclusive community. They want to see an expansion of local rainbow youth programs and more network inclusion offices in rural areas to enhance support for vulnerable LGBTIQ+ youth in the Central Highlands.

Investment in Staff Training and Qualifications: The community identified the need for more investment in staff training and qualifications to retain skilled professionals within the Central Highlands.

Evidenced Child and Family Services Initiatives: The community want to see successful evidence-based programs scaled so that more families can access support. They cited programs and initiatives like Better Futures, Integrated Family Services Flexible Packages, and the Family Preservation and Reunification Response.

Expanded Health Service Access: Participants told us that health services are not meeting demand in the region. They need more paediatric and GP support, further pregnancy support services. Participants want to see further integration of child and family services and health services.

Rethinking Reporting Requirements: Reporting requirements too often rely on Western ways of thinking. When reporting back to funding bodies, participants called for reporting requirements that incorporate Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing.






# Mallee region

## WERGAIA, NGINTAIT, LATJI LATJI, AND WOTJOBALUK COUNTRY



July 15 2022

Mallee Family Care, Mildura

The event was attended by 71 people representing 16 organisations.
Our panel members for this event were:

- Teresa Jayet – CEO, Mallee Family Care
- Connor Pall – Intern and Lived Experience Voice, Mallee Family Care
- Vincent Wilson – CEO, Mallee Accommodation and Support Program (MASP)
- Argiri Alisandratos – Deputy Secretary, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)
- Belinda Hudak – Principal, Mildura Senior College

## What we heard in the Mallee

**Key Challenges in the Mallee include:**

Attracting and Retaining a Skilled Workforce: The Mallee's human services sector faces challenges in attracting workers. Local organisations want to support meaningful supervision and quality experiences to attract students to the sector and provide pathways for young people to stay local. To improve workforce stability, participants wanted to see longer-term funding arrangements and more resourcing to provide competitive remuneration to staff.

Access to Housing: Participants recognised a shortage of housing in the region, especially for women and children affected by family violence. The community want to see more rental properties in the Mallee to alleviate the rental crisis in the region.

Cross-border Issues: Challenges arise for service delivery due to the region's proximity to border areas. Participants cited that jurisdictional differences mean that supporting children, young people, and families in border communities can be difficult.

Lack of After-Hours Support: The community told us that there often aren't enough resources to deliver after-hours support. Participants want the community to have capacity to provide comprehensive support for children and families when they need it. Participants recognised the strength of Family and Child Hubs in the region and expressed the desire to see them operational outside of regular business hours.

Transport Exclusion: We heard that there are limited transportation options in the Mallee, excluding community members living in remote communities from accessing essential services in regional hubs.

The Cost-of-Living Crisis: Families in the Mallee are experiencing significant financial stress. The high cost of living means some families are struggling to meet basic needs and buy the essentials, like fuel and groceries.

Mental health: We heard that a combination of challenges like family violence, economic hardships, and unstable housing has led to more community members seeking mental health support. Mental health services in the Mallee are overburdened and under-resourced.

Outreach to Remote Areas: Participants told us that it is difficult to replicate service models from Mildura to other remote areas in the Mallee region. The community wants to see equitable access to services, supported by resourcing that enables creative responses to remote service delivery.

**Opportunities in the Mallee include:**

Building Partnerships with the Community and Sector: Participants saw an opportunity to collaborate more with the broader Mallee community. It was suggested that the child, youth, and family service sector collaborate more with sporting clubs, membership-based services, and existing hub programs to enhance community support, cohesion and show presence.

Additionally, the local sector expressed a desire for greater teamwork. They sought to shift away from open competitive tender processes and instead foster enduring collaborations and between organisations through place-based partnerships.

Early Help: In the Mallee, the child and family services sector provide supports to children and families when they first need assistance. Participants stressed the need to expand services to prevent children and families from accessing services at the tertiary end of the system. We heard that the sector wants to expand parenting supports and interventions that enhance child development and well-being.

Adapting Innovative, Evidence-Based Programs: The sector is bringing innovative, evidence-based programs to the region to address local challenges. An example of success is the implementation of KEEP, a nation-first, evidence-based program by Mallee Family Care, which equips local carers with skills to support children who have experienced trauma.

