

WE HEAR YOUTH PROJECT REPORT

JULY 2021

“You have to leave to chase another dream”: Why young people choose to stay and leave country VIC

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WE HEAR YOUTH

PROJECT REPORT

We would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we each are located throughout Australia. In this project we acknowledge we are on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung, and Yorta Yorta peoples. We pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page 4	ABOUT THIS PROJECT
Page 5	PROJECT AIMS
Page 6	WHO WE ARE
Page 10	PRINCIPLES, VALUES AND APPROACH
Page 11	PROJECT MODEL
Page 12	WHAT WE DID
Page 13	RESEARCH TRAINING
Page 15	THE PRACTICAL TASK
Page 19	RESEARCH FOCUS
Page 20	HOW WE DID IT - METHODOLOGY
Page 36	WHAT WE FOUND
Page 38	KEY ISSUES
Page 44	KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH
Page 53	REASONS TO STAY AND LEAVE
Page 55	GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY
Page 62	THE RIGID CULTURE OF COUNTRY TOWNS
Page 68	THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS
Page 78	THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
Page 88	THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE
Page 101	WHAT NEXT
Page 107	APPENDICES

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Thorne Harbour Country in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) developed the We Hear YOUth program which broadly aimed to build the capacities of young people aged 12-25 in the Loddon area (Mount Alexander, City of Greater Bendigo, Central Goldfields, Campaspe, Loddon and Macedon Ranges) in research, specifically peer interviewing.

The program is underpinned by a commitment to the United Nations Human Rights Commission's Convention of the Rights of the Child (Article 12) which focuses on children and young people's right to participate in civic life, specifically in voicing their concerns and participating in decision-making that affects them. The right to be heard is placed at the centre of this program, clearly aligning with academic literature that identifies young people as both the experts in their own lives and futures (Carlson, 2008) and as those best placed to gather and amplify a chorus of youth voices for social change (Camarotta & Fine, 2008).

This place-based project was a fully subsidised course that was designed to develop the knowledge and skills of young people so that they can form a network of Youth Peer Interviewers (YPI) in the region. As a network of YPIs, these young people will be able to work with DHHS and other local agencies to bring together the voices of young people from diverse experiences and backgrounds to facilitate youth-informed and led change.

PROJECT AIMS

The aims of this project were to:

-  Develop knowledge, skills and capacities of youth researchers to inform local initiatives.
-  Develop and enhance young people's leadership capacities.
-  Be a learning pathway into a range of education or employment trajectories.
-  Create clear channels for youth voice in place-based projects, programs and initiatives (including in the areas of project governance, design, implementation and evaluation).

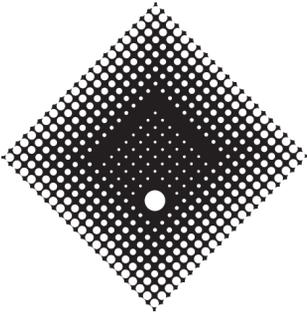
WHO WE ARE



Thorne Harbour Country provides support, counselling, rapid HIV testing, resources and information around LGBTI wellbeing, HIV, Hepatitis C and sexual health across the Loddon Mallee. Operating out of the Community Hub in Bendigo, Thorne Harbour Country provides a safe place for the LGBTI community to connect and access information resources and referral services. Thorne Harbour Country aims to celebrate and support the many communities and community initiatives that embrace and support LGBTI people and PLHIV whilst also responding to the identified barriers, working towards a more supportive space for all.

Together with the Department for Families, Fairness and Housing (Loddon), Thorne Harbour Country has previously delivered a Rainbow Youth in Out of Home Care project and the Pathways to Pride webinar. Committed to youth voice, the We Hear YOUTH project has been the next step in our partnership with DFFH Loddon and in our work supporting regional young people, in all their diversity, to inform the design, delivery and evaluation of youth projects and initiatives- to ensure these are more inclusive and representative of diverse youth voices from the region.

WHO WE ARE



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

Victoria University was the Registered Training Organisation involved in developing and delivering the research training for this project. The University offers short courses, apprenticeships, certificates, diplomas, degrees and postgraduate studies. Victoria University is committed to delivering a learning and teaching experience that empowers students from diverse backgrounds to grow their capabilities and realise their potential.

Of specific relevance to this project, VU provides research and community engagement services. Victoria University undertakes internationally recognised research and research training which provides creative and evidence-based insights into and solutions to important contemporary problems locally and globally.

The research training curriculum was developed and delivered by VU researchers, Associate Professor Alison Baker, Dr. Amy Quayle, and Rama Agung-Igusti who have expertise in youth participatory approaches, research methods, and community psychology perspectives on health and wellbeing, power and social change.

WHO WE ARE



YLab is a social enterprise established by the Foundation of Young Australians. YLab employs young people with different lived experiences to bring fresh, impactful solutions to design the future. YLab's vision is to equip young people with the power, networks and skills to shape systems across the globe. YLab is a global network of young people and institutions rethinking the systems that shape the world. YLab has expertise in co-design, workshop delivery and facilitation (online) and also offers immersive, practical online learning modules. YLab facilitated a number of workshops as part of the We Hear Youth project where they introduced participants to youth co-design, provided leadership training, and sought to enhance participants' social change toolkit including a focus on growing their voice.

WHO WE ARE

ACTIVATE YOUTH VOICE

In the process of developing their data collection tools and organising the data collection day in Echuca to conduct peer interviews, the group of young people that were participating in this project formally organized and gave themselves a name: Activate Youth Voice.

Activate Youth Voice is a group of young people from rural and regional (the Loddon Campaspe Area) Victoria with a diverse range of lived experience and expertise. They are passionate about the need for greater representation and consultation of young people aged 12-25, and aim to increase the engagement of young people within both their community, and society at large. They provide an intermediary body of one or more consultants which enables organisations to engage in research, consultation, and representation more effectively on the needs, opinions, and concerns of young people.

PRINCIPLES, VALUES AND APPROACH

Central to our approach was the notion of a Living Curriculum, through which we sought to:

1

Strong Relationships

Build strong relationships with and between the young people to facilitate a safe space and so that young people can seek out researchers for help and support.

2

Clear Vision

Develop a clear vision, mission and collective identity

3

Critical Questioning

Cultivate a space in which we share, question, and explore critical questions about complex social issues such as social exclusion/inclusion and belonging

4

Centering Youth Voice

Centre the realities of young people in the program, drawing on examples from their experience and their communities.

5

Reflect Communities

Ensure curriculum reflects young people's identities, communities, hopes and desires.

6

Dynamic and Responsive

Create a curriculum that is dynamic and responsive

PROJECT MODEL

The figure below shows the project model including key topics covered throughout the research training program. Alongside the delivery of the research training, VU researchers also sought to document and explore the model, as a way for increasing youth voice and action in regional areas.



1. WHAT WE DID

The following sections explain each component of the project, from the researcher training to the brief which the youth peer researchers were engaged for.

WHAT WE DID

RESEARCH TRAINING

The We Year Youth Research training program involved a mix of face to face and online sessions. In total, there were 10 sessions delivered (two face-to-face/eight online), with an additional face to face interview preparation/data collection day in Echuca. The tenth session was specifically for those youth researchers volunteering to take on Practical Task 2 (Focus groups for the City of Greater Bendigo - Evaluating their Youth Strategy 2017-2021) though was open to all to attend.

The We Hear Youth Project

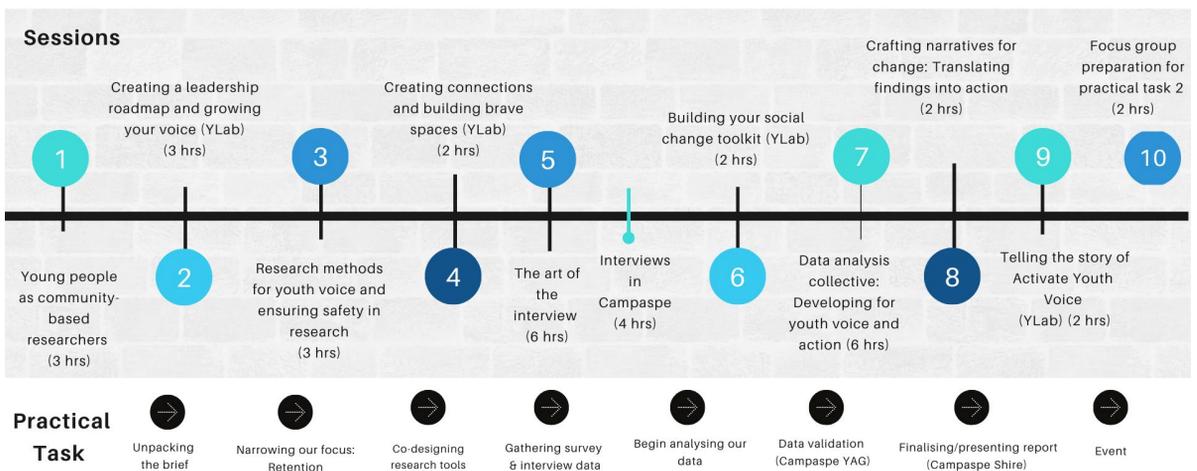
Number of participants still on board= 6/11

Number of workshops delivered= 10

Number of face to face meetings= 3

Number of shires represented= 5

Number of drop-in sessions= 5



VU facilitated six of these sessions where the focus was on developing young people's knowledge and skills as community based researchers and supporting them to design, develop and conduct their research project.

WHAT WE DID

VU staff worked alongside young people on the practical task (i.e., responding to the brief from Campaspe Shire) from initial conceptualisation through to data analysis and reporting. YLab facilitated four sessions (Creating a leadership roadmap and growing youth voice, Creating connections and building brave spaces, Building your social change toolkit, Telling the story of Activate Youth Voice). The Thorne Harbour Health project Lead, Kate Phillips, attended all sessions.

In addition to the workshops, VU also facilitated a number of drop-in sessions that were offered to provide updates to those who may have missed sessions or to provide extra support throughout the different stages of the research project (e.g., data analysis, preparation for interviews, preparation for YAG presentation).

A digital workbook was developed as part of the research training program consisting of a total of 8 chapters aligned to the topics explored in each of the sessions. The workbook was provided to support the young peoples' learning throughout the training project and beyond. The workbook included information about the topics covered (e.g., qualitative and quantitative research methodology, different types of interviews, survey design, ethical principles informing research, data analysis), reflection pages, checklists, tools and resources. It was considered important to provide the young people with a digital workbook that they could come back to in the future when engaging in peer research activities as a handy resource to refresh their knowledge.

As part of the workbook three short engaging videos were also created covering the topics of: Introduction to social research methods (5.26); Power, representation and reflexivity in community based social research (5.33); and Principles of research ethics (4.37).

WHAT WE DID

THE PRACTICAL TASK



A key part of the project was the opportunity for the youth researchers to conduct a small research project in response to a brief from a local government agency. This was seen as an important way to develop the youth researchers skills but also to involve local agencies in the project given the ultimate goal of the participants being employed as youth researchers locally for the purpose of increasing youth voice on issues impacting them and their communities.

WHAT WE DID

As part of this task, the youth researchers had the opportunity to:

- conceptualise the problem to be investigated and develop a research aim and questions in response to the broad brief provided by Campaspe Shire Council,
- identify appropriate research methods to respond to the research questions and consider youth friendly research methods,
- co-design the research tools (survey; interview schedule);
- consider and enact ethical principles in research with young people,
- conduct one or more interviews with young people from the Loddon Mallee region,
- analyse the qualitative interview and survey data as part of the collective data analysis process (led by VU)
- present the preliminary report for data validation to the Campaspe Youth advisory group
- present the findings to Campaspe Shire Council.

The group also had the opportunity to speak about the program at the We Hear Youth project steering committee meetings. There were at least two steering committee meetings attended by some, and an additional meetings with Campaspe Shire Council.

Additionally, project Lead, Kate Phillips (Thorne Harbour) worked with Activate Youth Voice to co-design a Guidance document for use by organisations who wish to employ youth peer interviewers in research activities.

WHAT WE DID

THE BRIEF

The practical task for this training program was provided by the Campaspe Shire Council who were in the process of reviewing and defining their shared vision for the future. The current community vision was outlined in their 2015 Strategy for the Future of Our Community, Campaspe: Our Future. Outlined in this document is the community's vision to be "strong, supportive, vibrant and sustainable".

The Campaspe Shire Council were keen to support the We Hear Youth program to provide an opportunity for the young people to engage in a real life brief, and the data would be a useful addition to the feedback they collect through their process of community consultation. The young people were introduced to the brief in the initial workshop and had the opportunity to unpack the brief over the next few sessions. In their initial reflections on the brief at the early stages, the young people identified that given the data collection methods often occurred within the contexts of high schools, the 18-25 age cohort are often missed. Within our group of youth co-researchers, there was one participant from Campaspe who also provided important insights into what it is like to be a young person in the region, and if and how her experience is captured (or not) in the statistics presented as part of the materials provided by Campaspe Shire to introduce the community conversations materials.

