

OAKEY YOUTH PROJECT

SOCIAL OUTCOMES RESEARCH

Final Report



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SUMMARY

Throughout 2019-2021, Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC) and the Public Health Network (PHN) Darling Downs & West Moreton partnered to deliver structured community engagement and positive health community development programming for young people in the Oakey community. Using a ‘whole of community’ approach, Toowoomba Regional Council’s Community Development Branch coordinated a series of community engagement, youth support and employment and transition initiatives designed to engage young people, foster community cohesion and promote healthy activity and lifestyle. Founded on a ‘social determinants of health’ perspective, the *Oakey Youth Project* was designed to engage young people aged 12-24 and promote positive social and health outcomes in the community.

Sherree Halliwell and Professor Andrew Hickey from the University of Southern Queensland conducted a review of the social impact of these initiatives. Together with a broader evaluation of the youth-directed services that these initiatives complement, this review sought to determine the effectiveness of current programming and identify where future initiatives in the Oakey community might be targeted.

An *Interim Report* evaluating the first 6 months of the *Oakey Youth Project* was provided to Toowoomba Regional Council and Queensland State Government stakeholders in February 2021. This initial review revealed that:

The Oakey Community is cohesive and maintains a strong ‘sense of community’, however coordinated support from Government at all levels is required to ensure that the social, physical and mental well-being of young people is secured. As a regional centre, unique challenges face the Oakey community and its young people; challenges relating to social cohesion, education-to-employment pathways and the sustained provision of social and health support are particularly significant.

The *Interim Report* revealed that the role of government in communities like Oakey is crucial and that well-planned, targeted and youth-focussed community development programming yields greater community cohesion, well-being, and social opportunity for young people. The interim report suggested that ***well-planned community engagement programming actively supports the well-being of young people and the formation of strong community bonds.***

The evaluation of the *Oakey Youth Project* suggested that despite COVID-19 related delays and restrictions, the programming remained on-track in meeting stated timeframes and agreed success indicators, particularly amongst the 12-15 age cohort. Due to impacts caused by COVID-19, greater emphasis on work-related training and life-skills was conducted for the 16+ age group.

This *Final Report* focusses on assessing the degree to which the *Oakey Youth Project*:

1. Improved social, physical and health outcomes for Oakey's young people.
2. Created a sense of community cohesion and connectedness.
3. Provided engagement activities for the target school-age (12-15) cohort.
4. Supported a post-school age (16-24) cohort to access employment opportunities, develop skills to assist in independent living, and seek mental health mentoring and support services.

Between July 2019 and June 2021, the *Oakey Youth Project* generated 7,337 engagements, across 194 delivered activities. A further 122 community members were involved in training and upskilling programming. The findings detailed in this report reveal that these interventions had tangible effects in generating community cohesion and supporting young people, with significant outcomes realised in terms of positive attitudinal change relating to happiness, mental wellbeing and social connectedness evidenced amongst participants.

As outlined in this report:

It is notable that these programs do not only provide a 'reactive' response to the problems of social, physical and mental health for young people. The programming has been designed to confront issues of social isolation and physical and mental health before these become evident. A key strength of Toowoomba Regional Council's programming derives from this approach.

The *Recommendations* included in this report emphasise this proactive approach to supporting the Oakey community and its young people. As a regional centre that is confronting challenges related to social cohesion, employment pathways and educational opportunity, it is imperative that sustainable supports are provided to ensure that Oakey's young people continue to prosper and that the Oakey community can continue to grow. The *Recommendations* offered in this report are geared toward ongoing process enhancement and innovative service delivery over coming years.

OVERVIEW

OAKEY YOUTH PROJECT PROGRAM OF INITIATIVES

Through 2019-2021, Toowoomba Regional Council was contracted by the Public Health Network Darling Downs & West Moreton to deliver positive mental health outcomes for young people aged 12-24 in the Oakey community. A community engagement strategy was designed by Toowoomba Regional Council Community Development and Youth Project Officers, and staffing allocated to support the provision of a series of targeted programs. Between July 2019 and June 2021, the project delivered a program of **49 targeted initiatives** encompassing 194 activities, including:

- a) **Youth Entertainment and Engagement Activities**
194 sessions delivered; 5929 engagements
- b) **Youth Training Activities**
17 sessions delivered; 2147 engagements
- c) **Community Engagement Forums**
78 sessions delivered; 120 engagements
- d) **Community Skills Training**
4 sessions delivered; 29 engagements
- e) **Promotions and Prize Give-Aways**
5 promotions
- f) **Community Group/ Service Provider Collaborations**
4 program collaborations



A detailed description of these events is outlined in *Appendix A*. It is notable that these events generated significant engagements, with targeted training and skills development programs generating further community interest. Beyond 7,337 engagements with young people, 122 community members were involved in training and upskilling programming offered as part of this program's initiatives. As outlined in the *Situational Analysis and Research Findings*, demand for training and education programs is significant, with the short courses and accreditation programs offered in this suite of initiatives demonstrating community interest.



A particular focus of these initiatives has been on strengthening the social cohesion of Oakey and its networks of young people, whilst providing tangible training and up-skilling. Many of the programs were designed to be community-led and to build capacity of both young people and the wider Oakey community. As the focus of the program's funding was geared to 'mental health', focus was given to the delivery of programming that encouraged participation, monitored for social risk indicators, and supported young people to access services.

METHODOLOGY & ANALYTIC APPROACH

This evaluation was conducted using a mixed-methods approach that utilised existing statistical datasets, demographic data profiles and qualitative data developed using ethnographic research techniques. This combination of datasets enabled a rigorous analytic process. ‘Triangulation’ across datasets was conducted to confirm the *Situational Analysis* and *Research Findings* that inform the *Recommendations* outlined in the latter sections of this report.

To generate the evaluation, a ‘4-stage design’ was developed specifically for this evaluation.

The Oakey Youth Project 4-stage Evaluation approach:

Stage 1: Outcomes and Mapping – analysis of existing and historical youth-oriented service delivery in Oakey, utilisation of current services by the Oakey community, and gap-analysis of service needs.

Stage 2: Social Impact Evaluation – evaluation of current and proposed services and programs against key impact criteria:

- (i) Young people in Oakey report living healthier, safer, more independent, purposeful and connected lives;
- (ii) The wider Oakey community reports a greater sense of youth empowerment to access and engage with services that enhance community wellbeing.

Stage 3: Ethnographic data collection (key metrics and interviews) – demographic analysis of publicly available data; interviews with service providers, community leaders (e.g., school, healthcare, law enforcement, local council, youth leaders), and a cross-section of youth program participants and non-participants.

Stage 4: Reporting.

RESEARCH TO ACTION FRAMEWORK

The *Situational Analysis* and *Research Findings* that inform the *Recommendations* are derived from a model of continuous improvement designed to ensure that this report's findings and recommendations produce meaningful reflection on Toowoomba Regional Council's youth programming.



The evaluation of the initiatives delivered in Oakey centred on assessing the *Actions* enacted to deliver the Oakey Youth Project's stated *Objectives*. Upon assessing the alignment between the *Actions* and the *Objectives*, *Insight* into the relative success of individual initiatives and *Reflection* on areas for further development was activated.

RESEARCH PERSONNEL

Sherree Halliwell was engaged as the Research Program Manager assigned to this project. Sherree is currently completing her PhD research on intergenerational cohabitation and sits on the Board of Directors of Wesley Mission QLD (not-for-profit aged care, mental health, disability and community outreach organisation). Sherree maintains experience in ethnography and community-based research including the evaluation of service delivery in the United Kingdom and Australia.

Professor Andrew Hickey is a social researcher with a background in the investigation of community engagement, public participation and the sociology of young people. He has undertaken large-scale research exploring young people's engagement in urban spaces and partnered with organisations within Australia including The Department of Education and Training, the Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government and with several city and regional councils, and internationally, with funding agencies including the Canadian Government Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS & RESEARCH FINDINGS

OPERATIONALISING THE Oakey Youth Project

The *Oakey Youth Project* commenced its programming in August 2019. In the first 8 months of operation, the project delivered 28 activities, with 2,796 engagements. A further 51 community members attended youth-support oriented training. Although this represented a strong commencement, like many other community associations and enterprises, the project faced operational challenges between late March 2020 – July 2020 when COVID-19 restrictions on face-to-face gatherings were most stringent. The unique task of providing care and support to young people in times of a pandemic resulted in changes to the program delivery, with several of the activities suspended or transitioned to online activations.

The Toowoomba Regional Council's Community Development Branch took proactive action and began briefing staff and tailoring programming from the beginning of February 2020. Project team members were quick to adapt to the new environment, and the continuation of services such as the Oakey Youth Connection & Referral Service provided (especially vulnerable) young people with an ongoing support presence.

The project team ensured young people continued to feel supported and connected, distributing 200 wellbeing and mental health support packs in April/May 2020.

ONLINE WELLBEING TRAINING

Accidental Counsellor and This Way Up

Gain skills and build confidence to support those who are experiencing difficulties and stress

Training facilitated by Lifeline Darling Downs & South West Qld, Community Connections

STUDY MODE	Cost
Online	Free

TO REGISTER Please contact the Oakey Youth Project via email enquiries@oakey.youthproject.org.au or phone 011 422

ACCIDENTAL COUNSELLOR
Develop skills to support others, manage self-care and cope with stress

By completing Accidental Counsellor, you will learn to:

- Feel more confident about how to best respond to a person in need.
- Respond to a person's emotional pain and recognise feelings of safety and trust.
- Help people discover their own solutions to the challenges they face and
- Identify wellness habits which can be applied to your own life and help others improve wellbeing.

Learn these valuable skills over approximately 10 hours. Online evidence is self-paced and provides access to other training courses related to mental health and wellbeing, responding to distress, managing difficult conversations, responding to grief and loss, managing anxiety and stress.

THIS WAY UP
Develop skills in mindfulness, to cope with stress and manage insomnia

This Way Up is a range of self-paced online courses with topics as wide as coping with stress, managing insomnia and introduction to Mindfulness. Other courses are available through a referral from a GP with topics including depression, anxiety and panic disorder.