Elevating Lived-Experience Voice: There was a strong call for greater inclusion of lived experience voices in decision-making and policy development. There are a number of passionate young advocates who are making a difference in the Mallee region. Ensuring equal participation of children and young people's voices alongside professionals is seen as a significant opportunity for local sector development.






# Gippsland region

## GUNNAIKURNAI, BUNURONG, TAUNGURUNG AND WURUNDJERI COUNTRY




July 26 2022

Century Inn, Traralgon

The event was attended by 75 people representing 23 organisations.
Our panel members for this event were:

- Cindy Pullar – Executive Director, Quantum Support Services
- James Bush – Young person and HEY Project Worker, Gippsland Lakes Complete Health
- Annette Jackson – Executive Director of Berry Street Statewide Services, Berry Street
- Vicki Levey - Regional Director, Anglicare Victoria
- Shellee Strickland – CEO, Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative (GEGAC)

## What we heard in Gippsland

**Key Challenges for Gippsland include:**

Access to Housing: The scarcity of affordable housing options in Gippsland poses significant challenges for families. Participants expressed the need for greater investment in affordable housing initiatives and the adoption of innovative housing models.

Mental Health: We heard that generational trauma, self-harm among adults and children, and the concerning 20-month waitlist for Monash mental health services were critical issues in the region. Participants told us that children, young people, and their parents need greater access to effective interventions and accessible mental health supports.

Service Access: Children and families living in outer Gippsland have limited access to services, hampering the ability of children, young people, and families in Gippsland to receive the support they need. Participants told us that expanding service provision, reducing waiting times, and improving service coordination can enhance outcomes for the community.

Supported Organisations and Workforce: The region has been grappling with the aftermath of bushfires and the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have significantly affected local organizations and their workforce. The service system is under strain and faces numerous challenges. The community strongly advocates for sustained support to be directed towards the child and family services workforce following a period of instability. It was highlighted that short-term funding cycles negatively impact workforce recruitment and program stability. Concerns were raised about the heavy reliance on volunteers, underscoring the necessity of increased funding and resources to ensure consistent and reliable support.

Transport Exclusion: Participants expressed concerns about the inconsistent and unreliable nature of public transport in the region. Specifically, East Gippsland was highlighted as an area lacking fast and efficient public transportation options. For instance, the distance between Bairnsdale and Mallacoota requires a three-hour drive, leading to increased isolation and service exclusion for these communities.

**Key Opportunities in Gippsland include:**

Establishing a Local School of Social Work: We heard that Gippsland is the only region in Victoria without a local school of social work. While Gippsland shares similar struggles to other areas, the absence of a school of social work creates a significant workforce gap in the region. Participants proposed the idea of establishing a tailored school of social work to address the specific service needs of the community.

Expanded Financial Literacy Programs: Financial stress contributes to poor outcomes for Gippsland families. Participants wanted to see the promotion and expansion of financial literacy programs to help families deal with cost-of-living pressures.

Effective Partnerships between Schools and Community Agencies: Participants stressed the need for school-community partnerships to boost school engagement and address post-COVID school refusal and anxiety. They called for improved transitions from school to post-school planning  that provide crucial support for young people entering adulthood. More collaborations between schools and community agencies, exemplified by the successful School Focused Youth program at Gippsland Lakes Complete Health, can identify needs, coordinate responses, and support at-risk youth to reengage in learning.

A Youth Foyer for Gippsland: Participants at our Gippsland event called for alternative models of social housing for young people. The Gippsland region sees more than 40 applicants vying for each transitional housing property, with only 16 of these properties available across the region. Quantum Support Services have been advocating for a Youth Foyer for Inner Gippsland, which would provide stable housing and education to young people in the region. We were told that this model would be transformative for young people who are locked out of the rental market and require a greater level of wrap-around support.