WHAT WE DID

As part of Session 3: Research methods for youth voice and ensuring safety in research, the young people outlined how they were defining their purpose, which included:

- To provide a diverse snapshot of young people and their needs in the Campaspe Shire
- To work from a grassroots approach and gathering accurate data that reflects what young people actually desire for the future community in Campaspe
- Making things more accessible for people who learn/communicate differently

As part of session 3, we asked the young people: What story would you like to see told about young people with our research, and these were their responses:

- (how) do young people feel their local government sees them?
- I would like to hear, within the community vision, what is working and what isn't working in the community so far, to get a glimpse of where the community is and where the gaps lie. I would love to see young people at the forefront of the research as they will be the people who live out the community plan!
- I feel like the young people's visions and experiences are missing and what they're replaced with is the clients own belief of what young people want.
- Community retention of young people in the region.
- I know that after doing this in person data collection we can better inform the research and originating from a grassroots model.

WHAT WE DID

RESEARCH FOCUS

In session 5 (The Art of the Interview), we finally had the opportunity to meet face to face in Echuca. While the first session was planned to be face to face, we were forced into lockdown the day before the first face to face session. We invited Jess from the Campaspe Shire Council to come and speak to the group about the brief. This was a very productive session. It was in this session that the young people started to refine the focus of the brief to a focus on what was labelled 'retention' at the time, that is, why young people leave Campaspe. The young people reasoned that through this topic, it would be possible to explore key issues facing young people in the region broadly, young people's sense of belonging to their communities, as well as young people's perceptions of the opportunities available for youth voice. The group also decided that the focus would be on young people aged 18-25 given that this group of young people are often missed in community consultation. In this session, the group identified interviews and surveys as the key methods of data collection they would use, and they started the process of developing the survey and the semi-structured interview schedule (which continued post session).

Throughout the process of data collection, the decision was made to broaden the focus of the research beyond Campaspe to the broader Loddon Mallee region. This decision was made given difficulties in organising interviews with people living in different regional towns, and so the slow recruitment of Campaspe participants, and because it was important for the young people to have the opportunity to develop their interviewing skills. Moreover, we expected that there would be similar issues facing young people across the regions, and thought it would be interesting to broaden the focus.

2. HOW WE DID IT

The following section explains the project methodology, and approaches towards the data collection and analysis.

HOW WE DID IT

METHODOLOGY

Through the research training program, the youth co-researchers were introduced to community based approaches to research and a variety of data collection methods, with a particular focus on interviews and surveys as common modes of data collection. During the sessions and also reflected in the workbook content, we explored the notion of youth friendly methods and how to engage young people in research as well as ethical considerations in research and with young people in particular.

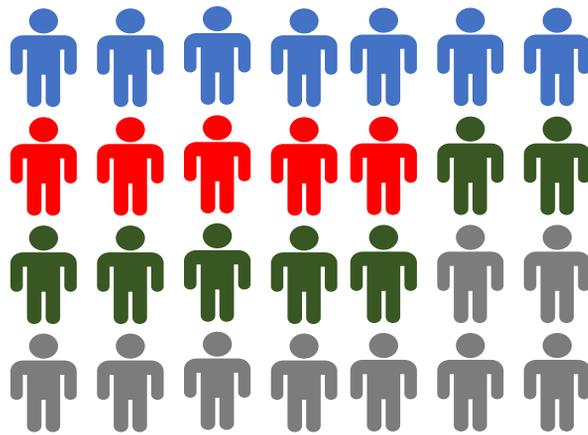
The data collection tools (i.e., interview schedule and survey) were co-designed by the youth researchers alongside VU researchers which provided an important, hands on learning opportunity, allowing the process to be youth-led with the support of experienced researchers.

THE SURVEY

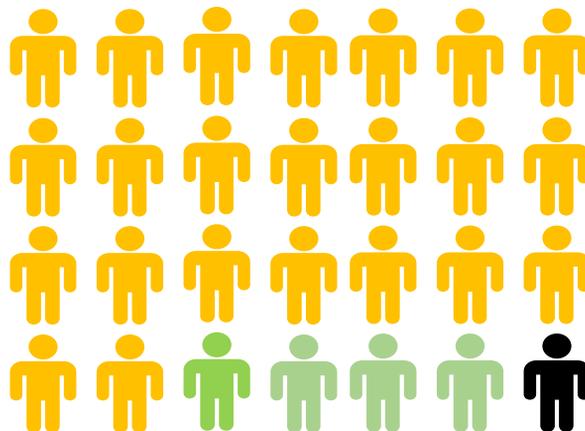
The survey consisted of a mix of questions (e.g., short answer, likert scale, check boxes; Appendix A). Questions inquired about basic demographic information (e.g., identity, employment and education, age), community belonging for young people and marginalised groups in particular, key issues for young people in their local area and that impact them personally, quality of life in their community, and youth participation and voice, and how they felt about engaging with youth peer researchers.

HOW WE DID IT

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be interested in participating in an interview, and to leave their email address if so. Therefore, we were able to recruit participants for interviews through the survey. The survey was sent through the networks of the young people, and also posted on social media. In total, there were 28 respondents to the survey.



18-19 years 20-21 years
22-23 years 24-25 years



Female identifying Male identifying
No answer

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS



**20 University or TAFE
Students**



**1 High School
Student**



**23 Casual or
Part-time Employment**



**2 Full-time
Employment**



2 Unemployed



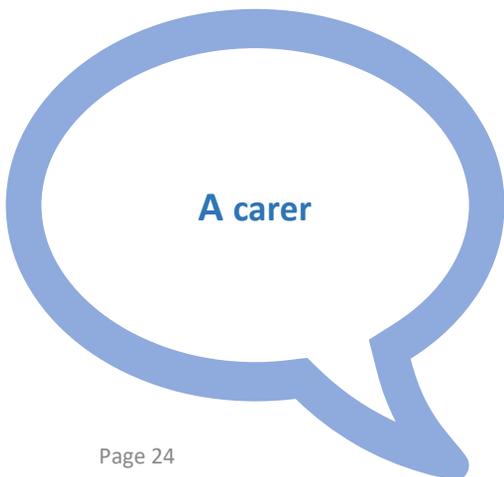
10 Volunteer

***Many survey respondents engaged in work, study and volunteering**

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS



Survey participants also described themselves in many different ways.



HOW WE DID IT

INTERVIEW PROCESS

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide some structure but also allow flexibility for the youth researchers to keep the interviews conversational in style. The key topics explored in the interviews were: Life in their community and aspirations for the future (including whether this involves staying/leaving), key issues facing young people in their regional town, and opportunities for youth voice including whether or not young peoples' voices are heard (Appendix B).

In total, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people from the Loddon Mallee Region. The interviews were conducted by the youth peer researchers with the informed consent process supervised by VU staff. Some of the interviews were conducted face to face, while others were conducted online via Zoom and 1 was conducted over the phone. Interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word (verbatim). Each youth researcher was asked to write brief reflections on the interview after conducting the interview, and provided an opportunity to debrief with a member of the VU research team.

Importantly, the interview guide was co-designed with the young people and the VU researchers. The peer interviewers were encouraged to use it as a guide. We emphasised the importance of ensuring that they were very familiar with the questions included before the interview, and that they should ask the questions in a way that works for them---it was not a script to be followed, but rather some questions to guide the conversation.

YOUTH RESEARCHER'S REFLECTIONS ON INTERVIEWING



We asked the youth researchers to reflect on the key lessons they learnt in doing interviews and beginning the process of data analysis.

This is what they shared.



Let there be awkward silences if there needs to be: to consider your angle, create a fantastic question or simply just truly take in what was just said.



Listen to where they are taking their story! What themes/questions come up to inspire your next question?

Clarify any information that the person is skipping—maybe you already know that information— but others don't!



Take your time. Don't rush through questions. Sometimes the most interesting and most important information comes from a moment of silence and thought.

Interviewing to empower others through their voice is very beneficial. It gives you ideas and opportunities.



Relax, it's just a conversation (with a little structure)

Don't stick to the script too much! It takes away the conversational/relaxed nature of the interview!

Trust yourself— you know the brief!

The questions are a guide. Use them to fall back on but just have a conversation.





Self compassion: Knowing if this is your first experience in research that you can't expect it to be perfect.

The interview will never go as planned in your mind. Expect the unexpected and follow interesting paths that appear through conversation.



Research is much easier to understand when working collaboratively. It's made me realise how much I didn't know



Mentoring each other through coding and organising ideas is a huge help. Especially if something unexpected occurs.



Don't be shy about keeping them on topic, ask exactly the question that you want answered

Before the interview: do your research (e.g., on the youth strategy, census info)

A little side tracking of conversation is good because it may make for a really good insight. But if you feel that the interviewee is going too much off track, don't feel bad about guiding them back with questions like: "You mentioned xyz earlier what did you mean by that?" or "That's really interesting, How do you think the experience you just mentioned could relate to 'interview focus'"



In the end it's all about having a friendly and welcoming environment. Take time if it's over zoom to neaten and make your space more welcoming.

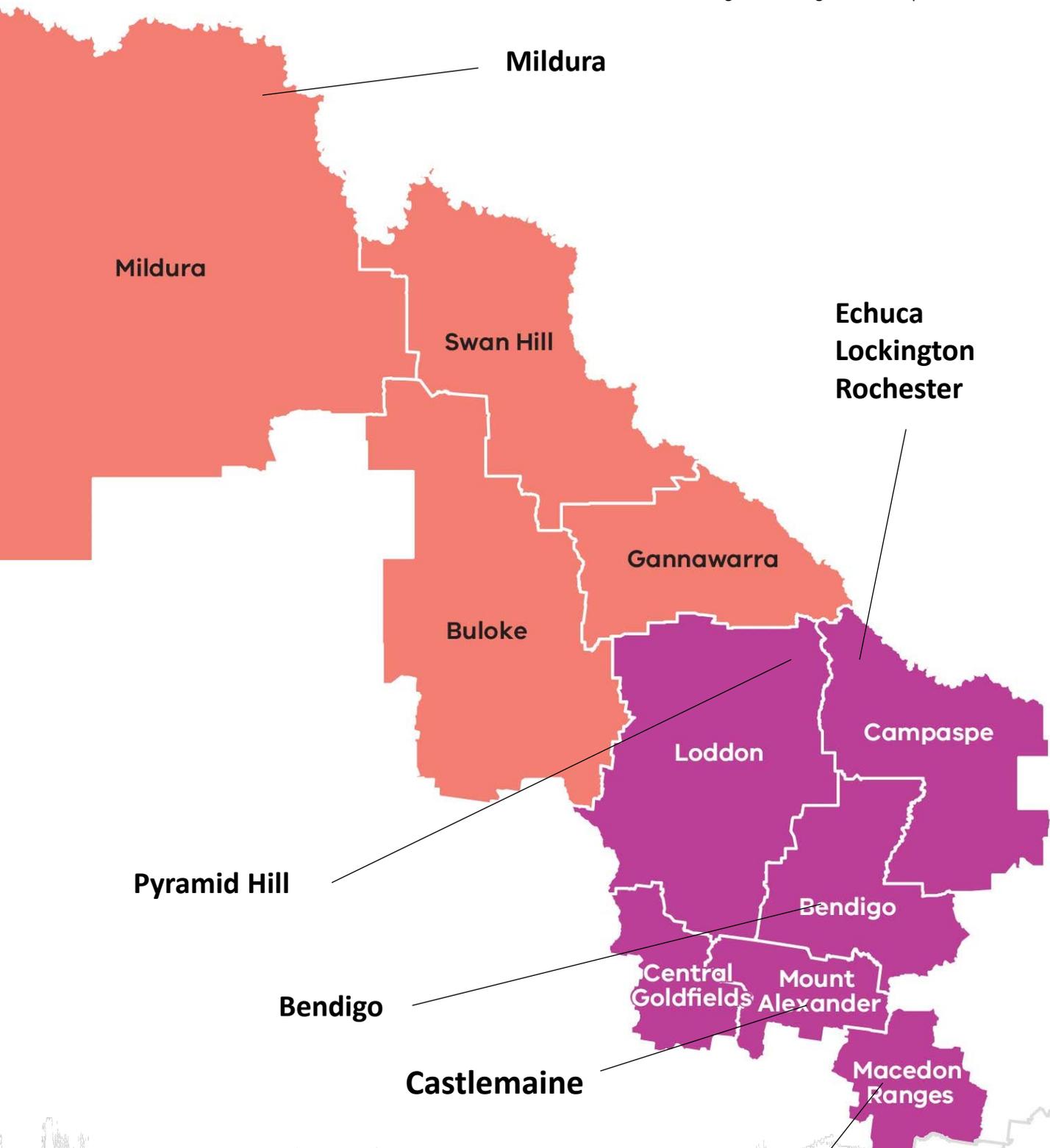
HOW WE DID IT

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Interviewees were 4 Males and 7 Females, aged 17- 24 from a number of different towns across the Loddon Mallee region. In total 4 of the interviewees were from the Campaspe region. Pseudonyms have been assigned for confidentiality.

Eight were currently completing University TAFE; seven were full time and 1 part time, as they balanced part time or casual work. The remaining three were engaged in full time employment. At least four of the interviewees had moved in order to pursue education or employment, while others were travelling for example from Echuca to Bendigo for University.