Two key activities were also transitioned to online delivery; the first, the *Australian Skateboarding Web Championships*, was delivered with collaborative funding provided by Toowoomba Regional Council's Youth Connect team and the Australian Skateboarding Community Initiative. The second, *Online Wellbeing Training*, offered young people two courses designed to develop mindfulness skills to cope with stress and the development of skills to support others facing mental health and wellbeing issues.

The project also recognised the incredible burden carried by the 75 staff at Oakey State High School during the early stages of COVID-19, by sponsoring a café van run by youth

social enterprise, Emerge. Attending the school once per week, the café van provided staff with moments of light-hearted respite.

The continuing presence of the Oakey Youth Project Team during the early stages of pandemic was highly valued by community members and key workers in the community. It was important that the team maintain a presence in community in order to assure young people and the Oakey community that they were supported. An Oakey State High School staff member commented:

“At a time when most services were cutting back face to face operations and ignoring phone calls for assistance, the [Oakey Youth Project] was out in the community, at the school, reaching out to social services, basically rallying around to keep up the visibility of support for young people doing it tough. It was a stand-out in its determination to keep supporting young people, and an absolutely, golden, invaluable partner to the school. I can’t speak more highly of Julie [Community Development Officer - Oakey Youth Project]. She was here, keeping a presence in the community, even when she didn’t have to be, and when social services had left to work remotely.”

An Oakey Local Level Alliance (LLA) member praised the project’s *“unfaltering support for the community”*, adding that: *“it’s during challenging times that the strength of partnerships is tested. The Toowoomba Council team has been a true partner to Oakey.”*

The challenges of adapting to COVID-19 also produced important executional learnings, which have been documented by Toowoomba Regional Council Community Development Branch staff. Project leader, Julie Cave commented on the operational opportunities and challenges faced by the team in adapting to COVID-19:

“COVID-19 fundamentally changed the design and implementation of the Oakey Youth Project. Many elements which were originally designed to be face to face were postponed or shifted to online delivery. Timelines were extended in order to utilise the funding. This had both a positive and negative impact. On a positive note, the project has been active in the community for twice as long as originally envisaged, which has allowed it to become embedded and adopted by the community for the community. However, there has been some reticence across the community to participate in larger gatherings due to formal COVID-19 restrictions, fear and health concerns.”

OAKEY COMMUNITY SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHY

The Oakey community is characterised as *socially and economically disadvantaged* and defined by lower-skilled employment. Oakey is culturally diverse, with a high proportion of the community identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Social fragmentation and disconnection

Oakey's older generation retains a sense of pride in their community, with many older residents having maintained decades long associations in the community. These residents also recall earlier periods of prosperity and employment, citing times where Oakey was a growing, industrious community. It was noted that several factors, including a scaling down of a military base on Oakey's outskirts and subsequent transition of military housing to social housing, that a "*different class of people brought down the area*" (Oakey resident and OLLA member). During this period it was also observed by residents that people from Toowoomba moved to Oakey to take up residency in this social housing, but that these residents often lacked family support or connections to community. This created different social strata in Oakey divided by social, political and economic distance. It is notable that 44% of the Oakey community is now classified as 'disadvantaged', as compared with 20% in Toowoomba (Lifeline, 2021).

Despite a relatively high proportion of Oakey's population being aged 12-24 years, relatively few training and educational opportunities exist for school-leavers. Yet, despite the paucity of training and educational opportunities, matriculation statistics for Oakey State High School's Year 12 students are significantly favourable in comparison to other disadvantaged townships. This indicates the capacity of Oakey's young people to engage with formal education, but that more can be done to generate sustainable education and training pathways. The following indicators confirm this status:

Socio-Economic Profile (2016 Census)

- Analysis of the Toowoomba Regional Council Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) shows that the **Oakey District is ranked at the 10th percentile (the bottom 10%) of most disadvantaged communities based on indicators including occupation, income, education and housing**. Oakey's median household income is 19% lower than the Queensland average and 12% lower than Toowoomba Urban Centre.
- Only 5% of Oakey's residents hold a university qualification, compared with 16% of people residing in Toowoomba Urban Centre. However, attainment of a trade qualification (23%) is on a par with Toowoomba Urban Centre (22%). The relatively low level of professional qualifications held by the resident population is reflected in the dominant employment sectors in Oakey. In 2016 the three most popular industry sectors were: Manufacturing (20.9%); Health Care and Social Assistance (9.9%); and Retail Trade (8.8%). In comparison, Regional QLD employed 5.5% in Manufacturing; 12.8% in Health Care and Social Assistance; and 10.3% in Retail Trade.
- Oakey has a **higher proportion of young people** than other regional satellite towns in the Toowoomba LGA. There were 795 12-24-year-old resident in Oakey in 2016. This is particularly pronounced in the 18-24 immediate school-leaver age group. There is

high demand for youth employment, training, and higher education, as well as youth engagement programs and services.

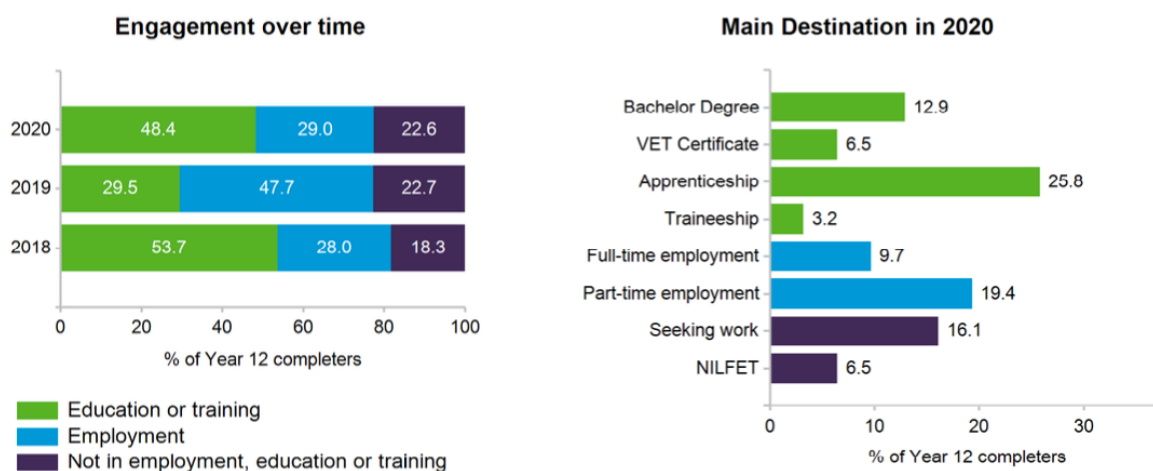
% OF POPULATION 2016 CENSUS	TOOWOOMBA URBAN CENTRE	Oakey	PITTSWORTH-SOUTHBROOK	CROWS NEST - HAMPTON
12-17 YEARS	8%	8%	8.5%	6.6%
18-24 YEARS	9.8%	9.2%	7.8%	4.4%
12-24 YEARS	17.8%	17.2%	16.3%	11%

Source: <https://profile.id.com.au/toowoomba/service-age-groups?WebID=330>

- A comparatively high proportion of Oakey’s community identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (9%) in comparison with Toowoomba Urban Centre (4.3%).
- Only 31.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons aged 15 years and over had completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared to 38.8% in Toowoomba Urban Centre. The proportion of Oakey Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18-24 engaged in work study or training was also lower (34.7%) than Toowoomba (43.2%).

Education and Employment Pathways

- In 2020, 77.4% of year 12 completers from Oakey State High School were engaged in education, training or employment in the year after they completed school, as compared with the Toowoomba LGA average of 81% and Queensland state average of 80.5% (Department of Education, *Next Step Year 12 Completers Survey*)



Oakey State High School’s Year 12 completers’ profile is significantly favourable in comparison to the average of 70.1% of respondents from disadvantaged areas (Queensland Quintile 1 IRSAD) engaged in education, employment and training.

Opportunities exist to leverage the indicators provided by these statistics for the benefit of student retention and the development of employment pathways in Oakey.

EVALUATION OF YOUTH-DIRECTED SERVICES IN OAKEY

Community Consultation Insights

A community consultation was undertaken between September – December 2020. Members of the research team met with local service providers, law enforcement, library service, school/training organisation representatives, media outlets (including *The Champion Oakey* and *Oakey Community Services* Facebook page) business owners, social enterprises (including Oakey-based *Get Set for Work* training program) community elders and youth leaders. The following insights pertain to the community's attitudes towards young people in Oakey:

- Perception of Oakey in the wider Toowoomba Region

As is typical of regional communities, Oakey residents are distrustful of external policymakers, agencies and service providers “*swooping in*”. Prior to its amalgamation with the larger Toowoomba Regional Council, Oakey held pride in its local administration. It enjoyed a reputation as a powerhouse in the region; however, post amalgamation it is now perceived as “*just a forgotten satellite*”.

Older residents remain proud of their community and the way it has responded to recent challenging employment and environmental conditions. Community movements such as ‘Oakey Fights Back’ demonstrate the community’s cohesion and resilience.

However, there is a growing sense that the wider Toowoomba region has a negative perception of Oakey, based on recent, high-profile issues including contaminated ground water, youth crime and youth under/unemployment. Addressing youth disengagement is identified as a key priority across all Oakey community sectors.

- Barriers to Youth Engagement

Programs and activities targeting youth engagement have not been maintained consistently. Many have run for a period of 4-8 weeks and either ended or failed to attract further funding. The lack of consistent programming has been a barrier to community trust, awareness, word-of-mouth advocacy and habit-forming amongst Oakey youth.

There is low awareness of existing services and programs, with many community members being unaware that free youth development programs, health and support services are available without the need for a doctor’s/social worker’s referral.

Many young people lack home internet access (as reported in the *2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census* 28% of Oakey’s Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander households were without internet access) and are disadvantaged when it comes to accessing services or programs requiring online application/access.