# Goulburn region

## YORTA YORTA, TAUNGURUNG, BANGERANG AND DHUDHUROA COUNTRY




July 28 2022
Parklake Hotel, Shepparton

The event was attended by 69 people representing 27 organisations.
Our panel members for this event were:

- David Tennant – CEO, Family Care
- Paul O'Kelly - Goulburn Area DFFH Director
- Professor Lisa Bourke, Uni of Melbourne (Director – Department of Rural Health)
- Laurie Sevil – Chief Operating Officer, Corporate Services, Rumbalara
- Melinda Lawley – CEO, The Bridge Youth Service

## What we heard in Goulburn

**Key Challenges in Goulburn include:**

Social Housing and Community Education: Housing access and affordability is a challenge that Goulburn shares with other regions. While efforts have been made to construct more social housing, determining their placement remains challenging. Participants emphasised the importance of community education to combat prejudices against children and families residing in social housing.

Youth Employment and Aspiration: Participants noted a lack of ambition and clear pathways for education and employment. Two specific challenges were highlighted. Firstly, employment agencies are unable to assist young people who leave school in year 10 or 11 without six months of disengagement or unemployment, making early intervention for young people who are disengaged with school difficult. Secondly, the growing specialization of the workforce, with certifications now necessary for previously non-certified roles (like being a barista), poses a barrier to youth employment.

The Cost-of-Living Crisis: Families in Goulburn are experiencing financial hardship. Participants called for expanded support systems, including welfare, transportation assistance, and affordable access to local produce.

Youth Mental Health: We heard that there is an unmet mental health need in Goulburn that isn't being seen by services. Poor mental health and well-being contribute to issues such as emotional regulation difficulties, low resilience, and a sense of powerlessness among young people. Addressing youth mental distress and reducing suicide rates is of paramount importance in the region.

**Key Opportunities in Goulburn include:**

Partnerships with the Sector: Participants expressed a strong desire for authentic partnerships within the sector and cross-sectorally. We heard that increased coordination and collaboration would greatly benefit the community.

Alternative Education Options: Creating education and employment opportunities for young people necessitates the implementation of alternative education options and increased support within schools. Currently, Shepparton has one large secondary school, highlighting the need for diversification in educational settings. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of having more well-being supports integrated within schools to enable services to intervene early with vulnerable children and families.

Building a Home-Grown Workforce: Participants want to see quality supervision and the expansion of universities in the region. Participants highlights the potential benefits of having a home-grown university, which would not only provide educational opportunities but also encourage graduates to stay in the local area and join the region's workforce.

Scaling Early Intervention Supports: Participants expressed a strong desire for the implementation of scaled early intervention supports, particularly focusing on areas such as perinatal and infant care, adolescent violence, relationships, and parenting. They underscored the importance of addressing challenges during critical developmental stages and providing the necessary support to prevent children and young people from entering and remaining in the care system.

More platforms to hear regional voices: Participants want to elevate Goulburn voices at policy and decision-making tables. Participants want to see more dedicated platforms where children and families in the regions can present their needs. They called for leaders to actively listen to the community and seek knowledge to inform inclusive and effective policymaking.






# Barwon region

## WATHAURONG, GULIDJAN, AND GADUBANUD COUNTRY



August 9 2022
Rydges Hotel, Geelong

The event was attended by 70 people representing 22 organisations.
Our panel members for this event were:

- Bernadette McCartney – Deputy CEO, Bethany Community Support
- Lyn Edwards - General Manager-Geelong, MacKillop Family Services
- Kelly Stanton - Executive Director - Program and Service Development, Family Safety Victoria
- Fay Agterhuis – Principal, Point Lonsdale Primary School & Board Chair, Bellarine Community Health

## What we heard in Barwon

**Key Challenges in Barwon include:**

Addressing Homelessness: During our discussions, it became evident that the region is facing a critical housing crisis, necessitating the expansion of homelessness services. It was made clear that providing adequate housing options is crucial, especially for individuals leaving care and low-income households. In particular, the focus was on supporting single mothers who are facing family violence.

More Workforce Supports: Participants voiced concerns about the strain on the child and family services workforce, citing the detrimental impact of large caseloads on staff well-being. This is particularly the case for inexperienced staff managing complex cases in child protection. While there was a desire to foster more collaborative work, it was acknowledged that this posed challenges as it required individuals to take on additional responsibilities alongside their already demanding roles.