**INTERVIEW AND
SURVEY
PARTICIPANT LOCATIONS**

- Kyneton**
- Woodend**
- Romsey**
- Macedon**
- Gisborne**

HOW WE DID IT

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was the method used to analyse the qualitative data collected through interviews and surveys. Thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clarke’s six steps were used to guide the analysis process. These six steps involve an initial familiarisation with the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts and writing down initial ideas, generating initial codes across the entire data set and collating these codes, searching for themes by grouping the codes along with illustrative excerpts. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2006), “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). The next step is to review the themes by checking against the coded data and the entire data set (Is anything missing? What are the relationships between themes). After this process of reviewing themes, the aim is to define and name themes, which involves further refining the analysis to ensure clarity of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells. The final stage is the production of the report, including selecting vivid and compelling example quotes to answer the research questions, and connecting the findings with previous literature.

The process of analysis involved first introducing the group to qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis and initial coding in particular. This session was a face to face session held in Castlemaine.

HOW WE DID IT

As part of this session, the youth researchers were asked to code one of the transcripts (the same transcript). They then worked in pairs to compare and collate their codes. The VU researchers had also coded this same transcript individually before the session, and had come together to compare and collate their codes. Each of the pairs were then asked to share the list of codes that they had identified (having written them on post-it notes), and in doing so, start to tell a story about the things that stood out to them across the interview. This initial hands on experience provided the opportunity for the participants to see coding in action and to be assured that they were on the right track with their coding. After this session, youth researchers were asked to continue coding other transcripts, with the aim of having each of the transcripts coded by one young person (and a VU researcher).

VU researchers were mindful of striking a balance between asking too much of the youth researchers (given the time intensive nature of qualitative data analysis) but also providing ample opportunity for the youth researchers to contribute to the collective data analysis.

A collective data analysis template was created where (VU/youth) researchers were asked to provide their familiarisation notes for each of the interviews (i.e., a brief summary of the key information that is captured in the interview) along with up to five important quotes from the interview (Appendix C).

HOW WE DID IT

Session 8 provided a further opportunity to engage in the collective data analysis process. This was a very productive session in which the young people, having familiarised themselves with a number of transcripts, were able to identify similarities across the interviews, things that surprised them, things that were unique. Their responses are provided in the figure below. Given that VU researchers had engaged in coding and had started to develop some ideas around key themes, this also provided an opportunity to brainstorm some of these themes to get the youth co-researchers input into the developing themes.



WE Hear YOU

SHARING PORTRAITS OF YOUTH PARTICIPANTS



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SIMILARITIES/OVERLAPS?

Craving a sense of belonging

Regional towns can be intolerant of difference

Race, ethnicity and stigma for being "different"

Wealth disparity/Resource distribution?

A sense of ageism. Being viewed as inexperienced or forgotten

Moving to regional centre as a compromise

Transport issues. Both public and private (eg. Cars).

Valuing country lifestyle/sense of community

Needing space for young people

Drugs and alcohol being a concern

People aren't leaving because they want to many times. It's because they have to

WHAT ARE SOME DIFFERENCES, DIVERGENCES OR DETAILS THAT MAKE EACH DISTINCT?

Feelings about their small and v rural hometowns

Opportunities available - depending on field

Town attributes

Sense of belonging - strong for some not for others

- Often depended on what 'groups' they engaged in (eg. sporting, leadership)

Connection to council- if they felt heard, what they thought they could change

WHAT WAS UNEXPECTED OR SURPRISING?

Connection to education was a big focus for many

How much I felt like i was personally relating to them

How much people love their home and want to stay

People really wanting to stay in their hometown- wanting more opportunities so they can stay!

HOW WE DID IT

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Thematic analysis was the method used to analyse the qualitative data collected through interviews and surveys. Thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clarke’s six steps were used to guide the analysis process. These six steps involve an initial familiarisation with the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts and writing down initial ideas, generating initial codes across the entire data set and collating these codes, searching for themes by grouping the codes along with illustrative excerpts. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2006), “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). The next step is to review the themes by checking against the coded data and the entire data set (Is anything missing? What are the relationships between themes). After this process of reviewing themes, the aim is to define and name themes, which involves further refining the analysis to ensure clarity of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells. The final stage is the production of the report, including selecting vivid and compelling example quotes to answer the research questions, and connecting the findings with previous literature.

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- Wealth disparity/Resource distribution?
- A sense of ageism. Being viewed as inexperienced or forgotten
- Moving to regional centre as a compromise
- Transport issues. Both public and private (eg. Cars).
- Valuing country lifestyle/sense of community
- Needing space for young people
- Drugs and alcohol being a concern
- People aren't leaving because they want to many times. It's because they have to

WHAT ARE SOME DIFFERENCES, DIVERGENCES OR DETAILS THAT MAKE EACH DISTINCT?

- Feelings about their small and v rural hometowns
- Opportunities available - depending on field
- Town attributes
- Sense of belonging - strong for some not for others
 - Often depended on what 'groups' they engaged in (eg. sporting, leadership)
- Connection to council- if they felt heard, what they thought they could change

WHAT WAS UNEXPECTED OR SURPRISING?

- Connection to education was a big focus for many
- How much I felt like i was personally relating to them
- How much people love their home and want to stay
- People really wanting to stay in their hometown- wanting more opportunities so they can stay!

HOW WE DID IT

DATA VALIDATION

The Activate Youth Voice group were invited to present the analysis to the Campaspe Youth Advisory Group meeting on Tuesday 1st June. This was seen as an opportunity for the young people to communicate research findings, and also for data validation. Given that only 4 of our interviews were from Campaspe Shire residents, and 2/29 survey respondents indicated they were from a town in Campaspe, we wanted to know if the preliminary findings resonated with these young people, that is, if the themes spoke to their lived experience as a young person in Campaspe.

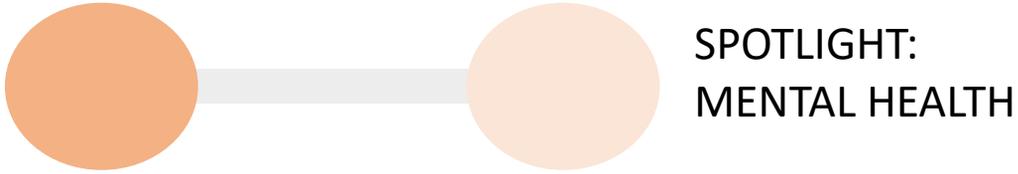
Through the process of preparing this presentation, the analysis was further refined, and at this point it was led by the VU researchers, in consultation with youth researcher volunteers (because not everyone was available, or volunteered to present to or attend the YAG). The presentation to the YAG involved the presentation of preliminary themes, along with some of the survey data that complemented the interview data and acted as a form of data triangulation. The young people also spoke about their participation in the project more broadly and the development of the research project in response to the brief (i.e., practical task). To prepare for this session, additional data analysis and a preparation session were run with two of the Activate Youth Voice members.

3. WHAT WE FOUND

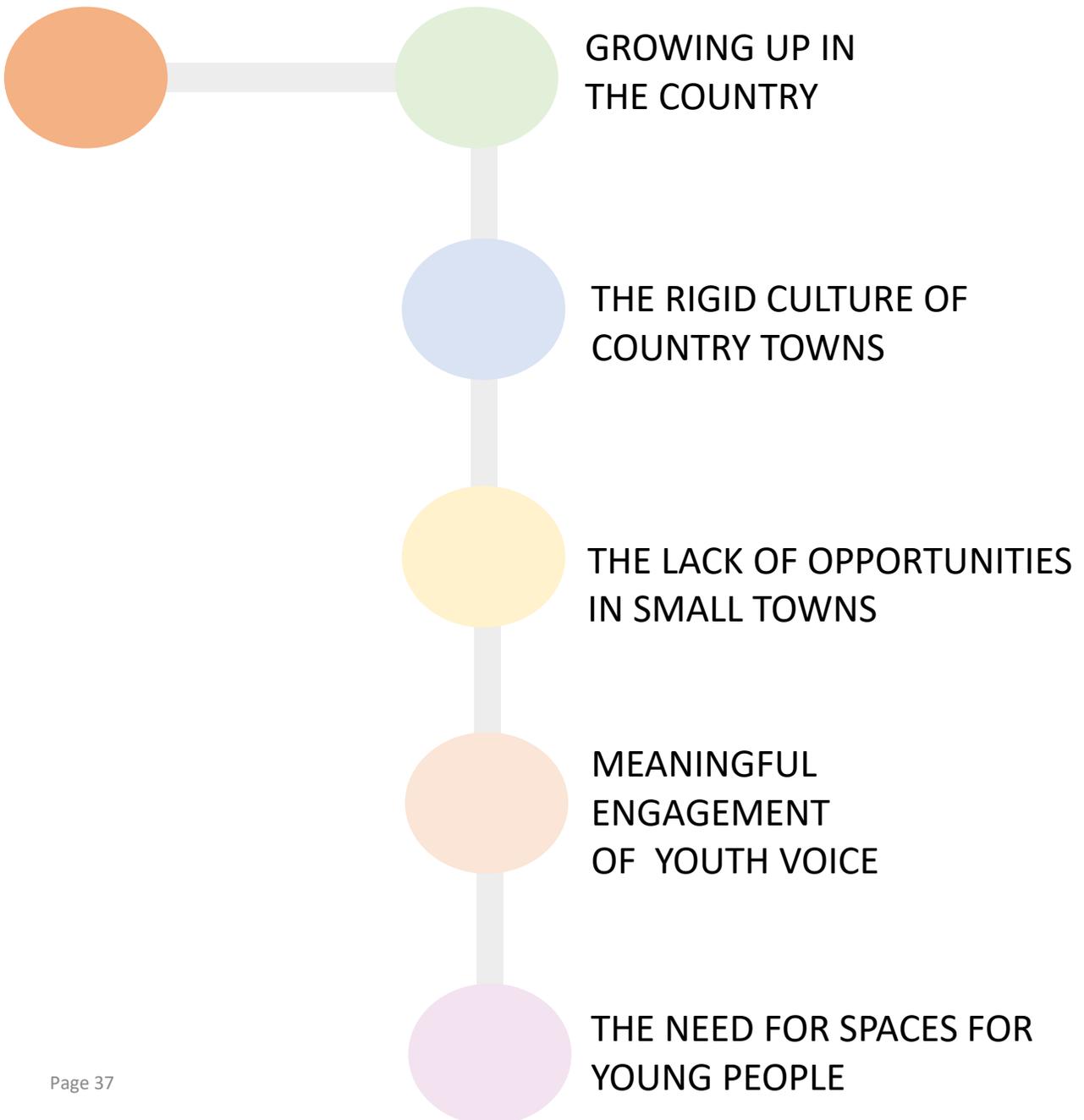
The current research sought to hear from young people in the Loddon Mallee region about the issues affecting them in their town/region, and what makes them leave/stay.

We first present the findings in relation to some of the key issues of concern for young people. We then present the themes identified following thematic analysis around what makes young people stay/leave country towns.

KEY ISSUES
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



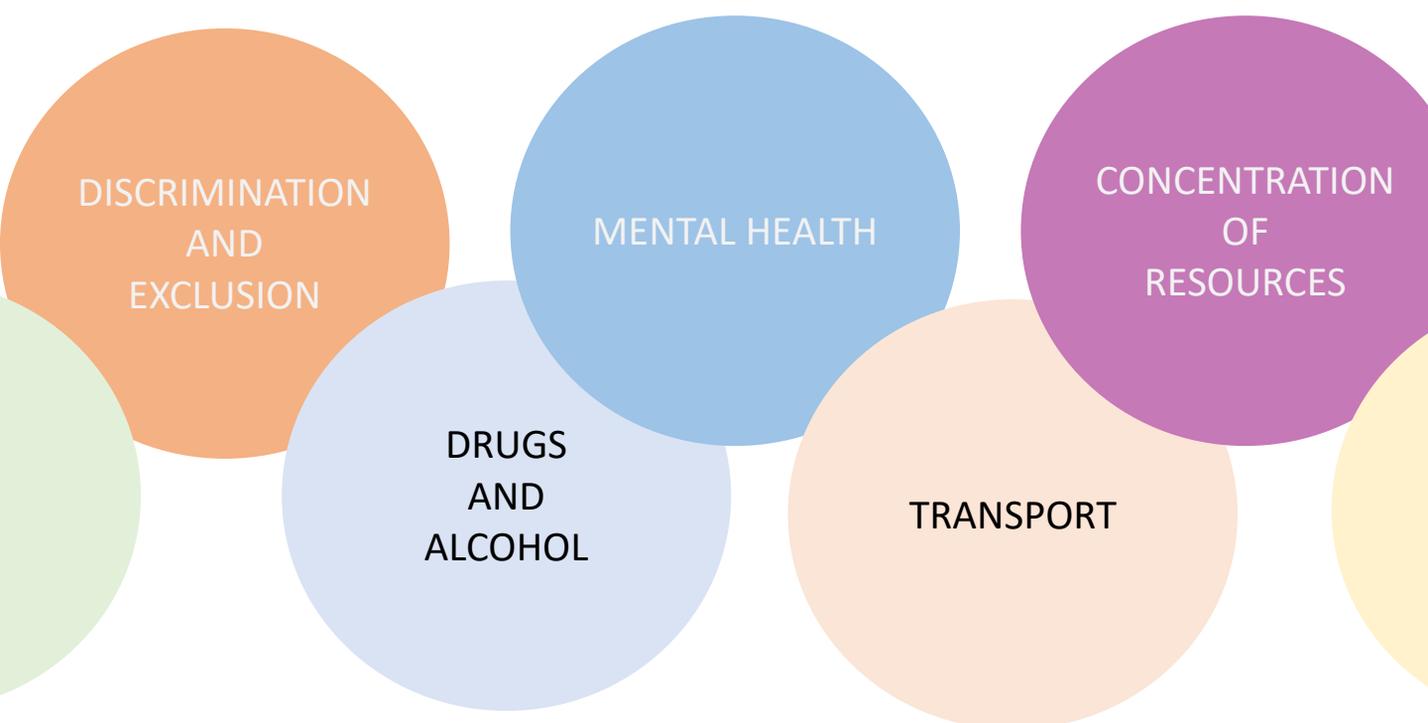
REASONS TO STAY
AND LEAVE



KEY ISSUES

IDENTIFIED BY YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Both interviews and surveys asked participants to identify the key issues facing young people in their local area. Across both interview and survey data, mental health stood out at the number one issue identified by participants.