One unexpected finding identified that many unemployed young people in Oakey tend to be *nocturnal*, staying at home until the evening. Daytime programs have therefore had little

traction amongst this group. These habits are inhibiting young people's opportunities for obtaining employment and skills training.

Police presence at youth programs also causes some young people to feel uncomfortable and mistrusted.

Opportunities to Enhance Youth Engagement

- *Youth engagement programs that are fully funded and sustained beyond short-term delivery.*
- *Investment in sustainable traineeships and apprenticeships.*
- *Increased access to online services and programs via public institutions including the Library and schools.*
- *Better communication between service providers and community to ensure that those in-need are connected with services without the need for doctor's or social worker's referral.*

Service-Provider Survey and Interview Findings

A survey was administered through the Oakey LLA in April 2021 to capture service provider sentiment regarding youth-directed services within the Oakey community. Additional paper-based and electronic PDF surveys were also provided to service providers who were unable to access the online link.

23 responses were collected, with 7 participants agreeing to follow-up interviews, either face to face or via telephone. These interviews ranged in duration from ~30 minutes to upwards of 2 hours. Feedback has been anonymised to protect confidentiality.

The following 8 key insights pertain to the operation of youth-directed services in Oakey:

- 1. Awareness of youth-directed services is low, resulting in many service providers reporting under-utilisation of their resources, or low levels of referral.*
- 2. Services need embedding geographically in the Oakey township to be effective.*
- 3. More services need to be available for earlier intervention, rather than directed towards crisis management.*
- 4. An opportunity exists for greater collaboration and integration of case management across services.*

5. Creative and passionate community-based ‘change-agents’ are needed to overcome the inertia and scepticism regarding Toowoomba-based service and support provision in the Oakey community.

6. Toowoomba Regional Council and local/state government should commit to further fund agencies and programs that invest in Oakey. Governance around funding of services is needed to ensure that there is an allocation of resources within Oakey, and not just Toowoomba-based services that provide to Oakey residents.

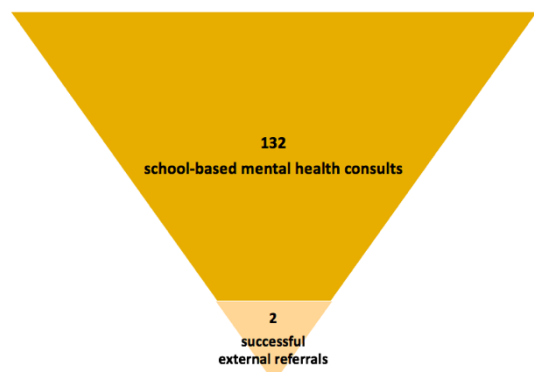
7. Investment in spaces (community centre, youth facilities, community enrichment initiatives) is required to create environments where young people can meet, engage in productive social interaction and seek support.

8. Garnering young people’s feedback about proposed services and programs is often overlooked, resulting in ‘service-oriented’ rather than ‘client-oriented’ offerings.

Elaborations of these 8 points are contained in *Appendix B*.

Intersection of school and community-based services

Interviews were conducted between April 2021 and June 2021 with Oakey State High School-based health and wellbeing, counselling, and pastoral support staff. Queensland health nurse records (supplied for April and May 2021) and feedback from staff interviews demonstrates a very high demand for mental health support amongst Oakey State High School students, which is primarily accessed through school-based services. A very low incidence of successful referrals to external service providers was reported, resulting in extremely poor mental health outcomes for young people in crisis.



In April 2021 there were 67 mental health consults to the nurse at Oakey State High School, with 66 consults recorded in May 2021. During the period April – May 2021 2 young people were successfully referred to external mental health professionals.

Mental health support services are severely stretched. Scarcity of external mental health support services (specifically psychological and psychiatric care) places a heavy burden on school-based support services and results in poor crisis management with disastrous health outcomes for young people experiencing extreme mental health issues.

Typically, a young person's GP responds to a mental health referral from the school. However, once directed to their GP, young people are advised that there can be a 6 month-plus wait list to see a psychologist. The administrative process of activating this referral is also onerous, particularly for those in a precarious home situation.

The Oakey State High School maintains connections with a number of local services – Family Connect, Headspace, New Access, DV Action Centre, Crew 4 Youth, Youturn Youth Support, Mercy Community. However, a key issue reported across all services is the wait list for referrals; again, upward of 6 months or more for most services.

“One mum came to me; she was so concerned about her daughter, who had attempted suicide twice. It was a DV [domestic violence] situation, and the mum couldn't easily get away without endangering herself. Anyway, she went to three interviews to get her daughter a psychologist because I had advised her and she trusted me, and she had nowhere else to turn to. So, she jumped all those hoops, and then there was a 5-month waiting list. It's heartbreaking.”
[School-based Youth Health Nurse]

The school counselling and support services gain the trust of young people and their parents but are unable to connect with support services.

“I rang around the psychologists for a girl who had attempted suicide. Two psychs couldn't see anyone for more than 6 months, and the other two, their books were closed. She was sent to the ED and discharged home without any ongoing support. And that's common. That's actually how it is for most of the suicides. There's nothing. There was one who had attempted suicide for a fourth time. That's usually when they succeed, the fourth time. She'd come to see me after the third time. She'd had a consult with the mental health practitioner in the hospital, then sent home.” [School-based Youth Health Nurse]

Oakey does not have a dedicated mental health facility; paramedics routinely take young people who have attempted suicide directly to hospital for care in the Emergency Department. Once treated, patients are discharged without any ongoing mental health management plan. In these situations, the school-based services pick up the burden of student mental health crisis support.

“I am aware of 4 students who were up to their 3rd or 4th hospitalisation for suicide and got discharged without an ongoing psych management plan. They were just locked in a room in the ED and stabilised. Then they were turned out.”
[Oakey State High School health practitioner]

A more holistic mental health care approach is needed, requiring greater collaboration across school and externally based services. An opportunity exists to increase collaboration between Oakey State High School counselling and pastoral support staff and external service providers in order to deliver more holistic mental health care for Oakey's vulnerable young people.

“Services are limited and often work in silos; they don’t collaborate. Needs are complex and multi-dimensional. Someone might be in a DV situation, or there might be drugs and alcohol at home, so they’re not being cared for. Then there might be bullying because of anti-social behaviours or appearing different, unhygienic and things like that, and then that might lead to mental health issues, self-abuse and suicidal ideation. It’s a holistic problem, complex. But these services aren’t set up to operate like that. They only deal with part of the problem, then referrals to other services fall down because of waiting times and red tape.” [Oakey State High School health practitioner]

Attempts by school-based health practitioners to reach out to external services have proven unsuccessful to date.

“I invited 13 mental health services, support services, to attend a support night for Year 12 students. Only one service attended. Three cancelled at the last minute, on the day, and the others didn’t even respond. That’s what we’re dealing with out here. Out of sight. Out of mind”. [School-based Youth Health Nurse]

“It is very isolating working in the mental health sector with young people. The silos that exist mean that you’re on your own trying to manage cases which require a holistic approach. It isn’t just about managing mental health. It’s about dealing with homelessness or unstable housing, finances, lack of transportation to access services, domestic violence situations, bullying, self-harm, teen pregnancy, drugs, alcohol abuse, the list goes on. There’s no one fix-all service... ” [Oakey State High School health practitioner]

Oakey State High School typically provides young peoples’ primary mental health support system. The school has normalised mental health conversations, such that young people are comfortable accessing support through the school health and counselling services. The “Love Bites” programme is encouraging an open discussion about mental health and bullying, which in turn is leading to greater proactivity in self-help management.

“The relationships and connection within the school community have empowered students to engage in self-help seeking behaviours. These positive connections have created and nurtured a resilient school community. I think that this is because of the opportunities created through funding specialised programs within the school.” [Oakey State High School health practitioner]

School-based health practitioners use a range of points of contact, including face to face, telephone and text message check-ins. The responsiveness and flexibility of school-based health practitioners starkly contrasts with the long wait time and inflexibility of community-based services.

“I’ve worked in a number of communities, and it’s ingrained that you don’t ask for help. Completed suicides in St George are much higher. I’m surprised by

how proactive students are in Oakey in asking for support. That's down to the school, I think, normalising it. Health-seeking behaviours and more access to support in school, but then they're let down by the lack of support services outside school." [School-based Youth Health Nurse]

The school-based nurse at Oakey State High School is the connecting service between school and community. Students' utilisation of school-based health support services is often ongoing and long-term throughout their school years due to the lack of community-based services to refer to. However, once students complete Year 12, they find themselves without mental health support.

For some young people, school attendance is about accessing a supportive and caring environment, rather than benefiting from an education. Struggling students often admit to truancy from lessons, but not to the level that they are expelled and excluded from accessing school support services.

Suggestions to strengthen school-based mental health care

School-based health practitioners have assumed the primary burden of mental health care for young people in Oakey. At present these resources are severely stretched, isolated and lacking specific psychological and psychiatric expertise. The following suggestions were made by Oakey State High School health practitioners to optimise the delivery of care both within the school and in the community:

1. Due to the success of school-based mental health programming, there is benefit in providing school based psychological support to mediate referrals.
2. Psychological services should be made available to indigenous students though the 715 check.
3. Localised professional psychologists and psychiatrists dedicated to youth should be incentivised to establish practise in Oakey, or appropriate transport provided for young people to attend services in Toowoomba.
4. Continuation of funding for the Oakey Youth Project program of activities beyond the end of 2021 must be considered a priority. Programming delivered from this project have proved effective in connecting school and community-based activities and represent an opportunity to forge closer relationships between school and community-based services.

NEEDS-BASED GAP ANALYSIS OF YOUTH SERVICE REQUIREMENTS

A needs-based gap analysis was utilised to determine the variance between the needs of Oakey's 12-24 year-old community and the current provision of youth-directed services (excluding those funded directly by the *Oakey Youth Project*). This analysis also identified key areas for improvement by drawing comparisons between the current level of service delivery and the desired future levels of service delivery. This information can assist funding bodies to optimize allocation of human and financial resources, initiate possible changes to existing services and determine specific areas that need further strategic alignment or focus.