Partnerships and Service Coordination: The community expressed a strong desire to work across organisational silos and explore innovative approaches to service delivery. Recognising that traditional referral pathways are clogged, the community emphasised the need for partnerships to respond to the challenge. Sustainable service delivery relies on effective coordination of services and seamless systems integration. However, the community stressed that establishing partnerships would require greater resourcing and staffing capacity.

Mental Health: We heard that mental health is a key issue in the region, with a rise in children and families seeking assistance, particularly for anxiety disorders and school refusal post-pandemic. Recruiting mental health professionals in the region is a challenge, as current funding for mental health practitioners in schools is only at 0.2 or 0.4 FTE, making it difficult to attract to qualified individuals.

Addressing Educational Exclusion: Concerns were raised about education exclusion and the need for improved engagement strategies, including modified timetables, to address the social and emotional impacts of returning to school post-COVID. Participants emphasised the importance of establishing specialist schools to cater to the specific educational needs of children with disabilities.





**Key Opportunities in Barwon include:**

Elevating Lived Experience Voices: The community wants more inclusion of lived experience voices in decision-making processes, particularly the voices of children and families who have used or are using child and family services.

Helping Local Carers Continue their Impactful Work: Within the Barwon region, foster carers have demonstrated incredible dedication in nurturing children's connections, promoting engagement, and fostering emotional well-being. Nonetheless, the pressing need for additional foster carers remains critical in both Barwon and across the entire state.

The community strongly advocates for enhanced support for foster and kinship carers, with a particular focus on addressing the financial pressures they face. This can be achieved through increasing care allowances, providing comprehensive support for kinship carers, and resourcing to recruit new foster carers.

Expanded Supports for Parents: The Barwon community told us that they want to see expanded support for parents. Participants highlighted the importance of holistic family work, and specific support programs targeting young parents and parents in custody that recognises their unique circumstances and challenges. Access to quality childcare was identified as another crucial service that can greatly benefit parents and contribute to family well-being.

Therapeutic Support for Kids in Care: Participants stressed the importance of providing funded therapeutic support for all children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC). Recognising the significant challenges and trauma experienced by those in residential care, it is crucial to create a safe, supportive, and therapeutic environment to help them process their trauma and foster their well-being.









# Ovens Murray region

## YORTA YORTA, TAUNGURUNG, AND WIRADJURI COUNTRY



24 March 2023

Atura Hotels and Resorts, Albury

The event was attended by 80 people representing 24 organisations.
Our panel members for this event were:

- Luke Wilson, Victoria's Cross Border Commissioner
- Megan Hanley, CEO, Junction Support Services
- Richard Slade, Executive Director – Ovens Murray Area, DFFH
- Felicity Williams, CEO, Upper Murray Family Care
- John Martin, CEO, Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation

## What we heard in Ovens Murray

**Key Challenges in Ovens Murray include:**

Access to Local Mental Healthcare: Mental healthcare emerged as a significant concern during the consultation. Participants stressed the necessity of local beds to cater to the mental health needs of young people. It was brought to our attention that young people are compelled to travel to Box Hill in metro Melbourne to access mental healthcare, with some needing to occupy adult mental health beds in the region. In response, the community have strongly advocated for the establishment of local perinatal and infant mental health inpatient beds. Additionally, suicide prevention was identified as a pressing area that requires immediate attention.

Challenges of Cross-Border Service Delivery: Delivering services in border communities makes service coordination, navigation, and the sharing of information and documentation between jurisdictions difficult. Healthcare restrictions further challeng in delivering seamless services across borders.

The Cost-of-Living Crisis: The consultation revealed challenges arising from the increasing cost of living. Participants voiced particular concerns regarding homelessness and food security for families doing it tough in the region.

Service Access: In the Ovens Murray, the large geographic catchment poses a barrier to service accessibility, requiring community members to travel considerable distances for support. Limited availability and accessibility of services in rural and remote areas were acknowledged as major challenges, necessitating efforts to ensure fair access to essential resources and support.

Access to Healthcare: There is community need for more accessible and affordable healthcare options. Participants stressed the importance of bulk billing general practitioners (GPs). The availability of specialised medical practitioners, such as paediatricians, mental health professionals, allied health practitioners, and sexual assault services, was deemed crucial for comprehensive healthcare provision.