Some of the key issues identified across interview data were drugs and alcohol, discrimination and exclusion, transport, and concentration of resources. We will discuss mental health as the most prominent issue of concern in the following sections. Some of the other key issues will also be elaborated on in the discussion of other themes identified following thematic analysis (for example, discrimination and exclusion is captured in the theme ‘the rigid culture of country towns’). Importantly, mental health needs to be understood in relation to these other issues. For example, drugs and alcohol and discrimination and exclusion have clear impacts on mental health and wellbeing, and transport relates to opportunities for education and employment and access to mental health services etc.

SURVEY RESPONSES

KEY ISSUES

In the survey data, mental health was mentioned by 14 respondents as one of the top 3 issues facing young people in their local area. This included concerns about access to mental health services (waiting times and affordability), mental health education, stigma, suicide, body image.

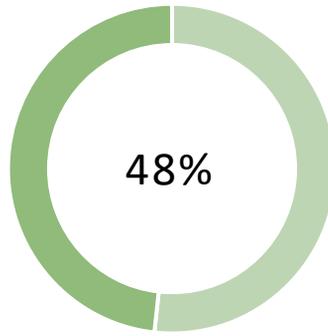
SURVEY RESPONSES

KEY ISSUES

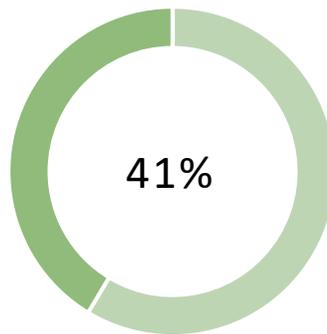
Unemployment and financial insecurity was the next most common issue (mentioned by 12 survey respondents), followed by drugs and alcohol (10), lack of things to do, and finally housing and homelessness (7). Other issues mentioned included: Environmental issues, Transport (2), family violence, lack of GP's, racists, lack of sense of community, inadequate public parks, graffiti/vandalism, bullying, social isolation, crappy schools, road accidents, safety, recover post Covid, good sex education and learning about consent in schools, that people need a label, there's not much physical history left- it's all modernised (referring to the Port) (Note: respondents were free to name the issue- they were not pre-filled responses).

“Speaking up, seeking help,
not knowing where to get
help...”

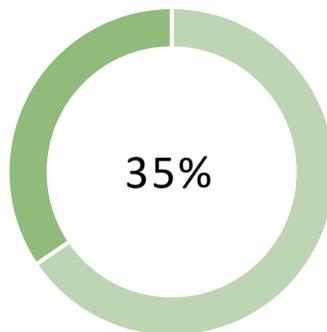
MENTAL HEALTH



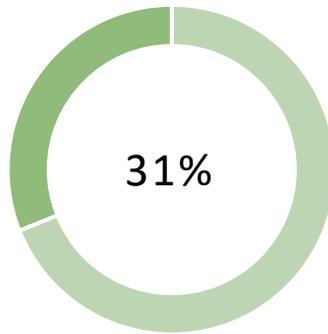
FINANCIAL SECURITY AND EMPLOYMENT



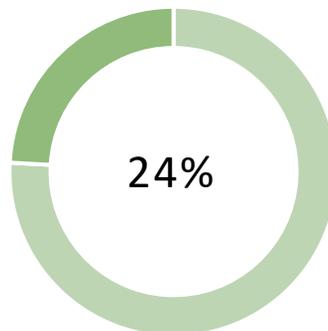
DRUGS AND ALCOHOL



THINGS TO DO

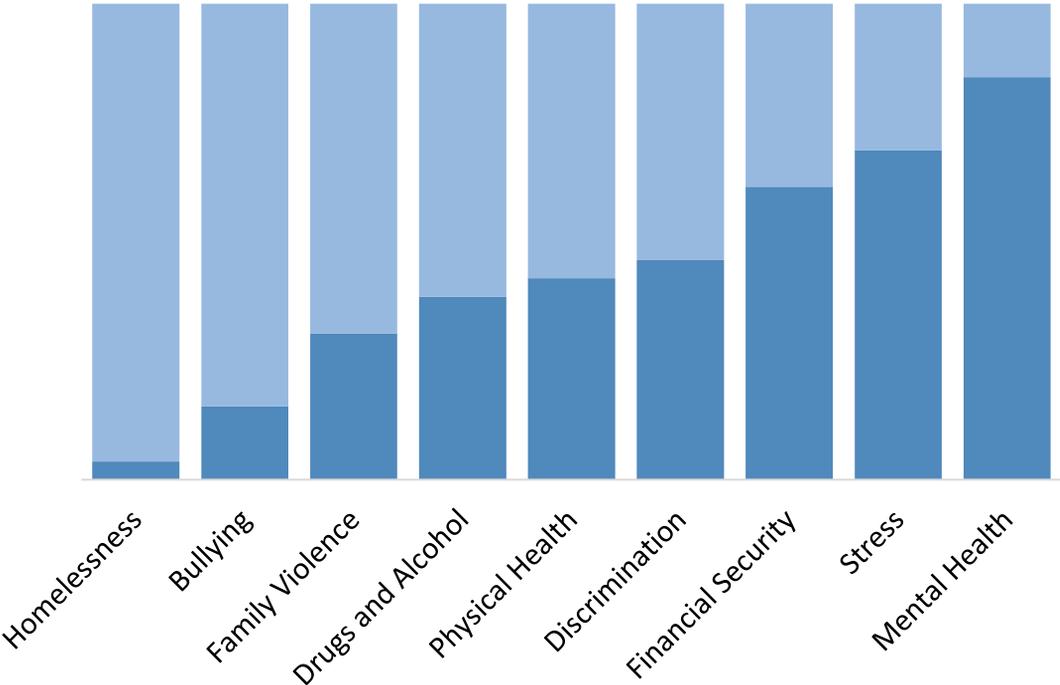


HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS



KEY ISSUES

Importantly, respondents were asked to indicate which of a set of issues they were concerned about personally (they were able to tick all that applied). While family violence was not one of the most frequently mentioned issues for young people in their local area, there were 8/26 respondents who indicated that they were personally concerned about family violence. Mental health (84.6%), stress (69.2%), financial insecurity (61.5%), discrimination (46.2%) were the the most frequently identified issues respondents were personally concerned about. One respondent used the 'other' option to note 'homeless'.



KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

Across both interview and survey data, mental health was identified as the number one issue for young people (stress was the second most common response regarding what young people were concerned about personally).

There were a number of key aspects to this concern about mental health, namely:

- Lack of youth focused and affordable local services
- Long wait times and difficulty accessing services
- Stigma around mental health
- Education on mental health and how/where to access support

Young people expressed concern about long wait times to receive mental health care and support, not having access to affordable, youth focused services in their local area, and the stigma associated with mental health which makes it difficult to speak about mental health issues.

KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

Some young people emphasised the relatively high level of mental health literacy/awareness, while others called for more education on mental health and of how and where to seek support. In the example below, Keanu highlights the difference between metro and rural cities in relation to access to mental health care but also in terms of the level of stigma around talking about mental health that can exist in regional areas (relating to the 'rigid culture of country towns).

‘
Mental health is massive. I don't think it's any surprise when we talk about the difference between metro and rural cities. Struggles for young people, mental health is always going to be number one. The stigma around mental health in rural communities is massive. Especially being a young guy, the stereotypes of, "Man up and just get over your problems," is exacerbated tenfold as you get into rural communities. (Keanu)

’

Lack of access to mental health services in their local area was identified as a major issue for young people. One survey respondent commented: “waiting times to get mental health support and we can't afford to go to any ones that cost money” (Survey response- top three issues for young people).

KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

In the excerpt below, Keanu highlights that the demand for mental health support is far greater than the support that is available.

It's hard when we have so many young people struggling with mental health, but they put one service in one town and expect every young person to travel to that one. Or, "Oh, just jump on a train and head over here or head over there."
(Keanu)

Keanu noted that while there might be other local services available, they are not necessarily "doing good things" or are not youth specific, and highlighted the Headspace model as responding to the needs of young people but that it is not easily accessible.

There's a few more localised ones....but again, they're not doing great things or doing well, and there's no youth specific ones. There's no Headspace model, I guess, of that sort of service. I think Headspace is kind of still touted as the, "Hey, if you have any struggles, go to Headspace," but it is an hour plus on a train. (Keanu)

A number of young people emphasised the long wait times to see GPs and mental health workers. For Kimmi, this pushed her to seek support in Melbourne at times.

So, I think the waitlist around here to see a GP is two or three weeks. And to see a psychologist or counselor, the waitlist is two months, so... it's gotten to the point where sometimes I go to Melbourne just to go, and see a doctor because I can't get an appointment anywhere around here. So, in terms of young people accessing mental health support, that's a big problem (Kimmi).

KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

Kimmi went on to emphasise how underfunded mental health services are and her concern about the lack of early intervention available, with people only receiving support when they hit crisis point.

The Headspace here is so underfunded, and has waitlists for a month to see young people. And then they prioritize those who are reaching crisis point, but then they can't follow up as often. You know what I mean? Because they have to see so many people. And so then, I had friends who have been in situations where there's no early intervention for them, if they have a mental health issue. And so then, they'd wait until they reach a critical point, and they have to go to ED [emergency department] or something or they have to access AOD [alcohol and other drugs] support, whereas if there was support two or three years earlier, this wouldn't have been an issue. (Kimmi)

Mia also emphasised that there are not many places to go to seek mental health support outside of family.

Well, there's not really many places to go where young people could go and talk to someone about their mental health instead of having to go to their parents first. So, that'd probably be helpful. (Mia)

From Mia's perspective, the issue of mental health is something that is ignored:

We kind of have an issue with mental health and they kind of ignore that, especially in the schools and that. So, probably trying to deal with that. (Mia)

KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

Some respondents emphasised the lack of awareness of where and how to seek help:

Speaking up and seeking help, travel for some, and not knowing where to get help for a range of issues such as homelessness and mental health (Survey response- top three issues for young people)

Educating on mental health: What these terms mean, how to get help... general lack of awareness of what certain terms mean.. (Survey response- top three issues for young people)

While some young people emphasised the need for further education on mental health, others emphasised that mental health is “well publicised now” or that mental health awareness is not necessarily the problem. In the excerpt below, Theo emphasised the generational change in the acceptability in talking about issues of mental health. Specifically he mentions his footy club and the procedures they have in place relating to issues of mental health.

Mental health. That's the one that just jumps out at me straight away. Certainly mental health is a big one, which is well publicized nowadays, for a good thing. People are starting to recognize it a lot more, understand it a lot more and a lot more work has been put towards it, which is great. I know footy clubs and all that nowadays. It was never a thing in the past, you didn't talk about mental health, it was all about physical health and that. Whereas at our clubs specifically, we've got a lot of mental health procedures in place now, which I love seeing it. So that's the one that springs to mind. (Theo)

KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

Theo emphasised the change that he has seen from when he was a teenager to now, in that there is more education and awareness about mental health, though he emphasised that the more avenues for support the better.

the services that we've got at the moment, I didn't even know about them when I was a teenager and that, whereas nowadays a lot more teenagers are starting to hear about them because there is a lot more education. So I'd say the first and foremost thing is that education, getting out there about what we have at the moment, because they are incredible. And then from there, opening up more avenues wouldn't be a bad thing because that might open up more avenues for someone to have a chat, because the broader it is... Some people might feel more comfortable attending a certain place, or they might have connections there and so forth, especially with mental health, so I think that's really important. (Theo)

In her reflections, Kimmi said that young people have an awareness of mental health, but do not necessarily know what to do to support their peers in difficult conversations.

I don't think that there's necessarily a lack of awareness about mental health issues, and looking after your mental health or being able to identify the signs. It's just more like, "Now that we've identified the science, what do we do about it?" When I was 16, we all knew that some of my friends had anxiety, and depression or eating disorders or something like that. But then it was like, "Well, we don't know what to do about it." Yes, we've identified it but now what the hell do we do about this?... (Kimmi)

KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

Also captured in Kimmi's reflections is the issue of access to services (relating to costs) and young people's reluctance to speak up about mental health issues to their parents, with older generations recognised as having lower levels of mental health literacy and so not necessarily being comfortable in speaking to them.

So, I don't think there's a problem in terms of mental health literacy, maybe amongst parents, there's more of a bigger problem. I had a lot of my friends' parents brush it under the carpet, say it wasn't a big issue when it really was. And there were also some people who could have afforded private health care to go see a private psychologist or something. And then because they didn't want to tell their parents because they didn't want to be laughed at or something. So, they go into Headspace instead, because then they could access it for free. So, I don't know if awareness is a problem, maybe just amongst the older generation. (Kimmi)

In the excerpt below, Clara emphasised the importance of mental health awareness along with education around related issues of drugs and alcohol, relationships, sex and consent.