NEEDS-BASED GAP ANALYSIS			
Level of Service Required	Gap Rating		
	Minor	Moderate	Major
Professional mental health clinicians (psychologists and psychiatrists) based in Oakey, dedicated to youth and available for immediate referral in crisis cases (e.g. suicide).			✓
	Currently there are 4 clinical psychologists practicing in Oakey, two of whom have closed books to new referrals. Referrals to practices accepting new clients are wait listed for upwards of 6 months.		
Mental health and mindfulness training/coaching directed towards young people, and delivered in a group format to normalise mental health conversations.		✓	
	The "Love Bites" program delivered through Oakey State High School meets the desired service requirements, however, no community-based programs exist beyond graduation for school-leavers.		
Crisis management services for common issues such as homelessness, drug/alcohol abuse, domestic violence, suicide and young parenthood.		✓	
	Several services dedicated to crisis management accept referrals for Oakey youth residents, however many have wait-lists of 3-4 months. There is a lack of awareness and trust of many of these services, as few have permanent sites of operation in Oakey or actively market their services/seek referrals from primary care services.		
Early intervention services for common issues such as homelessness, drug/alcohol abuse, domestic violence, suicide and young parenthood.			✓
	No services have been identified in this review that provide programs or services dedicated to early intervention or prevention of common health/wellbeing issues facing Oakey's youth. The Oakey State High School currently fills this gap by offering students access to a counsellor and health nurse.		
Community-based further/higher education and training opportunities.			✓
	A limited number of local trades offer apprenticeships. TAFE QLD is piloting a Certificate 1 in Construction based in Oakey. Otherwise, all educational and training pathways open to Oakey youth require travel to Toowoomba.		
Safe, community-based entertainment and enrichment activities for 12-16 year-olds and 18-24 year-olds.		✓	
	Oakey's Girl Guides and Scout groups offer Christian youth services. PCYC operates 'Oakey Box Out' (originally a funded activity of the <i>Oakey Youth Project</i>). The library hosts youth activities throughout the year. A small number of sporting clubs operate seasonally (Oakey Junior Rugby League Club, Oakey Soccer Club, Oakey Bears Cricket Club)		
Dedicated youth community centre/facility			✓
	Oakey does not have a dedicated youth community centre/facility.		

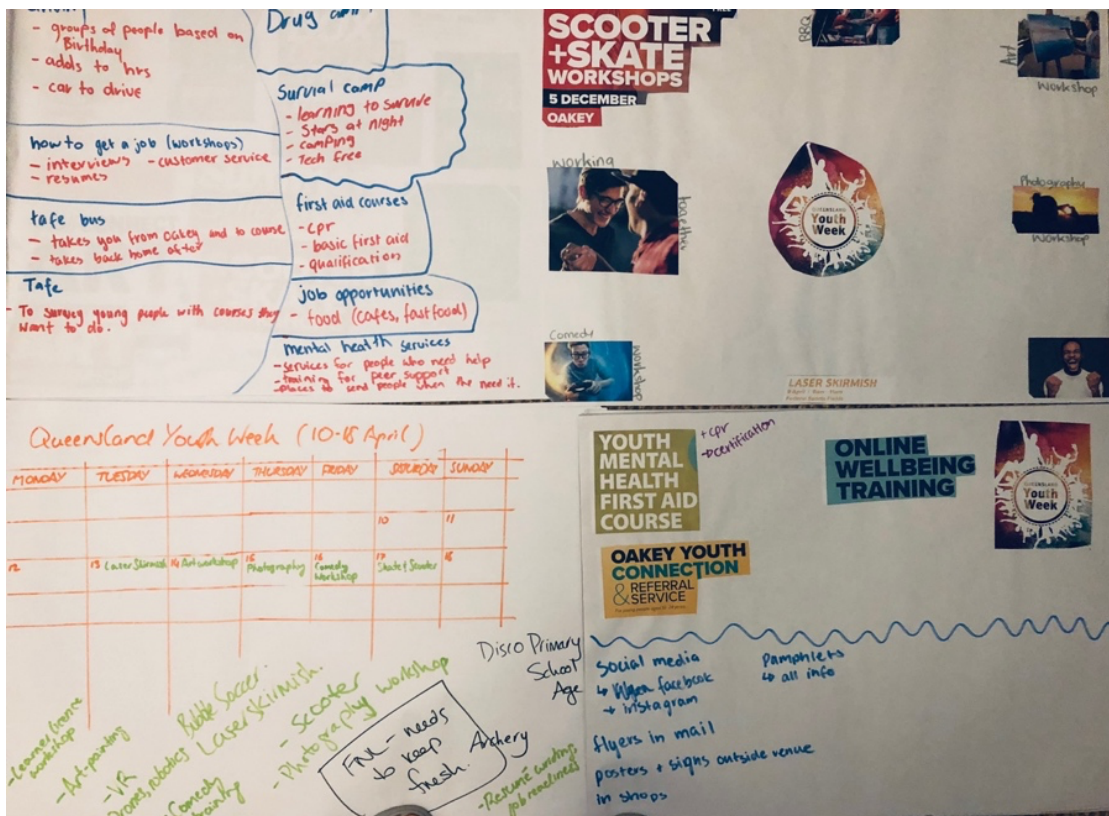
SOCIAL OUTCOMES IMPACT

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK ON THE OAKEY YOUTH PROJECT

Insights derived from focus groups with 12-24-year-olds

The following findings provide a summary of themes raised by young people aged 12-24 in focus group discussions held in January 2021. Interviews were conducted using a 'semi-structured' schedule of questions pertaining to youth engagement and programs/services targeted towards youth in the Oakey community.

The research also integrated ideation techniques designed to elicit feedback and reactions to current and planned program activities/services, as well as inviting young people to propose additional activities and services to better meet their needs.



1. Awareness and availability of youth-oriented (free) programs and services is low.

Unprompted awareness of youth targeted programs and services in Oakey is very low amongst young people. In particular, crisis services for those in need, training for employment skills, and programs targeted specifically to the school-leaver (16-24) age group have gained little awareness or traction. Lack of awareness of (free) services rather than lack of need has been the key barrier to greater youth engagement with youth-directed programs and services.

One school-leaver expressed a typical concern: *“I wish there were more places for people to get help, like issues that they can’t solve in an instant. There’s not many places where people can get help for drug issues and all that. I don’t really know where they’d go... the only real suggestions are in Toowoomba. There’s nothing really in Oakey, like local.”*

An indigenous youth leader also commented: *“The thing is, to talk to anybody you’ve got to pay them. To pay, you’ve got to have a job.”*

Knowledge of available programs and services is gained mainly through social media posts and word of mouth. Awareness of activities and services amongst those in the school-leaver age group without home internet access is therefore correspondingly low.

2. Youth engagement in Oakey is focused on delivery of entertainment and enrichment activities, which are most attractive to the 12-16-year-old age group.

Existing activities organised for young people by adults tend to focus on delivering entertainment rather than skills-based development opportunities or fostering friendships around common interests. Entertainment activities such as those that have been delivered through the Youth Development Project in Oakey during 2020 serve the younger age group very well (12-16-year-olds).

Several of the younger participants had attended one or more of the recent programs of activities (*Summer Splash, Box Off the Streets, Get Gaming, Friday Night Live*). The younger participants responded very positively to the current and planned program of activities, and those who had not attended in the past expressed their desire to attend future events.

In the ideation activity, younger participants built a week-long calendar of activities that they would like to see for *Youth Week 2021*. All of the current program of activities and many of the planned new activities were selected for inclusion.

3. There are few skills-based development programs that create employment opportunities or programs that build a sense of camaraderie for older youth.

There is very low awareness of community groups organised by young people for young people, or recreational activities specifically targeted to older youth (aged 17-24). As expressed by one school-leaver in respect to her experience of *Friday Night Live*: *“It was alright. Just, I don’t think it was really for the older kids to be honest. I think it was mainly for the younger ones.”*

A key barrier to organic friendships and communities forming around shared interests is the lack of a space dedicated to young people. As expressed by one participant in the school-leader age group: *“There’s nothing. There’s cafes, there’s pubs, there’s really not much at all.”* A younger participant who had attended *Box Off the Streets* at the community centre commented: *“There was like, too little space. When everyone was in there doing their thing, there was not much space to do things.”*

It is recognised that there is a strong sense of pride and community amongst the older adult generations living in Oakey, however younger people lack the same community connectedness and shared sense of camaraderie. There is some awareness of community groups organised

around shared interests or skills development, but the sense is that these are run by adults for adults, as expressed by one school-leaver: *“I think there’s like a painting or art club in Oakey, but it’s all really old people.”*

Key concerns for school-leavers are employment, accommodation and transportation. School-leaver aged participants strongly gravitate towards activities that grow skills needed to obtain employment, and particularly those that offer recognised accreditations such as CV/resume-writing, trades (mechanic, plumbing, electrical, building trades), retail skills (customer service training, Responsible Service of Alcohol accreditation), survival skills and health/wellbeing training (e.g., first aid training, Blue and Yellow card accreditation).

In addition to skills-based training for employment, life skills training is also needed, as expressed by one school-leaver in response to reading a *Tenancy Skills* flyer: *“Will that course help you get a house? I want to do that course now. Yeah, yesterday! Yeah, yeah”*

Fully funded driving lessons, undertaken either solo or in community with other young people, are also high on school leavers’ ‘wish list’. It is widely acknowledged that for most young people living in Oakey who are not employed in manufacturing, retail or the military, personal transportation to access employment opportunities in Toowoomba is essential. The high cost of driving lessons and a lack of family/friends willing to dedicate 100 hours to driving practice are key barriers to young people in Oakey obtaining a provisional driving license.

4. There exists a strong desire for Oakey-based TAFE, traineeships and apprenticeships.

School-leaver aged participants are particularly concerned by the lack of further education and training opportunities in Oakey. Many young people lack personal transportation to attend TAFE and/or further education institutions in Toowoomba; and the lack of free or low-cost public transport options restricts their access to these opportunities.