**Key Opportunities in Ovens Murray include:**

Expanded Education Supports: Disengagement from education is a pressing issue, requiring flexible options that address individual needs. The pandemic's lingering impact is evident, with school disengagement observed as early as 8 years old. Participants call for expanding the Navigator Program, a targeted support service that collaborates with young people, families, and schools to achieve educational goals, leveraging strengths and fostering a positive school experience.

In Wodonga, stakeholders have actively worked since 2018 to establish the COSS (Community of Schools and Services) model. This collaborative effort involves organizations like Junction Support Services, Gateway Health, Headspace Albury-Wodonga, and NELLEN. The project aims to tackle challenges faced by young people, such as homelessness, mental health issues, and school disengagement, through a data-driven early intervention approach. The locally ready COSS model, already successful in Albury, is poised for implementation in Wodonga.

Improved Organisational Infrastructure: Organisations and agencies in the sector often receive funding for service provision, but there is a significant gap when it comes to addressing infrastructure needs such as buildings and IT. Adequate infrastructure support enables organisations to operate smoothly, maintain high-quality services, and meet the evolving needs of the community.

Services for Refugee and CALD Community: In the Ovens Murray region, there is a growing need for programs that cater to the unique needs of refugee and migrant communities in respond to the changing population in the region.

Expanded AVITH Supports: Participants want to expand the reach and availability of AVITH programs. Scaling AVITH programs can play a crucial role in preventing and addressing violence, promoting healthier family dynamics, and fostering safer and more supportive home environments for young people and their families.






# Great South Coast region

## GUNDITJMARA, PEEK WHURRONG, AND KIRRAE WHURRONG COUNTRY




9 May 2023

Pavilion Cafe and Bar, Warrnambool

The event was attended by 63 people representing 21 organisations.
Our panel members for this event were:

- Danny Chatfield, CEO at Gunditmara Aboriginal Cooperative
- Francis Broekman, CEO at Brophy Family and Youth Services
- Adam Reilly, Executive Director Wimmera Southwest Area at Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing (DFFH)
- Joanne Nicholas, Manager Western Region Services at OzChild
- Jean Davis, Mackillop Foster Carer

## What we heard in the Great South Coast

**Key Challenges in the Great South Coast include:**

Access to Local Mental Healthcare and Sexual Assault Exams: The mental health sector is grappling with overwhelming demand, resulting in long waiting lists and limited accessibility to preventative treatment. This poses a significant challenge, particularly for children and young people who need to travel to Melbourne for mental health inpatient care and sexual assault exams.

Child Care Availability: Lengthy waitlists and limited availability of childcare pose challenges for parents and child and family services workers. Insufficient placement options hinder workforce participation and disrupt the routine and stability of children requiring childcare services.

Access to Housing: The region faces significant challenges due to the lack of housing. This scarcity affects staff recruitment and retention, as finding suitable accommodation becomes difficult for workers coming to the region. Participants want to see Airbnb properties converted into private rentals as a solution to address the shortage of housing options in the area.

Suitable Education and Career Pathways for Young People: The mismatch between TAFE and university programs and the needs of young people is seen as a challenge in the region. The community told us that tertiary education opportunities aren't aligning with what young people want. Additionally, limited career development opportunities in the region make it difficult for young people to find clear pathways to achieve their professional goals.

Addressing Cyberbullying: Cyberbullying and social media present significant challenges in terms of online harassment and safety. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure a safe online environment for young people in the region.

**Key Opportunities in the Great South Coast include:**

Professionalising Foster Care: The community want to see the professionalisation of the foster care system so that local carers feel properly supported. As the number of carers in the region is diminishing, participants told us that financial support and comprehensive training for foster and kinship caregivers has never been more important.

Reunification Supports: We heard that timely and comprehensive reunification support for children and young people is crucial, starting from the day of the court hearing. Effective interventions and resources are necessary for safe and successful reunification.