Mental health awareness, proper drugs and alcohol education, proper sex education. That's a big one for me because I think it really, really helps, especially when you're in your teen years to understand things like consent. That's a really big heavy topic these days. And it really helps you feel more confident in your own identity. And I think healthy minds first, then healthy body, then healthy soul. And I think they're all connected. And I think programs that help students or just youth find those paths are really important. (Clara)

KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

Importantly, she also articulated the connection between mind, body and soul and of programs that help young people find their path in life.

Another (resident of Campaspe) spoke about the issue of mental health which she feels is not addressed.

I think a really important thing that isn't really addressed is mental health here. Recently, there's been a lot of really sad instances of...suicide. (Natalie)

She was speaking about incidents of suicide in the town and went on to explain that there is a lack of services or people you can talk to.

...And myself as well, I feel like everybody goes through a little bit of stress or they just feel like they don't really have anyone to talk to. Especially when you're really busy or you're just going through things and you don't really feel like you have anyone to talk to about it. I feel like other towns have more services for people to talk about mental health and things like that, like an actual Headspace building or organization that you can go to in the town. I think Bendigo has a Headspace shop or organization that you can go into. (Natalie)

Natalie identifies that people are not feeling like they are supported, and emphasises the need to normalise discussions around mental health and seeking help for mental health support (i.e., challenging stigma).

KEY ISSUE: MENTAL HEALTH

I feel like that's really important here, especially recently how there's been a lot of instances of people not feeling like they're supported. I feel like that's a really big issue and that just needs to be made not to be a massive deal, just a normal thing that people can talk about because if people don't feel comfortable, then it will just build up and then more and more people will feel alone and bad things will just happen. I feel like that's a really big issue that needs to be addressed. (Natalie)

Natalie went on to problematise the way funding is being distributed in the town (to re-developing the Port) emphasising the need to instead put the money into mental health services or programs that support mental health and wellbeing.

It's great how it is and I feel like that's a lot of money just to be used against something that's already great. It should be focused towards something that needs a lot more work. That money could be used to start up a facility for mental health or it could be used to improve something that's already started out that's really great and just make it even better. (Natalie)

REASONS TO STAY AND LEAVE

Through the process of data analysis, a number of themes were identified across both interview and qualitative survey responses to answer our research question: What makes young people stay/leave regional towns? The themes identified were:

1. **Growing up in the country: *“I just love that real community feeling”***
2. **The rigid culture of country towns: *“there's a lot of young people in marginalized communities that don't feel connected”***
3. **Lack of opportunities in small towns: *“All these tiny places that have no opportunities. How can they stay?”***
4. **The need for spaces for young people: *“There's not really anything that makes us feel like we're a part of the community”***
5. **The meaningful engagement of youth voice: *“They're just going to end up with 1000 skate parks”***

In the sections below, we will draw on quotes from the young people to demonstrate these key themes. Our conclusion will focus on what makes young people stay (which ultimately reiterates the other themes).

In reporting on these key themes we draw from both interview and survey data. Evident across the data set was the diverse experiences of young people across the Loddon Mallee region, based on their different social group memberships, aspirations, and life circumstances. Also captured across the data sets was what young people loved about growing up in the country, as well as the aspects of country life that they found challenging or would like to see improvements in. Across the data, it was clear that the chief reason why young people leave was the lack of educational and employment opportunities for young people in small country towns, with many having to leave to attend university (in Melbourne, or a larger regional centre e.g., Bendigo) or find/follow employment opportunities- to chase their dreams.

Example Quotes



GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

Across both survey and interview data, young people spoke about what it was like growing up or living in the country. They shared the aspects of country life they value including the sense of community, the friendliness of people, proximity to family, the natural environment, as well as access to arts, sporting and cultural activities.

“I just love that real
community feeling”

GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the top three things they enjoy about where they live (open response). In the survey responses, the culture of living in a country town, or as some called it: “small town experience” and “country vibe” appeared 10 times. This included a quietness, a sense of safety and a valuing of having close proximity to shops. References to the friendliness of the community and people appeared 9 times, and references to being close to nature 13 times as respondents shared their enjoyment of the local bushland or beach, local trails, parks, and gardens.

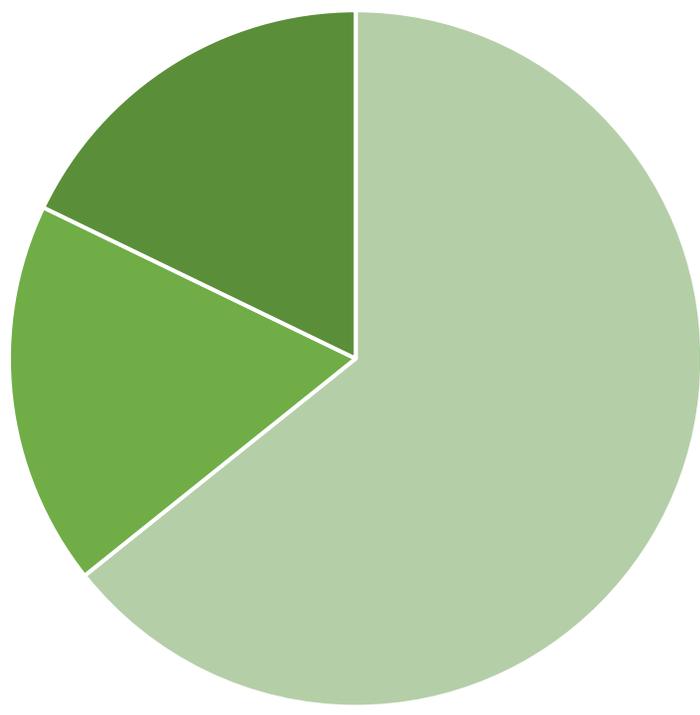
Community, community, connection, community, green and small businesses. Having a university in my town, the music and arts scene and the environment and walking trails. Community, the quiet and the proximity to family and city (happy medium), friendly community and country vibe. The friendliness of people, nature reserves and walking paths and the closer shops to my home. The rivers and port region are nice. The small town atmosphere. Family, friends and place.

Other respondents referenced specific events such as the Bendigo Blues and Roots festival, or the businesses and shops in their local town, the local nightlife or the music and arts scene. Others talked about the presence of a university as being a key feature for them. Importantly, three respondents spoke of their town being a happy medium of being located far enough to enjoy the benefits of the small town experience, but located close enough to an urban centre such as Bendigo or Melbourne.

GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

As part of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they feel like they belong in their hometown. The majority of respondents (18/28) indicated that they agreed with this statement (with 5 disagreeing that they feel a sense of belonging in their hometown).

I FEEL LIKE I BELONG IN MY HOMETOWN



■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree

GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

Participants shared what it is like growing up in country towns, including what they valued about living in a country town. Many emphasised that their town is small, with not much to do, but that they enjoyed living there.

I do like it. It's a lot different from say, like Echuca or Bendigo. It's, as you probably know, quite small. Probably I think like ... How many are we now? I think we're like seven, 800 people. But it feels like there's not very many. It's not a big place. There's not a whole lot of things to do, but we make it work. I've got friends here. We'll hang out, walk around town, find things to do, just stuff like that. (Robert)

Many spoke about the sense of community that comes with country life- that everyone knows each other and looks out for each other. For example, Keanu who grew up in a small town but had to move to a more metro area for work opportunities commented:

...I really love the sense of community. I still go back and visit my dad over in [Town] He lives in a really small court and has really good connections with his neighbors, and always, "Oh, I'm over at my neighbor's place, helping him fix this. He's over here helping me fix that... I absolutely love that. I think it's something that metro city really misses, is that really big sense of community and connection that we get in a rural township. (Keanu)

Similarly, when asked what he appreciated about living in the regional town he was living in (Bendigo), Theo also commented on the 'community feeling' that he argues that you just don't get 'in the big smoke' (Melbourne).

GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

I just love that real community feeling. And since I've had friends who have moved out of state and all that, and they say they miss how close you get with a lot of your friends and all that, in a town like Bendigo. So I think that's one thing that stands out to me. (Keanu)

Many spoke about this closeness of community in the country; that you can walk down the street and bump into people who you know. This familiarity contributes to a sense of belonging in the town as captured in the quote from Theo when asked about his sense of belonging.

A hundred percent, yep. Yep, with friends, community and sporting clubs and all that. Even at a place like, you go to a gym, everyone knows each other. Whereas, if you went to a gym down in Melbourne that might be a bit more hectic and those kinds of things. Whereas I walk into the gym nowadays and I know 95% of the people. Same thing, you go down the street, you bump into 15 people you know, you just end up talking half the time, you don't end up doing what you were meant to do. But yeah, it is a real community based feeling, for sure. (Theo)

Natalie and Robert also spoke about this closeness of community, that you know everyone and the way “everyone looks out for each other”. However, they also recognised that knowing everyone is not always “the best thing”.

I do feel like I belong here because I've lived here my whole life and because it is such a small town, you do get to know everyone here. Everyone knows you, or have heard of you, that knows your business kind of thing. It's good in a way, but it's also bad in a way. I feel like because I've been here so long, I just feel comfortable here and it's just second nature to me. (Natalie)

GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

I think it's a very close community. Everyone knows everyone, which sometimes isn't the best thing, but it's really good a lot of times. And a lot of the community tends to look out for each other and it's really, really good like that. And a lot of people who have moved here over the course of time that I've lived here have really made a big impact on [TOWN] (Robert).

Also captured within the quote from Robert, is the idea that people moving into the region have been able to make a “big impact” on the town. Importantly, whilst Robert noted this, at other times, he mentioned that it can be incredibly difficult to change a town that has been that way for a long time (see ‘the rigid culture of country towns’). From his perspective,

It's a very close community and a lot of the people that have moved here, haven't been as gossipy as a lot of the other people who have lived here for their entire life. (Robert)

Also captured in the way the young people spoke about growing up in the country, was their connection to the town or the region because of the simple fact that they have grown up there and/or their families (including extended family) are there- that everything important is there.

I've grown up here my whole life, I haven't moved away or anything, so I've got nowhere really to compare to, that's for sure. I've loved it, both my parents have been in Bendigo from a very young age as well. So my whole family background, everything's based in Bendigo. All my family's here, obviously all my friends. I don't have much family away so everything's pretty close by, which makes it pretty awesome. (Theo)

GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

Natalie, who is from Campaspe, spoke about having a good childhood growing up in or near Echuca, emphasising nature (including the river) and also the sport related activities she could be involved in.

I feel like I've had a pretty good childhood living here. There's been lots of activities and sporting teams that I could be involved in.

It's a nice town and it has a good environment, the scenic drive is really nice. It's a good place to go in and walk around in the nature.

I think the river. Everyone loves the river, especially in the summer and just going down there and floating or skiing. Everyone really likes the river (Natalie).

THE RIGID CULTURE OF COUNTRY TOWNS

While the previous theme highlights the aspects of country life that young people valued, such as the positive psychosocial impacts of sense of community and developing a strong community identity this theme surfaces the experiences of many young people, who feel there are hard lines drawn around who can belong and how

“...there's a lot of young people in marginalized communities that don't feel connected”

THE RIGID CULTURE OF COUNTRY TOWNS

While the previous theme highlights the aspects of country life that young people valued, such as the positive psychosocial impacts of sense of community and developing a strong community identity this theme surfaces the experiences of many young people, who feel there are hard lines drawn around who can belong and how. The rigid boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, were experienced by some some participants, as their social and economic identities and positions at times placed them outside of homogenised constructions of the community. One participant recounted the ways he and his mother were ethnicised, in comparison to the white Anglo-Celtic norm of the town they had moved to:

It's hard to change a town that's been one way for many years. And like I said before, a lot of the older generation tend to take anything they can and gossip about it. Actually as soon as Mum and I moved here, we moved here around 10 years ago. As soon as we moved in, there were people that were like, "Oh, this ethnic mother and son has moved in. I wonder what they're like." (Robert)

Whilst such an experience may differ to direct forms of explicit racism, it positioned Robert and his mother as outsiders to the established community. For another participant, Haley, socioeconomic position within the community was an important marker of inclusion and exclusion:

I honestly feel like it's been quite divided, in terms of you have, I suppose, lower class people who are kind of running under the surface of Gisborne. And then you have the people who, I suppose, do all the community stuff, run the council, do the libraries, do those activities. I think, if you're really looking for the people who are kind of participating in those things, they are quite often very similar, and all from like a similar background, in terms of age, stage, income, whatever else. So, I think that it's very, yeah, it's not a very open playing field. (Haley)

THE RIGID CULTURE OF COUNTRY TOWNS

Whilst being a newcomer to a community, like Robert, can contribute to outsider status and experiences of exclusion, for Haley forms of exclusion predicated on socioeconomic position was often intergenerational within the same community.

For many who experience exclusion it can be quite difficult connecting into a sense of community, and are instead pushed to seek a sense of belonging in other spaces and places. In the excerpt below, Keanu discusses how ‘mates that are in the LGBT community’ did not have a strong connection to their community (in contrast to his strong sense of community) and it was only in leaving their town that they found a sense of community elsewhere.