One of the young people had noticed a “mobile TAFE” in Oakey but did not believe that any training was being conducted on site. It was proposed that a free shuttlebus to Toowoomba TAFE and the University of Southern Queensland might encourage more young people to enrol in further training and education.

Feedback on Oakey Youth Project from wider community

Feedback on the impact of the Oakey Youth Project was sought in community consultations during September – December 2020 and in interviews with Oakey Local Level Alliance attendees during March-May 2021. Five key themes emerged.

1. In the absence of a dedicated facility for young people, the project has provided a focus for young people to come together as a community.

Despite lacking a dedicated facility in which to deliver its programming, the Oakey Youth Project has been successful in creating safe spaces where young people feel comfortable and connected with their peers. These spaces have ranged from existing community facilities such as the library, school and outdoor pool, to car parks and parks/recreational grounds.

The designation of these spaces as youth-only, under the supervision of trusted/trained staff and respected community members has fostered a deep sense of ownership and community connectedness amongst participants.

2. *The project has created a bridge between school and community-based programming and services directed towards Oakey youth.*

Previously, school and community activities have operated independently of each other. The partnership between the Oakey Youth Project and Oakey State High School has opened opportunities for cross-collaboration and delivery of activities that otherwise might not have been possible due to lack of dedicated facility/venue or funding.

3. *There's a sense that exciting things are going on in Oakey*

The Oakey Youth Project has created a buzz and excitement in the community, with young people eagerly anticipating the announcement of new activities and events.

4. *Sustainability of the activities, consistency of staff and ongoing commitment of funding has built momentum and trust.*

The extended timeframe of the Oakey Youth Project has allowed it to build up momentum and trust amongst participants and their families. Young people rely on weekly activities such as 'Get Gaming', 'Friday Night Live' and the pool party series for their social enrichment.

The successful transition of the Oakey Youth Project initiative 'Box Off The Streets' to a PCYC-operated initiative re-named 'Oakey Box Out' by its youth participants is an example of how programming can be adopted by the community.



Lack of sustainability of youth programming has traditionally been regarded by the community as the greatest barrier to youth engagement. It is feared that activities will not be sustained once the Oakey Youth Project concludes at the end of 2021.

5. Training of community facilitators ensures buy-in and sustainability beyond the project's lifetime

There is confidence amongst the community that the Oakey Youth Project's focus on training community members to deliver programming will ensure the ongoing sustainability of the project's most popular and valued activities. Several trainee volunteers interviewed expressed hope that additional funding will be made available to support dedicated youth programming in the region. It emerged as imperative that Oakey-based, community-centred facilitators be supported to ensure ongoing delivery of programming. The effect of this is two-fold: first, such an approach provides community-centred delivery of targeted and relevant programs. Second, supporting community members as program facilitators builds capacity and 'social capital' within the Oakey community.

EXECUTION AND OPERATIONAL LEARNINGS

Oakey Youth Project post-execution review

In May 2021 a post-execution review was conducted with Toowoomba Regional Council's Community Development Branch. Several key execution and operational learnings were identified:

- Issues faced in delivering youth-directed programming in Oakey

The most significant factors which impacted the project's ability to deliver youth-directed services in the Oakey township included:

- Staff resourcing – youth programming is heavily staff-intensive, and this was underestimated due to the unanticipated high levels of participation at popular activities. On one occasion 47 young people turned up to *Box Off The Streets*, and *Friday Night Live* peaked at 119 young people.
- Program budget – after receiving feedback on the project's planned program of activities from a cross-section of Oakey youth via the USQ focus groups, it became apparent that additional programming was desirable to meet the requirements of the 16-24-year-old cohort. Priority programming for school-leavers and young adults included training, life skills and pathways to employment (qualifications and certifications). Such programs are significantly more expensive than recreational and entertainment activities, which were well suited to the younger cohort.
- Staffing skills/qualifications – it quickly became clear that this was not just an activity programme, but a programme that could support young people through mental issues and home-life difficulties. The staffing requirements changed to reflect this, with new staff employed with additional skills (child safety) to build trust when there were behavioural escalations. Contractors therefore need to demonstrate skills beyond the base level Blue Card.
- Very high levels of disengagement and disadvantage among local young people and the community.
- Lack of other youth services operating in Oakey that are able to support young people to meet their material needs.
- Lack of available purpose-built spaces through which programs can operate.
- Risks to staff and the organisation around providing services to young people.
- The impost of compliance – both in child/youth practice and in a local government context which lacks the frameworks to support youth practice.

- Collaboration between Council and Community

- *Oakey Box Out* (PCYC) was originally the Toowoomba Regional Council's *Box Off The Streets* run by Emerge until funding ended in December 2020. Due to the strong community engagement in the programme, the local PCYC took on the program, owing to their greater capacity to continue the program long term. The young people changed the name, and the program organiser moved organizations from Emerge to PCYC to continue to lead the

initiative. This is one success story that demonstrates how council-funded programs can be adopted by the local community to ensure they are sustainable.

- It is a difficult balancing act to carve out a role for council. On the one hand, it is important for the council to promote a vision and have a tangible offering to gain the interest of the community; on the other hand, it is critical for community engagement and sustainability that any initiatives are co-created, and are led, by community. The role of council should be as ‘facilitator’ in support of community-led decision making and program delivery.
- Embedding programmes in the community requires a physical presence and cultivation of local stakeholder networks. It is important to work with local people who are motivated to collaborate. A great deal of time and resourcing was initially devoted to ‘winning over’ the hearts and minds of detractors. This proved an ineffective and fruitless enterprise.

SOCIAL IMPACT EVALUATION

Evaluation of Oakey Youth Project initiatives against key impact criteria

The behavioural and attitudinal insights derived from youth, community and service provider interviews are evaluated against two overarching social outcomes impact statements to derive a social impact evaluation of the project. The below social outcomes impact statements represent the positive social outcomes that the Oakey Youth Project seeks to deliver.

- ***Youth impact statement: Young people in Oakey report living healthier, safer, more independent, purposeful and connected lives***

In the 2016 census there were 795 12-24-year-old youths residing in Oakey. The *Oakey Youth Project* delivered **7,337 engagements, across 194 activities**, or an average of 9 engagements per 12-24-year-old resident between July 2019 and June 2021. The mass appeal and reach of the programming created a significant sense of excitement and community connectedness amongst Oakey’s young people.

Many of the young people who participated in Oakey Youth Project activities are socially isolated with little connection to, or awareness of, the communities, opportunities and support services which exist around them.

For a significant number of young people attending Oakey Youth Project programming, their time spent participating in these activities was the only out-of-school social contact that they had during the week.

The Oakey Youth Project has delivered safe and enriching activities where young people have been able to build new friendships, share their experiences in social media communities and begin to build the confidence to explore positive connections in their own communities.

- ***Community impact statement: The wider Oakey community reports a greater sense of youth empowerment to access and engage with services that enhance community wellbeing.***

Oakey Local Level Alliance representatives from the police force, Oakey State High School, local businesses and youth-directed service providers have provided spontaneous feedback to the USQ research team noting the positive impact that the *Oakey Youth Project* has had on the community. There is a general sense that the project has encouraged young people to invest their time in activities that build resilience, confidence, skills and opportunity.

In particular, the collaboration between Oakey State High School and the project has fostered greater connections between school-based programming and Oakey service providers /community groups. There is confidence that this will lead to the sustainability of youth-directed programming beyond the life of the *Oakey Youth Project*.

The Oakey Youth Project has had effect beyond Oakey's young people alone. This programming has demonstrated a 'whole of community' impact. Sustaining the Oakey Youth Project's programming will have tangible community-wide benefits, including the development of positive community cohesion and social capital through the formation of networks and associations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ADDRESSING GAPS IN CURRENT SERVICE PROVISION

The evaluation of the Oakey Youth Project has identified demand for the provision of dedicated mental health services focused on the early intervention and crisis management. Issues including homelessness, drug/alcohol abuse, suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviours, domestic violence and young parenthood are amongst those triaged by existing support services. There is a need for additional community-based psychological and psychiatric clinicians (including a clinical psychologist based at Oakey State High School) to mediate these issues.

The Oakey State High School counselling and health nurse currently supports young people experiencing physical and mental health issues. Although the school-based support system provides young people with a positive experience of primary health care, at present this resource is being used to fill wider gaps in community-based care. There is a need for more coordinated support provision in Oakey to respond to issues of mental health and psychological support.

This need is compounded by geographically ‘distanced’ support servicing currently offered in Oakey. Few support agencies are located within Oakey itself, with major care providers based in Toowoomba. There is an opportunity to encourage service providers to establish presence in Oakey. This evaluation of the Oakey Youth Project showed that once organisations become geographically embedded in the community the effect on community is significant.

Concomitant provision of education and training opportunities also falls under this purview of support servicing. Youth unemployment has long been a focus of Australian local, state, and federal governments, however the lack of educational and training opportunities operating *within* Oakey township is a key barrier for many young people. In the short-term, it is recommended that a strategy and funding stream to support reliable public transport to Toowoomba training and educational institutions be developed. The placement of Oakey-based education and training programmes must however represent a longer-term objective, with the outcome being the availability of service presence within Oakey itself.

An extension to this strategy is represented by community development funding and initiatives to upskill community members to deliver services and programs in their own community. 122 community volunteers have received training as part of the *Oakey Youth Project*. Capacity exists to fund a *Youth Service Project Manager* to coordinate in-community volunteer register and program of training and support initiatives. The on-going presence of a *Youth Service Project Manager* would ensure that community-based knowledge is captured and translated into skills development and educational opportunities for young people. Scoping of such a role would identify i) terms of reference for collaborating with service providers currently operating in Oakey, and ii) objectives for the delivery of community-based training initiatives.

2. OPTIMISING THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF YOUTH-DIRECTED PROGRAMMING

Co-ordination between funding bodies will be central to effective service delivery in Oakey. The current ‘silos’ of service provision between agencies and departments creates duplication of work and hinders effective planning and execution. Project leaders need to leverage networks of mutual support between agencies to break down administrative and budgetary duplication.