Supports for People Living with a Disability: To meet the growing demand for disability support, prioritising increased NDIS supports and qualified disability practitioners is essential. Enhancing NDIS services and expanding the skilled workforce will ensure people on the Great South Coast living with disabilities have access to the necessary resources and interventions they need to thrive.

Supporting First Nations-Led Child and Family Services Initiatives: The community wants to see trial projects for Aboriginal carers implemented and ongoing funding for their sustainability. Incorporating Aboriginal placement principles in child and family services is crucial for culturally appropriate care. We heard that enhance support for Aboriginal kinship care was critical, as participants stressed the importance of children in out-of-home care maintaining connection to community and culture.

Improving Regional Connections: To foster collaboration and effective communication, it is important to establish regional connections and forums for networking among stakeholders. Advocacy efforts are needed to improve communication channels between the Southwest and Wimmera areas, promote information sharing, and enhance coordination for better regional cooperation.





# Loddon Campaspe region

## DJA DJA WURRUNG AND TAUNGURUNG COUNTRY



17 May 2023

The Capital (Banquet Room), Bendigo

The event was attended by 85 people representing 25 organisations.
Our panel members for this event were:

- Dallas Widdicombe, CEO at BDAC
- Camille Kingston, CEO at Homes Victoria
- Graem Kelly, Executive Leader of Better Health at BCHS
- Anglicare: Sue Sealey, Deputy CEO
- Michael Oerlemans, Regional Director

## What we heard in Loddon Campaspe

**Key Challenges in Loddon Campaspe include:**

The Cost-of-Living Crisis: The region faces cost of living pressures, resulting in increased demand for services like Foodhubs, Foodshores, and Neighbourhood Houses.

Climate Impacts on Families and Service Delivery: The impacts of climate change on families and service delivery have been evident. In October 2022, a significant flood event hit the region, causing damage to 85% of the homes in Rochester. As a result, Anglicare Victoria established Elmore Village as emergency accommodation, which will provide shelter for 200 residents until August 2023. Dedicated case management services were put in place to assist those affected and facilitate the recovery process. The recent floods and community response highlights the urgent need for preparedness and resilience in the face of climate-related disasters.

Access to Housing: The region faces housing challenges, particularly for young people. The availability and affordability of housing options are limited, making it difficult for young individuals to secure stable accommodation.

We heard that Social Housing Growth Fund projects in Golden Square, Lancefield, and Bendigo will improve housing access and availability in the region.

School Disengagement: There is a need to provide alternative education opportunities in all secondary schools to address school disengagement and refusal. Participants told us that integrating mental health supports and trauma-informed practices within schools are essential for improved student well-being and engagement.





**Key Opportunities in Loddon Campaspe include:**

Foster Care Recruitment and Maintenance: Investing in foster care recruitment and support is vital for helping vulnerable children. This includes funding training for foster and kinship carers, as well as implementing innovative programs like Mockingbird to strengthen foster carer support networks.

Early Intervention Supports: The community told us that prioritising early intervention programs and interventions would significantly improve outcomes for families.

Mentorship and Leadership Programs: Providing mentorship and leadership programs, especially for Aboriginal young people, can empower them to reach their full potential. These programs can create a strong sense of identity, belonging, and resilience.

Responses to Youth Mental Health Challenges: Youth mental health is a critical concern in the region, necessitating tailored support and services for children and young people. To meet this need, the KIT Keep in Touch program by Anglicare Victoria was initiated in November 2019. It is a flexible and mobile service co-designed by young people, providing mental health support directly to them. The new Loddon Infant, Child and Family Health and Wellbeing Hub will also meet mental health need in the Loddon Mallee Region, and is one of three hubs being developed across Victoria. The Hub offers connection and navigation services, paediatric and mental health assessments, therapeutic interventions, targeted family services, and parenting programs. The aim is to ensure early identification, response, and support for the mental health and well-being of children and families in need.

Investment in First Nations Communities and Organisations: Leveraging the investment in self-determination for First Nations communities, BDAC does transformative work in the region in promoting Aboriginal children being placed in Aboriginal care. This approach recognises the significance of maintaining cultural connections and ensuring that Aboriginal children are nurtured within their own communities.