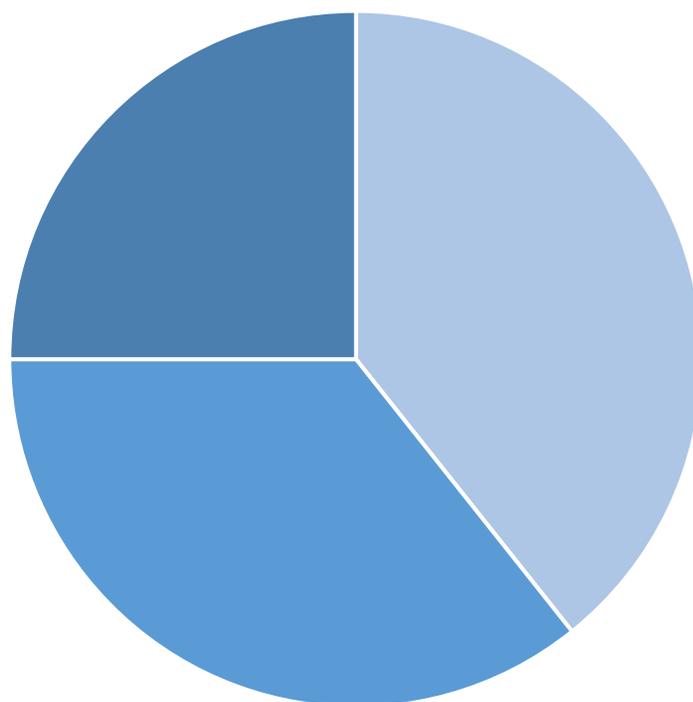
But I also think there's a lot of young people in marginalized communities that don't feel connected, once they finish high school and they're able to go to university and kind of discover who they are, and they find their sense of community elsewhere. (Keanu)

I'm thinking of a lot of my mates that are in the LGBT community, that in small towns didn't feel connected, and once they got to university and started meeting other people from the LGBT community, feeling a lot more a sense of connection and a lot more... They felt like they fit in for the first time. I think that was really good. So I think we'd still need to do a lot more work in that space of making sure that that sense of community isn't as rigid in our towns, as we do need to fit this specific stereotype of country Victoria that is quite backward sometimes, and have our young people still feel connected to it, even if they don't fit into that norm. (Keanu)

THE RIGID CULTURE OF COUNTRY TOWNS

Some of these experiences of exclusion were also present in the survey responses. Whilst many of the survey respondents indicated that in their local area there was a welcoming atmosphere (16/28), or that they were able to celebrate their identities (11/28), or that Indigenous and non-Anglo cultures were respected and celebrated (10/28), this was not the case for all participants. One quarter of respondents reported not feeling able to celebrate their identity, with over a third providing a neutral response. When removing neutral responses, just under half felt that Indigenous and non-Anglo cultures weren't respected or celebrated.

I FEEL LIKE I AM ABLE TO CELEBRATE MY IDENTITY



■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree

THE RIGID CULTURE OF COUNTRY TOWNS

An important form of exclusion is from opportunities for civic participation, and spaces that facilitate decision making within the community. For some of the participants, it was a particular subset of community members, who often shared similar socioeconomic locations and cultural backgrounds, that became leaders within the community or became representatives of community voice. Many participants also noted that this was also reflected in the kinds of recreational activities that people participated in. Sporting clubs serve as important community resources within regional areas, representing opportunities for leadership, connecting to town identity, and developing social capital. Sporting club membership and participation are also a mechanism which contribute to homogenous forms of community and culture experienced by some participants:

...it always gets spoken about, that, especially in country towns, the football and netball club is the center of the community. I think any young person that can be a part of that has quite a big sense of community towards that and does feel quite connected to their town. I did, when I was younger, and felt pretty pressured into football, and felt pretty connected into that space, right up until the point that I didn't, and then felt quite alienated and couldn't really connect with that community, and then struggled to find an identity or a community outside of that. (Keanu)

This has implications for those within the community that not only have marginalised identities across ethnicity, race, class and sexuality, but whom also seek belonging in alternate spaces beyond the dominant sporting institutions within the community.

THE RIGID CULTURE OF COUNTRY TOWNS

Spaces such as sporting clubs and institutions are points of connection to a community and can be pathways to decision making spaces. However, without fostering alternate spaces, many young people can be excluded from these pathways and opportunities, a form of exclusion that can also intersect with other marginalised identities.

The rigid culture of country towns can also shape the behaviours of young people. Whilst, mental health was a key issue of concern for many of the participants, some participants also notes the presence of gendered stigma of mental health help-seeking for men:

The stigma around mental health in rural communities is massive. Especially being a young guy, the stereotypes of, "Man up and just get over your problems," is exacerbated tenfold as you get into rural communities. Farming communities and stuff are always seen as the blokiest blokes and all that sort of stuff. I think that struggles with mental health and stigma and stuff are just incredibly way too high in rural settings. (Keanu)

Even for those who may be located within the boundaries of inclusion for a particular community, social expectations around masculinity can have significant impacts. For Keanu, broader social expectations of “manning up” are intensified, as community belonging can also be contingent on replicating “bloke culture”.

THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

The previous theme highlighted what young people enjoy most about growing up/living in the country including the natural environment, one of the strongest themes across the data set was about the lack of educational and employment opportunities in small towns, pushing them to Melbourne or regional centres.

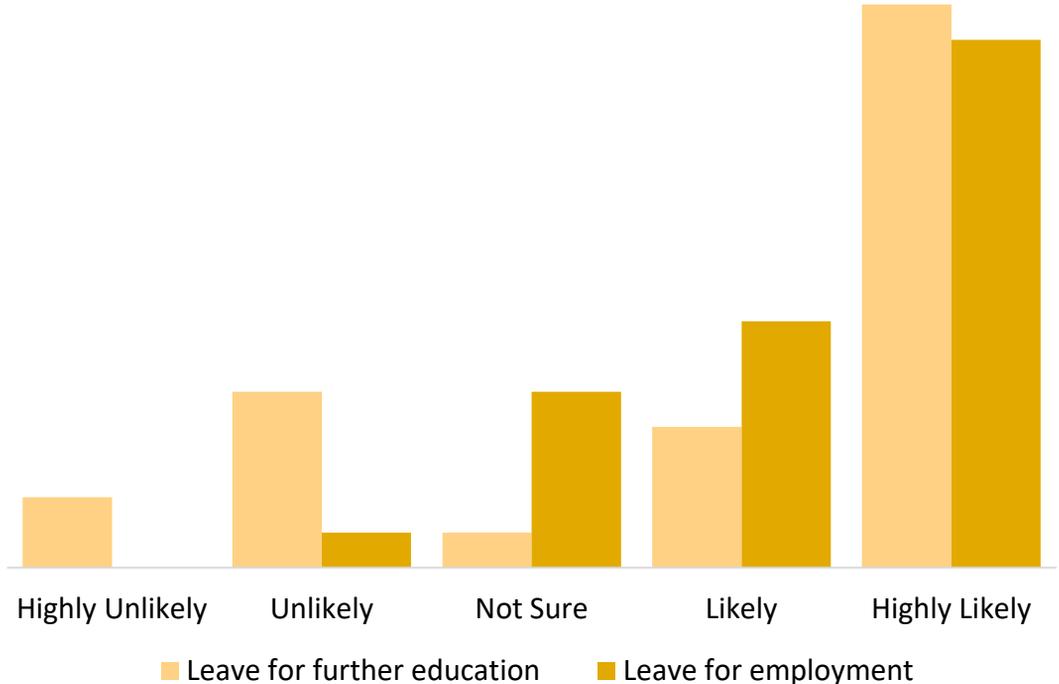
“All these tiny places that
have no opportunities.
How can they stay?”

THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

The push and pull factors for young people are captured in the reflection below from Haley.

You know, I think it's a really beautiful town. And I think it's got great scenery. But in terms of what else it offers, those who aren't well-educated or aren't well-funded, I think it's probably really, really limited, to be quite honest.
(Haley)

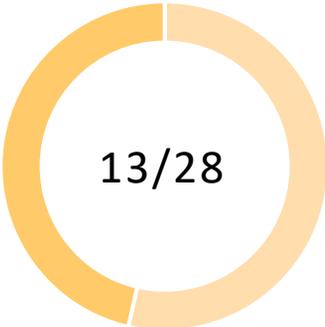
Below also shows the survey responses to the question of how likely it is that they will leave their town/region for further education or employment opportunities. The most common response to these questions was 'highly likely', with 15-16 of the 28 responses indicating this choice.



THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

Survey respondents were asked to indicate which statements apply to them in relation to opportunities available to them where they live. As highlighted in the figure above, 13/28 respondents indicated that there are a good amount of education opportunities in their area, only 9/28 felt like they are supported to achieve their goals in their local area, and only 7/28 think they could find their ideal job in their local area. (Note: a large number of survey respondents were from Bendigo where there is a University).

In my local area there are a Good amount of education opportunities



I think I could find my ideal job in my local area



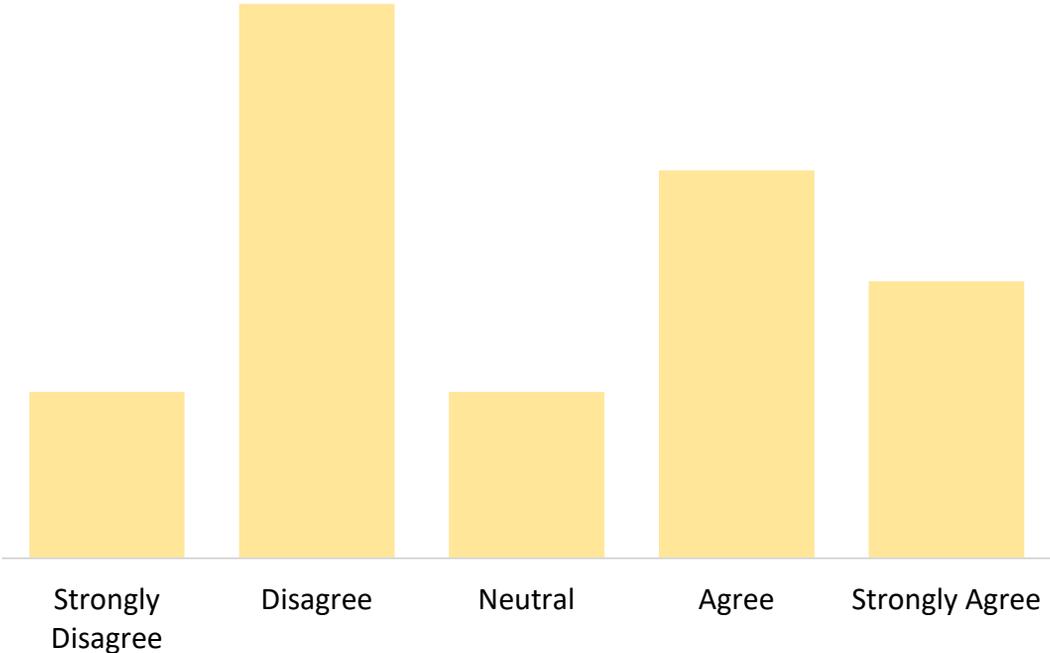
I feel supported in achieving my goals in my local area



THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate their level of agreement to a number of statements, one being ‘I would want to live in this area for most of my life’. The most common response was ‘disagree’ (12 agreement; 13 disagreement). Unfortunately, we did not ask participants to provide a qualitative response to explain their response choice, however, there is likely to be a range of reasons informing this choice, with employment and educational opportunities being a key factor. However, we can get a sense of the why by exploring the interview data (with many of those who were interviewed, also having completed the survey).

I would want to live in this area for most my life



THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

One of the major considerations young people have in regards to whether they stay or leave their town or region is in the employment and education opportunities available to them and if this aligns with their chosen career. Many participants indicated that they have had to move (or expect that they will have to move in the future) to pursue education or employment opportunities. As captured in the examples below, this pushes many to the City.

‘ Certainly. I think more job opportunities. I think that's why a lot of people went up in Melbourne, finishing a degree, or higher paying jobs, or better jobs. That's a real appealing factor to a place like Melbourne or even in a city. (Theo)

I'm mostly just planning on staying in Bendigo to finish my course, and then once I finish my course, hopefully moving somewhere else. Yeah. I don't know. Bendigo is a pretty good spot. Like, it's not too far away from Melbourne and I quite like the sort of scenery on the outskirts and nearby. It probably just depends on where the most job opportunities are for what I'm interested in. (Bea)

Many noted the limited job opportunities in regional towns, once they graduate, emphasising that they are often casual jobs, often in hospitality, given that their towns are tourist towns- they are not the kind of jobs that they would want to do forever.

‘ Career-wise, there's a lot of opportunities sort of for, I'd say, jobs while you're at school. But like career-wise, once you graduate, it's probably only limited positions (Bea).

THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

I feel like they couldn't really give many more opportunities here. It's just such a small town. It's a tourist town... I'd just rather be elsewhere. Because there's jobs here, but it's more just casual jobs, not really something I'd do forever.
(Mia)

Going back to job opportunities. I don't think there's that many job opportunities for people once they've finished their degrees. Just to branch out to a bigger town and places that have more opportunities. And also, it was mainly to do with jobs and things. It's a really nice town to settle down once, I think, your career's sorted. If you're looking for something, but you couldn't find it here, but it just stems back to if you can really get a job here or not.
(Natalie)

When asked if he would stay in his regional town if there were more opportunities, Keanu said: "100%. 100%. I absolutely love country Victoria. It is absolutely amazing". He continued:

I love small towns and country towns and all that sort of stuff. So if the opportunities were there and there was space for the amount of work that is needed and all that sort of stuff... I think there's small little snippets, especially when you're looking at youth work or youth mental health, and you can find it, but again, it's something you've really got to start searching for, and even then you're competing with everyone else that's also trying to do the same thing. There's not enough work to go around for everyone. (Keanu)

THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

In the excerpt below from Ben, he asks “How can they stay”, highlighting the strong push factors for country kids following employment and education opportunities, ‘greener pastures’ and at the same time, the desire to stay- which was seen as an impossibility.

It all goes back to employment opportunities and educational opportunities...All these tiny places that have no opportunities. How can they stay?... Young people are leaving because they see brighter pastures, or whatever that term is. I didn't want to leave [TOWN], I was very happy in TOWN. I had to leave TOWN. It wasn't up to ... That can be really hard for a lot of people when you feel your identity is so strongly somewhere as I did. And then you have to leave to chase another dream. (Ben)

This powerful quote from Ben highlights the sense of loss that young people face in having to leave to create their futures. Some participants expressed their desire or plans to move back in the future. This is captured in the excerpt below from Kimmi (based in Bendigo), and was previously captured in the quote from Natalie when she said “It's a really nice town to settle down once, ... your career's sorted”.

If I can stay, I would love to stay. It's just a matter of whether I could get the right work experience. I want to work in the public sector. So, I don't know whether I could work regionally if they would... If I joined a grad program, they'd probably want me to go to Melbourne for a couple of years before I could go out regionally. Yeah. And I think if you want to work in the NGO space, you'd probably get more money if you worked in Melbourne than if you work here. So, yeah. I think it just depends on what jobs I could get in terms of raising a family or investing or buying a house. I would much prefer to do it here. (Kimmy)

THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

That young people might have to leave their small towns to pursue education and employment opportunities is well recognised. Many of these young people may imagine coming back to their small/regional towns in the future. For example Clara said:

“I do see myself maybe moving back to a community. I'm not sure if it would be Kyneton and I'm not sure how long that would be, like whether it would be within five years or maybe 10 years” (Clara).

However, as captured in the excerpt below from Keanu, this does not always happen- life gets in the way.

I know a lot of young people and a lot of my mates that really loved growing up here and really loved it, and have planned on moving back here, in the last five years. It was, "I'm just going to move in for uni and then I'm going to come back," and then they finished uni, it was like, "Oh, but now the only jobs that are going are over here, so I'm going to move over there. But one day I'm going to come back, I'm going to come back, I'm going to come back." I just got a friend that just bought a house in Tasmania and I was like, "I don't think you're coming back. You kept saying it, but I don't think it's going to happen at this point." (Keanu)

Importantly, the choice to return is not always an option for some. In the excerpt below, the survey respondent reflected on the support they received that allowed them to return to their regional town.

THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

I am really fortunate to be fairly well-established in my life in the region- I've already completed tertiary education and am fairly solid in my work. However I had a really good support system to get to this point, and had to travel away from the region for several years to complete my studies. I know that without those supports I likely wouldn't have returned to the area, and I know that many of my friends I grew up and went to school with didn't for that reason. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunities and choice to return- but not everyone does, and I'm very mindful of that (Survey respondent, other comments).

For Natalie however, she saw that there were more opportunities for her in the country in completing her grad year, where she would get more experience and more 'one on one time with people'.

It really just depends on where I can get my grad year, but I am looking at staying rural at the moment just because I feel like there's a lot more opportunity compared to the city. Because in the city, there's a lot more going on and you don't get really that much one-on-one time with people and stuff like that. When it's rural, you get more experience, and you get to take your time and learn a bit more. I would probably be looking maybe at Bendigo because they have a really good graduate program there (Natalie)

In one of the interviews, a parent happened to join the Zoom interview. In reflecting on growing up in the country, this parent shared the following:

THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS

Yeah, I think some kids in the country.... grow up limited because they just have been taught what their family knows. That's it.

Indeed, within the current research literature on youth mobility and/or retention in regional areas, this idea of continuing on with the family tradition of farming can make the idea of leaving an apparent impossibility- it can be difficult for young people to make the decision to break this family tradition.

THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people spoke about the lack of youth specific spaces and activities, this can impact the sense of belonging young people have within the community, as Robert notes “besides our youth group, there's not really anything that makes us feel like we're a part of the community”.

“There's not really anything that makes us feel like we're a part of the community”

THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In the following excerpt Natalie reflects on the mundane cycle of activities that young people are able to spend their time on:

I find it's boring living here. There's not really a variety of things to do. People tend to go elsewhere for entertainment, I find...I feel like it would be good to have a lot more community events happening just to get everyone involved and make more exciting and that will bring probably other people from different towns in as well, just to make it more exciting and something different to do because, I feel like a lot of people just do the same things every day. Go to work, do a little sport or go to the gym or something, but there's nothing really to look forward to, I found. All I really do is work and go to uni and sleep and eat..
(Natalie)

Great community vibes but not enough for young people to do at times. Hard to travel for work and study also. (survey participant)

For Natalie, having a broader variety of activities and events is not just about decreasing boredom, but creating opportunities for community building and broadening connections between towns. However, some participants also discussed the negative impacts that a lack of activities and events can have. For many survey respondents, 'drugs and alcohol' was listed as both a significant concern individually, and for young people more broadly. In the following excerpt Haley draws connections between the lack of opportunities to engage in different activities and events and how it can contribute to drug and alcohol use:

THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

I know that a lot of my friends and their parents and stuff, like they just didn't go anywhere. They really just were in the house all the time. And I think that's what led, a lot of the time, to a lot of bad stuff, like drug use and alcohol use, is that they couldn't go out and do other things. The most that they were able to do was to maybe walk to another person's house down the street, around the corner, and do drugs and alcohol there, rather than actually being able to get out of [Town] and then having to go places... (Haley)

The experience of feeling excluded from the community can also be exacerbated as young people that are visible in public spaces can often be criminalised:

And a lot of the older generation have either unfortunately passed, or they're still here, and they're just doing the same thing, gossiping about the teenagers walking around, possibly causing trouble. Just anything that they can think of, they want to put up on Facebook and make a big deal about when really there's nothing going on. But ...(Robert)

Young people spending time together outside of community sanctioned spaces, such as sporting clubs, can be viewed as criminal or dangerous with young people perceived as being “up to no good”. The absence of space has important implications for young people who seek to find belonging and their own sense of community by coming together and,

“doing [things] any other teenager would do just sitting there, just listening to music, just talking”.

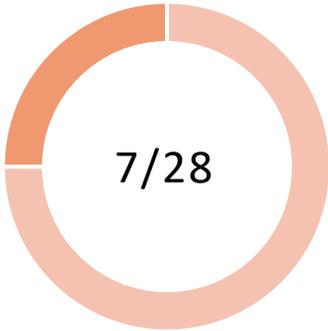
THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Survey respondents also shared similar responses when asked to select from a range of statements that reflected their experience. Of the 28 respondents, half felt bored in their local area, half felt that they do not have what they need in the local area, and almost three quarters reported that there weren't a diverse range of activities for them to participate in.

I am aware of support services in my local area



I feel comfortable accessing the support services I need in my local area

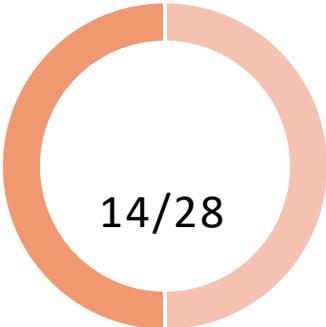


THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

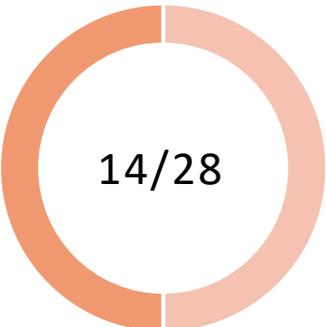
In my local area there are a diverse range of activities to participate in



I feel bored in my local area



I feel like I have what I need in my local area



THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Additionally, less than half reported being aware of support services in their local area, and only one third felt comfortable accessing services they needed. This signifies a need for spaces that are not only youth-centred, but accessible and safe. Many of the participants offered ideas of the kinds of spaces they would like to see in their towns. These were spaces for music or for art, spaces to encounter new hobbies, people and experiences. Having such spaces not only can contribute to a sense of being valued, but provides important opportunities for young people to find and develop interests and relationships that may exist outside of dominant spaces for youth such as sporting clubs:

Maybe different events maybe focusing on major hobbies and things. I know I did see a Facebook post of one girl trying to start up like a ... I think it was sort of like an art night and you could bring your own alcohol. It was like an 18-plus one. And yeah, it was just a night just to like, I don't know, paint. They were given something. You didn't have to be good. That seemed like a fun idea, but I'm not particularly artistic or anything, but there were a few people that were interested in that. (Bea)

Another participant suggested a movie night:

Because it gives us something to do, like on a Friday night or Saturday night where we don't have to go to school the next day or work or whatever. We can just go there, hanging out, get snacks, watch a movie, outdoors. And then on the way home walk all together, hanging out. Because at the moment that is literally the most fun thing to do in [small rural town in Campaspe Shire], is literally walk around with your friends at night. It really is. (Robert)

THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

For another participant, such spaces could also act as important site for accessing services and forms of support:

I think what would be really cool is, some places have youth centrals. Have you ever seen those things? Where essentially all the youth services are hosted in one building. And then it's like a warehouse something, and they have these cool spaces. They have video games, and places for people to study, and have Wi-Fi...young people could access youth workers, etc. "Bendigo needs that" (Kimmi)

For Robert, the idea of starting a movie night was not just creating opportunities for young people to enjoy themselves and hang out, but also to create spaces which young people can take ownership of and exercise their agency. These are important opportunities for community participation that are alternatives to other youth-centred spaces that may not align with the interests of all young people within a town, or even feel exclusionary for some. Kimmi further reflects that spaces that are created must also be safe places, especially for young people located across different marginalised identities:

[The council ask] "Hey, can you get the refugee and migrant youth to come to our building? We just have white kids here. We want it to be more diverse." And I'm like, "It's not my job to shepherd them into your building. You need to make it a safe space for them to exist." (Kimmi)

As Kimmi's comment demonstrates, sometimes it is not enough to simply create a space and allocate the resources.

THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In order to respond to the needs and wishes of young people, it is important to meaningfully and actively engage them in processes of community consultation and decision making (this will be further discussed in the next theme).

Importantly, Keanu emphasised that while there are lots of fantastic things happening within regional areas, often this is not well publicised.

There's a lot of good things happening in country towns and a lot of awesome stuff happening that isn't spoken about enough or isn't publicized enough. Young people don't know about it, and if they don't know about it, they can't join in or can't be connected with it.

Interviewer: Is there anything you would have wanted or needed as a young person in that area that would have connected you better to community or other people?

Keanu: Yeah, just I guess more variety and more... Like I said, there's people out there doing awesome stuff and people out there doing really cool things, but we don't know what we don't know. If you're not in your face and you're not speaking about it loudly and proudly, how are young people supposed to know that it's out there and know that they want to be involved? (Keanu).

Importantly, one young person from Macedon Ranges emphasised the changes they had seen in their local area over the last five years. For this young person, there has been a big improvement in relation to activities for young people.

THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

When I was younger it was somewhat more isolating in my teen years I would say. And that's I think just simply because I've noticed the last five years they really tried to improve youth activities and really tried to change the scope in like getting people to talk about what needed to be changed I guess, or, "What can we do to keep you guys entertained?" But yeah. When I was younger, I wouldn't say that that was easy. Yeah.

I think they really started to push the Macedon Ranges Youth Awards, they really tried to get more arts activities out there too. I think really having the Live4Life program and making that more strengthened in the community, in schools I think definitely has helped a lot of students now try to branch out their voice a little bit more and get heard.

But I think the improvement that I've seen since I finished high school really. And I'm like reading the local newspaper or hearing the local story of some of the programs and some of the changes, the activities that they can get involved in I think is wonderful. (Clara)

Whilst there have been some good examples of spaces and initiatives that have been supported, there is still much that can be done to foster the kinds of diverse, accessible and inclusive spaces that young people want to see. Importantly, the design and implementation of such spaces must also hold youth voice at the centre.