The provision of a *Youth Service Project Manager* in Oakey provides capacity to coordinate across services and to ensure the strategic delivery of programming and initiatives. Competitive funding applications, the provision of targeted initiatives and delivery of inter-agency programming requires coordination with a centralised *Youth Service Project Manager* holding capacity to function as the ‘bridge’ between agencies and suppliers.

Good community development functions as an evolving process. The foundations laid by the Oakey Youth Project have established a climate of good-will and momentum in the community, however, current programming remains early in its development cycle. There remains much to be done in order to consolidate trust in community and it is suggested that placement of a *Youth Service Project Manager* offers capacity to extend current developments.

3. COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Utilising local community stakeholders to achieve programming outcomes will provide the greatest possibility for traction in service delivery. The Oakey Youth Project has benefited greatly from the support of the Local Level Alliance, CWA, local service providers and schools.

Service providers that have failed to engage with local stakeholders have been significantly less effective in their service delivery. An opportunity exists for Toowoomba Regional Council to undertake the development of a *Stakeholder Engagement Plan* to establish a coordinated approach to service delivery, identify gaps in service provision, and triage areas of priority need. Such a plan, ideally coordinated by a *Youth Service Project Manager* would provide the blueprint for ensuring service delivery in Oakey is targeted and effective, whilst also responding to community and service provider stakeholder needs.

The Oakey Youth Project demonstrated that effective community engagement and service provision is reliant on the identification and cultivation of key community stakeholders to function as champions in the community to ensure that the program has trusted advocates. In addition to ensuring that service providers are afforded a direct link to community, community champions that maintain networks in community will be crucial as links to community and recognised and trusted advocates.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Oakey is a resilient community, but one that faces significant economic, social and health challenges. Changes in the social landscape of Oakey township in recent decades, including shifts in employment opportunities, housing and educational provision have had especially marked effects on Oakey's young people.

The Oakey Youth Project meaningfully responded to these challenges and demonstrated that targeted programming provides tangible benefits to community. But these outcomes are at risk of being lost should ongoing support be redirected. It is vital that sustainable, community-based and coordinated approaches to programming be developed, and that strategic oversight of this programming be established in order to provide Oakey's young people with the best possible outcomes. In conjunction with more cohesive mental health services, need for training and education opportunities within Oakey present as major priority areas for development.

As the Oakey Youth Project demonstrated, there is capacity in Oakey to develop networks of community-based service provision. With support from Toowoomba Regional Council and commensurate State and Federal Government support, the opportunity to establish community champions working alongside a *Youth Service Project Manager* and under the provision of a *Stakeholder Engagement Plan* opens possibilities for the delivery of targeted, community-based programming that yields tangible outcomes for Oakey's young people.

APPENDIX A

YOUTH ENTERTAINMENT ACTIVITIES

Friday Night Live – 34 sessions, 1440 youth engagements (2019-2020); 49 sessions, 2548 youth engagements (2020-2021)

The project funded Oakey Indoor Sports Centre to establish Friday Night Live. The program provides local young people a regular, safe, and friendly space on Friday nights to alleviate boredom and risk-taking behaviours. Friday Night Live consists of structured and unstructured activities and aims to:

- Provide a free weekly engagement accessible to all young people
- Develop young people's practical and interpersonal skills
- Provide connections to trusted adults and mentorship opportunities through existing community groups such as CWA, Men's Shed, and TOMNET.
- Link young people through stepped care mental health pathways.
- Work in partnership with service providers to deliver education around mental health issues, bullying, peer pressure, cyber bullying, managing relationships, managing stress, drugs and alcohol, abuse and destructive behaviours.



Get Gaming – 20 sessions, 224 youth engagements



The project partnered with the Oakey Library to provide bi-weekly after-school gaming sessions. The program aims to provide local young people an inclusive space that encourages community connection, engagement with library resources, and a sense of belonging. The program is facilitated by library staff and includes sessions dedicated to board gaming, video gaming and social engagement.

Movie Night – 1 Session, 29 attendees

Disney's *Dumbo* screened at Oakey Cultural Centre in conjunction with Oakey Wellness Committee.

Box Off the Streets / Oakey Box Out – 68 sessions, 1251 youth engagements

Delivered in partnership with Emerge, PCYC, and the Oakey CWA, *Box Off the Streets*, and its successor, *Oakey Box Out*, is an outreach program which brings together boxing, fitness and mentorship to reduce youth homelessness, crime, substance abuse and anti-social activities. The program seeks to help young people re-engage in education, employment and socially positive activities as well as achieve personal growth through a strengthened engagement with program mentors, peers, and the wider community.

For 2021, Emerge no longer had capacity to deliver *Box Off the Streets*. As the program had proved successful, a partnership with PCYC and Oakey Gym & Fitness Centre was formed to deliver a reprised form of the program: *Oakey Box Out*. The program objective remains the same – to provide outreach and re-engage young people through boxing, fitness, and mentorship.

Pool Parties and Summer Splash Series – 9 sessions, 319 youth engagements

The project engaged Oakey Aquatic Centre to provide low-cost activities for families during the drought and to discourage young people from swimming in the Oakey Creek.

The project partnered with Civic Assist Street Crews and Oakey Aquatic Centre to deliver a series of pool activations during the summer of 2020/21 for local young people. Civic Assist provided youth workers and activities, and reported on issues around mental health, isolation, stress, unemployment, risk of homelessness, drug and alcohol use, and relationship conflict.



Scooter and Skateboarding Workshops - 3 Sessions, 54 youth engagements

Beginner skateboarding and scooter workshops facilitated at the Oakey Skate Park by professional coaches from Australian Skateboarding Community Initiative. A total of 54 youth engagements over three sessions were held in partnership with Toowoomba Regional Council's Youth Connect Team.

Australian Skateboarding Web Championships – 22 youth engagements

The project partnered with TRC's Youth Connect team to part-fund a virtual skateboarding competition delivered by Australian Skateboarding Community Initiative.

Dis/Connect Art Competition & Workshop – 25 youth engagements



To provide young people in Oakey a means of creative reflection, expression, skill development, and community connection during COVID-19, an art competition was held inviting young people to create, design, or communicate an original artistic work responding to the theme of ‘dis/connection’. First prize winners were awarded a Samsung Galaxy tablet, and participants were presented with certificates during an assembly at Oakey State High School.

As part of the Dis/Connect Art Competition, the project ran three arts workshops during Friday Night Live to maximise participation by young people experiencing disadvantage. The workshops were facilitated by local Aboriginal artists Susie Klein and Damon Mirri Anderson.

As an outcome of the Dis/Connect Art Competition, the project also delivered an art zine and arts trail featuring the best artworks submitted by Oakey's young people. Annabelle Jervis, first prize winner of the 15–17 Years Category, was featured with her piece in the Oakey Champion.

Short Circuit Youth Circus Program – 5 sessions, 22 young people attending

The project partnered with the Oakey Wellness Committee to deliver Short Circuit; a free youth circus program facilitated by Circa Contemporary Circus.

Queensland Youth Week

To celebrate Queensland Youth Week in Oakey, the project delivered a range of activities for young people:

Youth Photography Masterclass – 2 sessions, 9 young people attending

The Youth Photography Masterclass was recommended as part of the USQ Research Youth Consultation Workshop and was facilitated by local photographers Ben Tupas and Inge Gaczjak at the Oakey Library.

Friday Night Live Laser Skirmish – 1 session, 80 young people attending

The project engaged Darling Downs Laser Skirmish to provide laser skirmish at Friday Night Live on Friday, 16th April to cap off Queensland Youth Week.

Scooter & Skate Days – 3 sessions, 15 young people attending



The project engaged Australian Skateboarding Community Initiative to facilitate a series of scooter and skateboarding workshops over Queensland Youth Week, including an advanced workshop and mini competition on Thursday, 15th April. The mini-comp was accompanied by a barbecue, youth service stallholders, and chill-out space.

Youth Training Activities

Tenancy Skills Training – 1 session, 2 young people attending



The project funded the Tenancy Skills Institute to deliver tenancy skills training during March 2020 at Oakey Library. This training package supports young people to learn about their rights and responsibilities as tenants, as well as how to maintain a property and manage their finances.

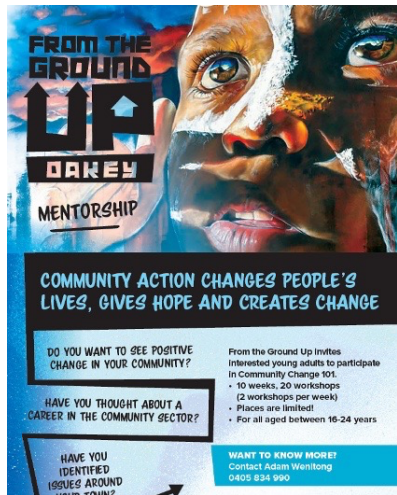
Looking for Work – 5 sessions, 5 young people attending (1 completing)

The project partnered with New Hope Church to deliver a Looking for Work program.

This Way Up & Accidental Counsellor Training – 6 young people attending

The project funded [the](#) online This Way Up and Accidental Counsellor training through Lifeline Darlings Downs & South West Qld – Community Connections. The course was advertised through the Oakey Champion.

From the Ground Up – 10 sessions, 3 young people attending (1 completing)



The project funded a leadership program for disengaged young people facilitated by Adam Wenitong of Young Bruthas Mentorship. The program was designed to involve young people in the development of the Oakey community.

Cert 1 in Construction (TAFE) – 15 young people commenced

The Oakey Youth Project partnered with TAFE QLD, Coops QLD, Oakey State

High School, and Busy At Work to deliver a 20-week construction course with paid work placement. The program includes two days per week of job readiness and life skills development, as well as placement through a local construction company to maximise employment outcomes for participants.



OAKEY STATE HIGH SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES

Mental Health Week – 500+ students engaged throughout in 2019 and 2020

The project was heavily involved in funding and coordinating Mental Health Week activities at Oakey State High School, which stepped up significantly in 2020.