Longer-Term Funding and Program Expansion: We were told that long-term funding models and expansion of existing programs, such as school transition programs, and workforce development in maternal child health, can sustain and enhance service delivery in the region.

Community Support and Referrals: Participants want to see the establishment of short-term case management specialists who can assist the community in navigating the service system and provide information. We heard that community spaces such as libraries or community gardens as hubs for referrals are underutilised and should be recognised as important pathways that community members can access support.

# Where to from here?

## Final remarks and future directions

As the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, the Centre recognises the critical contribution made by regional and rural service providers to the lives of children and families.

During the tour, we heard about the ways that our sector is collaborating and innovating. Our regional members know their community best and identify opportunities to improve the lives of local children and families. These communities are resilient and know what's best for them.

We also heard that our sector in the regions wants to share more about the challenges and opportunities they see for their communities. We know that Victoria's regional communities are driven to engage in meaningful collaboration with the government and have their voices heard at the policymaking table.

We greatly appreciated the opportunity to hear directly from regional and rural voices to help inform the work we do. Engagement with our regional members is a hugely important aspect of the Centre's work, providing the touchpoint we need to improve the services we deliver.

We look forward to continuing our Connecting Communities Regional Tour and commit to continually capturing the perspectives of our sector across Victoria.



# Acknowledging Attendees

It was a pleasure to welcome participants from the following organisations during the Connecting Communities Regional Tour:

54 Reasons
Albury Wodonga Health
Anchor
Anglicare Victoria
ARC Justice
Australian Catholic University
Ballarat Community Health
Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative
Barwon Health
Baptcare
Bendigo Community Health Services
Berry Street
Beyond the Bell
Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative
The Bridge Youth Service
Brotherhood of St Laurence
Brophy Family and Youth Services
Child and Family Services Ballarat
Caroline Chisholm Society
CatholicCare Victoria
Centre Against Violence
Centre for Multicultural Youth
Centre for Non-Violence
Chisholm Institute
City of Greater Bendigo
City of Greater Geelong
Colac Area Health
Communities for Children
Greater Shepparton
Community Living and Respite Services
Cottage by the Sea
Courts Victoria
Department of Education and Training (Education VIC)
Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing Victoria (DFFH)
Emma House
Family Safety Victoria
FamilyCare
Federation University
Foodshare
Gateways Support Services
Gateway Health
Geelong City Council
Geelong Youth Engagement
GenU
Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-Operative
Gippsland Disability Advocacy Inc. (GDAI)
Gippsland Lakes Community Health (GLCH)
Gippsland Southern Health Services
Good Shepherd
Goulburn Valley Community Legal Centre
Goulburn Valley Health
Grampians Public Heath Unit
Greater Shepparton City Council
Greater Shepparton Foundation
Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project
Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative
Headspace
Heathcote Health
Horses for Hope
Housing Justice
Inspired Carers
Irabina Austism Services
Intereach
Jeder Institute
Junction Support Services
Key Assets
Kids Foundation
Kyabram Community Learning Centre
Life Without Barriers
Lifeline
Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services
MacKillop Family Services
Mallee Accommodation and Support Program
Mallee District Aboriginal Services
Mallee Family Care
Mallee Sexual Assault Unit and Domestic Violence Services
Mansfield Shire Council
Meli
Mercy Connect
Mildura Secondary College
Mildura Rural City Council
Mission Australia
Moyne Shire Council
MPower
Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation
Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative
Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
Noah's Ark Inc.
NoFASD Australia
North Central Goldfields Regional Library
Office of the Cross Border Commissioner
The Orange Door
OzChild
Primary Care Connect
QEC (Queen Elizabeth Centre)
Quantum Support Services
Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation
Relationships Australia Victoria
Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
Sexual Assault and Family Violence Centre
Safe Places
Salvation Army
Save the Children
South West Healthcare
South West TAFE
Sunraysia Community Health Services
Shine Bright EYM
Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council
Uniting Vic/Tas
Upper Murray Family Care
Victorian Legal Aid (VLA)
Victoria Police
VACCA
Warrnambool City Council
Wauthurong Aboriginal Cooperative
WDEA Works
Whitelion
Wodonga City Council
Women's Health in the South East
Youth Insearch
YMCA
YSAS