Over the course of the week a different activity was held each day during the major school day break. The week commenced with a live band and other activities to create a carnival-like atmosphere. The theme of MHW for 2020 was 'Take time for your mind', so each day's activity was focused on having time out to relax and check in with your mind. Yoga sessions, sports activities, healthy food, music, art, and dance were available to experience through the week.

Human Power Vehicle Program – 25 young people attending (ongoing)

The project partnered with Oakey State High School to fund a new Human Powered Vehicle program as part of the school curriculum. Combining engineering and health and physical education, students learn how to design, build, and race human-powered vehicles. The program culminated in races at regional and state levels.

Alternate Suspension Program – 12 young people attending

To break the cycle of young people being suspended at the end of term due to emotional dis-regulation and exam stress, the project funded a pilot Alternative Suspension program at Oakey State High School. Joshua Schloss (Youth Motivational Speaker, Values Educator and

Emotional Health Coach) was engaged to facilitate the resilience-focused program over two (2) weeks. Twelve students participated in the program.

Year 12 Life After School Info Day – 1 session, 54 young people attending

The project supported the delivery of Oakey State High School's Life After School Info day for Year 12s. Julie Cave (TRC) spoke to students on the pragmatics of life as an adult.

Dolly's Day - 500+ students exposed to activity in 2020

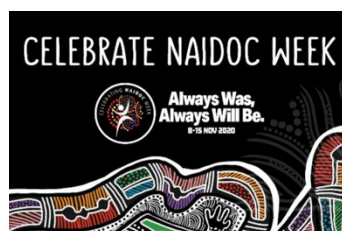
Promotion of Dolly's Day (anti-bullying program) through online platforms and school newsletter to approximately 540 students at Oakey State High School.



Growing up in Queensland Survey - 500+ students exposed to activity in 2020

Project staff supported Oakey State High School to survey most of its student cohort as part of the *Growing Up In Queensland Survey* held by the Queensland Family and Child Commission. Over 607 submissions were received.

NAIDOC Week 2020 – 500+ students exposed to activity in 2020



The project supported the delivery of Oakey State High School's NAIDOC Week activities, which included a NAIDOC Parade, flag raising, and cultural dance.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FORUMS

Oakey Local Level Alliance

The Oakey Youth Project has been an active participant in the Oakey Local Level Alliance (OLLA). Local level alliances (LLAs) are responsible for identifying the family support services that local communities need, and how that need can be met. The alliances ensure families are supported with an integrated mix of services that respond to local needs and issues. The Oakey LLA includes regular representation from Toowoomba Regional Council, Oakey State High School, Oakey Chamber of Commerce, University of Southern Queensland, Queensland Police, PCYC, Oakey Community Care Committee, Oakey Wellness Committee, Goondir Health Services, and other community sector organisations servicing the Oakey district.



Toowoomba Youth Agency Meeting

The Toowoomba Youth Interagency Meeting (YIM) is a subgroup of the Greater Downs LLA responsible for identifying needs in local youth service provision. Representatives from government and non-government organisations are in regular attendance across education, police, health, drug and alcohol services, settlement services, housing, local government, and others. The project has been represented at YIM meetings by Council staff.

Regional Youth Advisory Committee

The project has been regularly represented at Council's Regional Youth Advisory Committee. This group provides Council advice and recommendations on the youth sector within the Toowoomba Regional Council Local Government area; and the interests of young people and the sector that supports them.

Oakey Youth Project Reference Group

The Oakey Youth Project Reference Group was established to ensure the Oakey community is directly involved in steering the project and maintaining its alignment with community needs.



Restorative Practice Community Info Forum – 1 session, 6 people attending

This was an opportunity for Oakey community members to discuss the availability and experiences of support services offered to young people in Oakey.

Youth Consultation Workshop – 1 session, 11 young people attending

As part of the USQ Social Outcomes Research, the project partnered with USQ to facilitate a youth consultation workshop in the Oakey Library. Young people involved

planned the program for Queensland Youth Week and provided feedback on the current and planned activities for 2021.

Oakey Community Hub Workshops – 2 sessions, 25 people attending

Based on the feedback regarding the need to improve service delivery, the Oakey Youth Project, Oakey Local Level Alliance and Lifeline Darling Downs & South West hosted two meetings with key stakeholders. This group of stakeholders is currently working through a process called ‘The Golden Thread’ to clearly determine community need. This process will continue throughout 2021. This process was used to develop the Toowoomba Housing Hub which has become a model for one stop shop service delivery.



2019 Queensland Community Development Conference – 10 community representatives attending

Council hosted the 2019 Queensland Community Development Conference to inspire, celebrate, and develop a shared approach to citizen-led community development. The project sponsored ten (10) Oakey community representatives to attend.

COMMUNITY MEMBER TRAINING

Restorative Practice Training – 31 participants from 14 service providers

The project engaged David Moore, Principal Consultant of Primed, to deliver a full-day workshop of Restorative Practice Training to 31 participants from 14 service providers. Restorative practice works on principles of repairing harm through restoring relationships, ensuring all parties are heard, and working collaboratively on reparations. Participants were trained in restorative practice principles and conferencing in a youth service provision context.

Restorative Practice Facilitator Training - 6 participants

The project partnered with David Moore, Principal Consultant of Primed to deliver restorative practice facilitator training. The training enabled six participants to facilitate restorative practice conferences with confidence.

V.I.T.A.L. Program Facilitator Training - 7-day training program, 1 participant

The project funded Fernando Fermino's (Oakey State High School – Youth Support Coordinator) attendance at a seven-day residential program run by V.I.T.A.L. Projex, based in Boonah. The training focused on how to better facilitate training programs for young people along with helping young people to identify their own individual values and integrate their values into their everyday lives. Training also focuses on helping young people achieve their best potential and break through fears which prevent them from moving forward. Fernando along with the school's chaplain are now certified trainers in the program and will be working together to deliver the training to students.

Deeper Intervention Training - 3-day training program, 10 participants

The project funded a Deeper Intervention workshop facilitated by Joshua Schloss. Ten Oakey community members attended the 3-day training, which allowed participants to gain understanding around group dynamics and the fundamentals of transforming a 'bunch of individuals' into a group by creating a safe space (place of trust) for young people where they feel valued and encouraged to grow emotionally. These community members will be available to support in a volunteer capacity the Youth Support Coordinator and School Chaplain as they deliver the V.I.T.A.L. training at Oakey State High School.

'Love Bites' Facilitator Training – 4 participants

The project funded NAPCAN to deliver Love Bites Facilitator Training for four Oakey community members. Love Bites is a respectful relationships education program for young people aged 15-17 years, consisting of workshops on healthy relationships and sexual violence.



GIVE-AWAYS

Wellbeing and Mental Health Support Packs – 200 packs distributed

200 Wellbeing and Mental Health Packs were distributed by Student Support staff from Oakey State High School, Community & Youth Engagement Workers from Goondir Health and through the Oakey Indoor Sports Centre staff. The project partnered with these organisations to distribute packs as they were still having some face-to-face contact with young people and their families during the period of lockdown and isolation. These organisations were well-placed to provide assessment of the wellbeing of young people during this time. The packs included information from EACH (PHN funded) and other mental health support agencies on maintaining wellbeing during the time of lockdown. Packs also included a pair of Happy Socks, healthy snacks, keep cup and relaxing tea bag, art supplies and a copy of the TRC Youth Connect Boredom Busters book.

Emerge Coffee Van – 5 sessions, 75 staff attending

The project funded the Emerge coffee van to be stationed at the Oakey State High School one day per week for 5 weeks during the height of the COVID-19 lockdown. Emerge staff provided approximately 75 teachers and support staff a free beverage on these days as well as an environment of reprieve and light-heartedness during a very challenging time.



SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY GROUP/ SERVICE PROVIDER'S EVENTS

Oakey Mayday Fest

The project supported the delivery of Oakey May Day FEST on 4 August 2019. The festival was led by the Oakey Junior Chamber of Commerce and included live entertainment, dance performance and competitions, and an under-18 music concert.

Oakey Youth Connection & Referral Service

Council partnered with PCYC to employ an on-the-ground youth worker 8 hours per week in Oakey. During her time in the role, Kat has been working to provide connection and referral support for local young people, attending local programming and reporting on presenting youth issues. She is a key touch point for the project.



Protea Place Oakey Outreach

The project supported Protea Place to begin a weekly program of women's outreach service in Oakey.

Oakey Youth Grants – Strengthen the Things that Remain

The project is currently delivering an Oakey Youth Grants round to empower local community organisations to provide programs, activities and events which support the mental health, resilience and social well-being of young people aged 12–24 who live, work or study in Oakey. Grants of up to \$5,000 were made available to fund community-led youth mental health projects.



APPENDIX B

ELABORATION OF SERVICE PROVIDER RESPONSES

1. Awareness of youth-directed services is low, resulting in many service providers reporting under-utilisation of their resources, or low levels of referrals.

Five service providers commented that referrals to their service had not been forthcoming, citing lack of awareness as the key reason for the poor uptake.

“Our catchment area includes the Oakey region however are yet to receive a referral for a family in the area. Found that the difficulties include the families in the region not reaching out and asking for support... they don’t know about us”

“Other issues are gaining the trust of the youth, getting our name out to youth to let them know they can pop in themselves...”

The lack of referrals into services is a Catch-22 for service providers, who allocate capacity based on need. They are unable to justify a greater presence in the community to drive awareness of their service due to the low utilisation of their service currently by the Oakey community.

“In Oakey, the allocation of hours is based on capacity and need, as such we could not nominate a time for Oakey specifically. At the moment the service is open for referrals, though we have none pending from Oakey.”

2. Services need embedding geographically in the Oakey township to be effective.

Few of the service providers surveyed operate from a permanent location based within the Oakey community. Those that have a permanent presence reported high engagement with their services across multiple service offerings.

“We’re involved in a number of services at Oakey at [permanent location of operation]. We are delivering approx. 8-10 hours a week in Oakey. Consistent engagement from high % of young people - most of the time there’s a good amount of attending people involved.”

However, service providers operating services on a once per week or needs-only basis identified lack of geographical embedding is the community as their primary barrier to growing their client base.

“Rather than services coming to the area, it would be more beneficial to have the services set up and working directly from the area where residents can access on a daily basis.”

“Our key issue in delivering youth-directed services is time. We have limited ability to assist face to face at other times outside our Tuesday visit.”

“In terms of overall service delivery to youth, a place-based lead agency to coordinate service delivery, place-based young offender and diversion services, place-based housing support.”

“Programs are available to Oakey as required (referrals in). Key issue is not having a permeant [sic.] presence in Oakey. Suggest a regular (weekly) pop up service.”

“I have only lived in the region for 15 years and observed that often Oakey and the surrounding townships are seen as the poor cousin when it comes to service placement and delivery for young people and families. Services are based and run out of Toowoomba, Ipswich or to a lesser extent Dalby.”

The lack of community-based support services also extends to government services such as Centrelink and Medicare. Additionally, some JobActive providers will not work in the Oakey region.

3. More services need to be available for earlier intervention, rather than directed towards crisis management.

Echoing the feedback received from support services operating out of Oakey State High School, several service providers identified a gap in the provision of support services, specifically mental health, drugs/alcohol and homelessness-related support. Few of the service providers surveyed offered programs or services that accepted referrals prior to an issue being designated a crisis or high/complex need for a young person.

“There needs to be more options for support. This would have to be one of the biggest issues we hear about. More services for Indigenous (you shouldn't just have 1 service as some youth don't feel safe to go there).”

“Services in the region tend to work after an issue has been established rather than at the early intervention before an issue can occur.”

4. There needs to be greater collaboration and integration of case management across services.

Services that have developed strong links with other service providers reported greater effectiveness in driving awareness and engagement for their offering.

“We have created strong relationships with schools, health services, TRC, Probation and Parole as well as other community groups to make sure our message and information is shared far and wide. The services need to be transparent and work collaboratively.”

A lack of service provider connectedness and poor collaboration behaviours inhibit the utilisation of services by those who would benefit from them. The Oakey Local Level Alliance was established to address this opportunity, but currently there are only a core group of service providers who have committed to this initiative.

“Oakey seems to have a lot of programs happening for youth but not many youths utilizing them. I think it comes down to Oakey workers (e.g., QPS, Health etc.) not being collaborative,

transparent and getting the word out to all the youth in Oakey (not just through the school but to the young people who are disengaged from everything)."

"It's empire-building and lack of sharing information. Perhaps it's also too hard basket. I don't know. Only a few agencies attend the LLA regularly, and those that do have really benefitted, but it's a case of leading the horse to water and getting it to drink."

"I just want to say that Julie Cave and David from TRC are wonderful to work with and go above and beyond to support us with all of our programs. They have attended on many occasions to speak directly to our outreach users and are an asset [sic.] to Oakey. Young Bruthas Mentorship created and implemented a mentorship project, but doors closed from many services to assist in getting the information to the youth (e.g., QPS Health etc). On completion of the project YB was advised that this is why many projects fizzle out quickly in Oakey as certain services don't back projects or create positive pathways of referrals into them."

5. Creative thinking and passionate change-agents are needed to overcome the inertia and scepticism in the Oakey community.

There is a feeling in the community that Oakey has lost its sense of pride and community spirit. Oakey youth in particular have come to be regarded, both within the community and in the wider Toowoomba region, as a problem to be addressed rather than an asset to the township.

"We need to see a town filled with hope rather than hopelessness. We need to give the whole of community a sense of pride and celebrate the successes happening rather than focusing on the negatives from the past (i.e., water contamination, army base, mining, etc.) I am only mentioning this as they are resounding repeated subjects we hear weekly. Bring in more open-minded passionate workers who can be the catalysts of change for the community, be open to outsiders and there [sic.] creativity."

A change in the narrative and approach to youth service provision is needed to capture the hearts and imagination of Oakey's disengaged youth. Inspiring change-agents such as the leaders of the Oakey Youth Project have been able to generate extraordinary levels of engagement for youth-directed programming.

"I have met a lot of workers from Oakey who are in direct contact with youth but tell me that the youth don't want certain things, won't wake up for programs etc etc... I have asked to meet and speak with their youth clients but the workers have not yet taken up the invite and instead told me it's too hard. This seems like a worker issue not a youth issue."

"Julie and David from TRC are magnificent and have done wonderful things for the Oakey Community, as has Young Bruthas, but other than them there has not been a lot of buy in from local workers to engage with youth."

"We need to create projects by the youth for the youth and led by inspiring workers who are part of the community (not just lead by youth doing well in school etc., but by leaders of all demographics of youth in Oakey)."

6. Toowoomba Regional Council and local/state government need to fund agencies and programs that invest in Oakey. Governance around funding of services is needed to ensure there is an allocation of resource to Oakey, not just Toowoomba services that are open to Oakey residents.

Several service providers identified funding as a key barrier to scaling up their service provision in Oakey. Many services can only afford to allocate one key worker to a huge geographical area that includes up to ten satellite townships.

“Another issue is funding (we have no Govt funding to assist us in our costs and supports so again we have to limit what we can do).”

“Support agencies and programs already visiting Oakey.”

It was also remarked upon that external governance of service implementation is poor, resulting in service providers entirely neglecting their funding/grant obligation to provide services to Oakey residents.

“There needs to be funding specifically for the Oakey community, which is monitored and policed. We know of 3 major organisations who are funded to resource and support at Oakey but who do not - this is a major issue for community members who we speak with. The funding needs to be directed into place-based projects that is only for Oakey Community Development giving the knowledge and power to community members to assist in their communities.”

7. Investment in spaces (community centre, youth facilities, community enrichment initiatives) is required to create an environment where young people can thrive.

Several service providers that are funded to deliver activities and programs that entertain and engage young people identified lack of a dedicated facility as a key barrier to their operation in the Oakey township.

“We have struggled to deliver our programs in Oakey because there’s a lack of a safe youth centre or community centre or hall to hold our activities. For insurance purposes, it’s prohibitive.”

It is also generally felt that the lack of physical spaces for Oakey’s youth to gather safely is negatively impacting young people’s connectedness and engagement in their community. The skate park is the de-facto youth hang-out, though that facility lacks basic amenities such as rubbish bins, access to drinking water and adequate shaded rest/seating areas.

“We need a youth facility - a common place where all young people can hang out safely.”

“Creating a vibrant town - space activation (yes, I know this has happened before but not by the right people).”

8. Garnering young people’s feedback about proposed services and programs is often overlooked, resulting in ‘service-oriented’ rather than ‘client-oriented’ offerings.

Unsustainable programs and “one size fits all” services have had limited impact and resulted in ‘agency fatigue’ amongst Oakey’s youth. Insight-led services and programs designed to meet specific needs of Oakey’s youth are much sought-after by the community.

“Unfortunately the one size fits all approach doesn’t work. We need programs that address the specific needs of our young folk.”

“Too many agencies parachute in with their grants and their programs, then disappear again, never to be seen or heard of again. They don’t consult anyone about if their flashy thing is appropriate or relevant to our community. And they’re not sustainable beyond 5 or 6 weeks. But someone in a high office in government says that’s Oakey ticked. Problem addressed. Ticked a box. That’s all they care about. Not whether what they’re running is actually wanted by the community or addressing an actual need. If they gave the money to groups actually in the community, it might get spent on something the community actually wants and needs. We’ve got agency fatigue now. When a new agency is introduced, rather than being excited, people just go, how long will this one last?”

“Consulting with all demographics as to what they want, need and perceive, and collaborating with young people to build (through guidance) programs, events and activities that they are a part of and are excited to partake in... We need youth-designed programs.”

NOTES

TOOWOOMBA REGIONAL COUNCIL YOUTH-DIRECTED SERVICES

Toowoomba Regional Council provides a range of services directed towards young people aged 12-24:

1. Youth Community Development

TRC employs a Youth Team consisting of 2 full time staff. These staff sit within the Community Development Branch and service a population of approximately 27,450 young people aged 12-24 in the Toowoomba Region LGA (ABS, 2016). They deliver the following programs:

* Regional Youth Leaders – Engaging 25 young people each year, who volunteer to develop their knowledge about local events, activities, and youth support services; identify issues affecting local young people; and deliver community-based projects to address those issues.

* Regional Youth Programming (Youth Connect) – TRC-led arts workshops, music industry workshops, skateboarding and scooter workshops, movie nights, and sports and active recreation programs to support young people's skill development, social connections, and community participation. TRC runs a major regional program every year to celebrate Queensland Youth Week.

* Youth Mayoral Events – These include the Mayoral School Achievement Medals which recognises the personal milestones achieved by young people facing adversity and hardship; the Mayoral Morning Teas to provide a platform for the region's student leaders; and the Mayoral Skateboarding Competition which attracts competitors from across Australia.

* Youth Support Service – The Department of Children, Youth Justice & Multicultural Affairs part-funds one staff member to provide information, advice, and referral to young people at risk of disconnection.

* Regional Youth Advisory Committee (RYAC) – Provides TRC advice and recommendations on the local youth sector and the interests of young people, as well as continued development and implementation of TRC's Youth Strategy 2019-2021.

* Sector Development – This includes active participation in local and state youth sector networks such as the Local Level Alliances (LLAs), CD Qld, SEQ Community Development Network, headspace Consortium, etc. More information: <https://www.tr.qld.gov.au/community-business/community-support/youth>

2. Oakey Youth Project

Toowoomba Regional Council has partnered with Darling Downs and West Moreton PHN to deliver positive mental health outcomes for young people aged 12-24 who live, work, or study

in Oakey. This funding was part of the Australian Government's response to the inquiry into the ADF's use of firefighting foams and subsequent exposure of surrounding communities to PFAS contamination.

As a result of the project, TRC has been delivering a number of programs collectively referred to as the Oakey Youth Project, including engagement, mentoring, skill development, restorative practice, mental health, social well-being, and community capacity-building programs. More information: <https://www.tr.qld.gov.au/community-business/community-support/youth/14016-oakey-youth-project>