THE NEED FOR SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Ideas from young people

Youth led events

Better Distribution of Services

A range of youth specific activities and spaces

More training for jobs

Youth Centrols

- Centralised services and spaces to hang out and access what they need

Engaging young people through the workplace

More possibilities for online classes or training

Creating [supportive] spaces for dialogue about sensitive topics

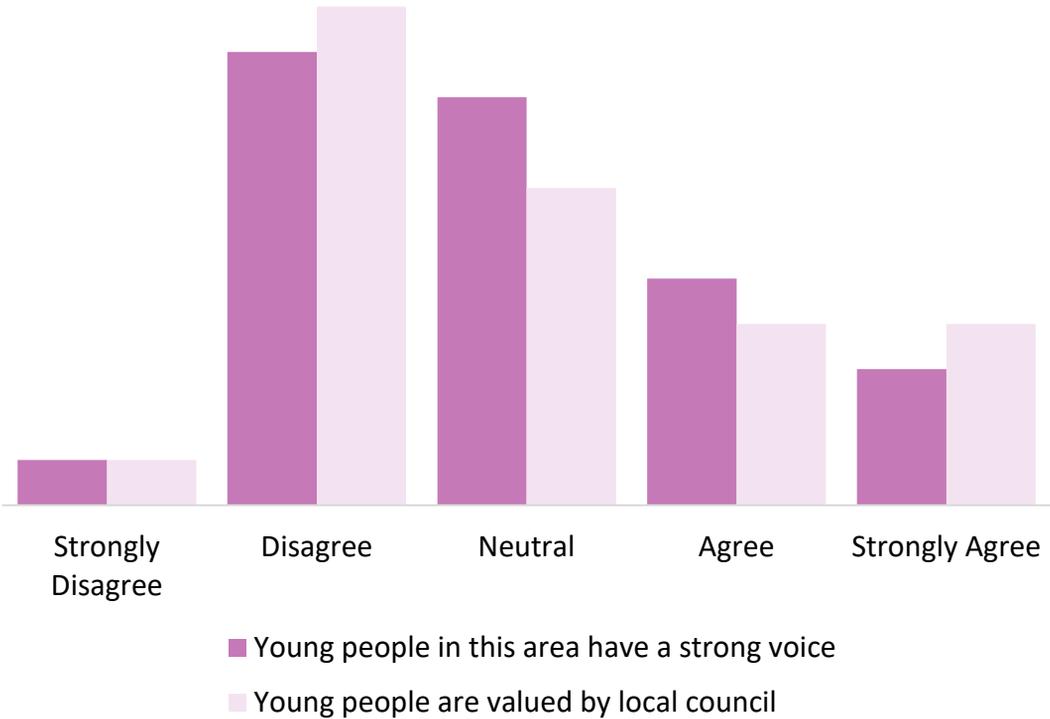
THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

This theme paints a picture of youth voice from the vantage point of the participants in this study. Specifically we hear their general reflections on being heard in the community context, the opportunities and channels through which young people can be heard and the possibilities for youth peer research as an amplifier for youth voice and starting point for action.

“...they’re just going to end up with 1000 skate parks”

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

It was evident in what young people shared that they felt their voices were not necessarily valued in their local community. A number of young people felt that they were not listened to by those in power including adults in the community; the council and even in organisations with youth leadership groups. Of the 29 young people surveyed, 39% felt that young people in the area did not have a strong voice and 32% neither agreed or disagreed, reflecting some ambivalence.



THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

Daria noted that there were particular conditions and prerequisites needed for young people to feel they could speak up and be heard within rural communities, specifically formal credentials, but also a sense of confidence and agency:

Or it's going to be like ten years down the track. And also I think that young people don't realize that they do have a voice and that they can do things, like have a little march or something like that. Or they can do a petition if they really want something. But I think that they think, oh, I have to have a job. I have to have a qualification. I have to have a degree. If I want to have a voice, I have to have a good career before I have a voice. They don't realize that they can say something if they want to. Yeah. (Daria)

Daria's reflection highlights the importance of young people feeling a sense of agency and taking small but meaningful actions in their community. Some of the community dynamics young people have experienced (captured in previous themes), such as feeling judged or being surveilled and being excluded based on particular identities or experiences, are likely to influence young people's sense of agency and confidence to speak. Being excluded or undermined has likely prevented some young people from stepping into spaces and opportunities where they can develop their voices for social change.

Young people highlighted opportunities and channels to develop and project their voices including youth programs situated in councils or organisations. Many young people from small towns noted that these opportunities were few and far between with Mia reflecting that in her community there are "a few leadership things that you can do, but it's very small."

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

Another participant, Keanu states that opportunities to participate in youth voice through councils may not be widely known or understood by young people.

I think there's definitely opportunities there.....But again, what they don't know, they don't know. So if they don't know that the opportunity is supposed to be there for council to be listening to them, why would they worry about it or why would they ask for it, if they don't know that's what's supposed to be happening? (Keanu)

One issue that was discussed by a number of participants was that opportunities to be heard, such as youth leadership groups or councils, were only available to young people who had the time, access to a car or transport and other resources. Ben explains:

You can't just be giving all the opportunities to people that have been lucky to have opportunities already. (Ben)

He linked this to inequality more broadly saying that young people could access education and pursue their dreams if they were 'lucky' and didn't have to grapple with financial insecurity, or other challenges such as having English as a second language or not having the networks needed to navigate various systems in education and services. The problem of 'the same old faces' having the opportunities is also highlighted in the next example from Keanu.

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

And then I think they had the same old faces coming back to do every opportunity that was there. I used to go and do a lot of stuff for them and I'd see the same four or five people at every single event or every single meeting, or every single whatever it was we were doing (Keanu)

Along the same lines, Kimmi identified that a diverse range of young people's voices were not being heard:

Let's say it's youth, they're not going to an EAL class, and then asking the kids who are failing the class. They go to the top student, and say, "You're a really keen student. We'll just ask you all the questions." When they are not necessarily representative. So, I think consultation is important. And also, obviously representation is important. (Kimmi)

In her professional role she had observed that people of colour were not being included in consultations designed to elevate voices of young people:

And also, people of color haven't been consulted in designing these [anti-racism] campaigns. It's just white people coming up with it. So, I just disagree because of that. And that's why I say I don't think that they're doing anything. (Kimmi)

Both Daria and Clara mentioned the importance of Indigenous young people being included, with Clara saying:

"And let our First Nations people have a platform.. and a really big voice in our community" (Clara)

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

One of the issues that young people raised in relation to youth voice and being heard by councils was the ways in which it had become superficial and tokenistic. Issues of representation were also discussed by a number of young people. Keanu describes this in relation to his local council:

I think they did. I definitely felt heard, growing up as a young person and being connected in that space. I think over the last few years that has dropped off. I think especially over this year and the later stages of last year, youth voice became quite tokenistic in our local council, and that young people were being engaged at a very superficial level, or to the point that we were being, I guess, heard and were being engaged to come and tell our ideas and speak to them about stuff. But none of that was actually being taken onboard and they were ticking the box to say, "Hey, we actually spoke to 20 young people about this project," but whatever we said didn't really matter. They were going ahead with it regardless. I don't think they're doing it well. I think they're trying to do it, but I don't think they're doing it in any meaningful way.

Keanu's reflections on his experiences of feeling heard earlier on as a young person, had shifted recently in his early 20s. One important issue Keanu raises is that when opportunities to be heard are opened up, it is extremely important *how* voices are heard (superficial consultations) and what happens to their voices. This was echoed in another interview with Mia saying she did not have a sense of trust in the council to listen to her needs or the needs of her small town, giving an example in which council had not been responsive after issues of concern were raised.

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

From Keanu's vantage point, when youth voices are gathered but nothing is done to honour them and translate their ideas and insights into action, a sense of outrage results:

I think there's a lot of, I guess, outraged young people that are definitely starting to feel that they're not being heard. I think there's nothing more powerful than a group of outraged young people that want to promote change and want to create a difference. I think there's definitely space for young people to... I'm going to say radicalized, and I feel that that sounds like such a brutal word, but I guess to unite and to speak out against the council that isn't currently listening to their voice.

Importantly, Keanu raised the issue of power dynamics between adults and young people, emphasising that you need people who are “willing to rock the boat”, people who “are radical in their thinking” to challenge adults assumptions about what young people want or need.

I also am quite worried that there a lot of people also that don't want to rock the boat or aren't radical in their thinking. I think in youth services and how to engage with young people, you need a bit of a bit of radicalism and you have to go against what your small, country, local council thinks or what they want. Otherwise, they're just going to end up with 1,000 skate parks and that's going to be about it, because I think that's all councilors think that young people need and use, is skate parks. (Keanu)

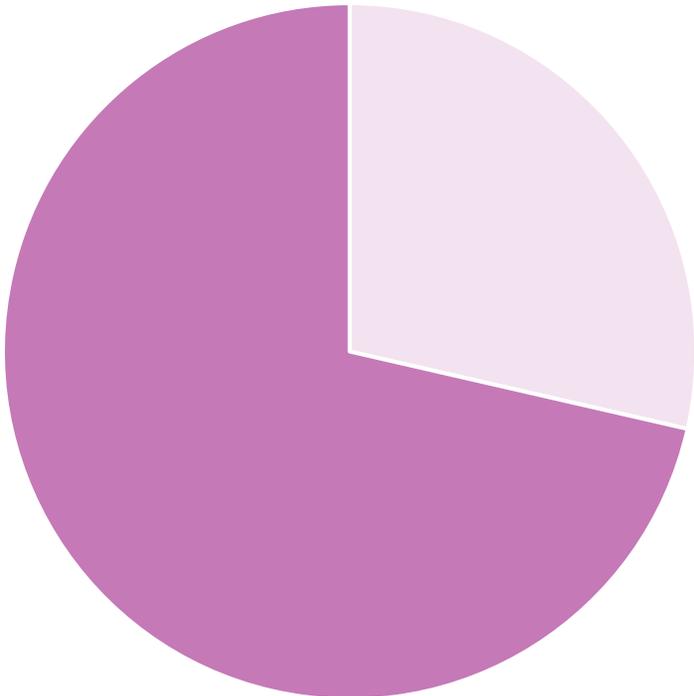
Ben said that if he had more power, he would be “making sure that they're [local councillors] getting out of the community and listening to as many people as possible”.

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

PEER INTERVIEWING AS AN AMPLIFIER

Of the 28 survey responses received, 71% indicated that they would be more likely to participate in community voice consultations with a youth peer researcher. The remaining 29% responded that it 'doesn't make a difference to me' (no respondents indicated they would be less likely to participate).

If young people led community voice consultations, would you be more likely to participate?



■ Doesn't make a difference to me ■ Yes

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

PEER INTERVIEWING AS AN AMPLIFIER

Respondents were also asked to indicate why or why not with 16 qualitative responses received. One respondent who indicated that it would not make a difference to them commented: “Shouldn’t matter as long as they get things done”. The other 15 responses were from those who indicated yes. These responses have been categorised into three broad themes that capture why they would be more inclined to participate in youth led community voice consultation: 1. More comfortable and relatable, 2. an opportunity for meaningful youth engagement to make change happen, and 3. to support other young people.

They are relatable.

It is a more comfortable environment

Sheep effect



Feel more comfortable and relatable with other youth

I would feel more safe and that the conversation would be relevant to me.

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

PEER INTERVIEWING AS AN AMPLIFIER

... all the more encouragement and positive fun meaningful activities in the region the better.

Because at the moment the 'voice' of the community are old white men and some women With younger people I think that we may get a more diverse range of people giving ideas for the community to help everyone

Seems like a good way to make change happen



Opportunity to have my voice heard

I think I can help this town if I get the chance

It would allow the local council to actually connect and prioritise their Youth Agenda.

They would be groups I used to be apart of and I'd want to support them and help out

I want to make the area better for young people



Because I am interested and passionate about the subject

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

The idea that young people are more relatable and that this would be beneficial to the research or consultation process was also evident across interview data. For example, Ben said:

“You guys have this really, really unique opportunity as young people that are trained in a skill that is so important, while also being relatable, which I think is really, really exciting... You can actually understand the experience of young people”. (Ben)

For Ben, having young people as peer interviewers enables a greater level of understanding that helps to challenge a generational divide:

"People who are older can sympathize with you. You can empathize with people. I think there's a big, big difference. There's a big difference between, "Oh, I'm so sorry for that" and, "Yeah, I understand you" because you genuinely do". (Ben)

This sense of being relatable, and therefore being better understood was further captured in the excerpt below from Bea.

I probably wouldn't find [peer interviewing] easier. Like, I find it just as easy no matter what sort of age I'm talking to, but I would definitely believe that I feel more understood because, yeah, the similar age, you might be going through similar things or know people who are going through the same sort of things, and witnessed the same stuff being at university as well, and things like that. So I definitely think that there is a deeper level of understanding than what there would be with someone who was older. (Bea)

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

While all participants responded positively to the idea of youth peer researchers as a means of including the perspectives of young people in order to be responsive to their needs, Keanu provided the caveat- “as long as it is done well”. In the excerpt below, Keanu emphasises that having young people involved means that they will care what young people have to say, whilst also stressing the need for youth participation to be meaningful (vs. tokenistic).

I think it's fantastic. I think as long as it's done well, and it seems like it's going fantastically, and that councils and DHSS and stuff are on board with it, and are taking what comes out of that meaningfully, then absolutely. That's fantastic. I think if you've got peer researchers and young people onboard in the research, they're really going to care about what young people have to say, and young people are going to see themselves in the research as well. (Keanu)

Evident in the example above, is the importance of having organisations on board with the model. For Keanu, seeing themselves in the research team would have a powerful impact, making young people more comfortable and willing to contribute.

Absolutely. Absolutely. I think once young people see themselves in the team or the research and stuff, they're definitely going to feel more comfortable speaking up and talking about their experiences and what they have to say about it as well. And know that they've got another young person on there that probably has pretty similar ideas or insights as them, and even if they don't, is probably going to be a bit more accepting of having a different view of opinion. I mean, stereotypically, older communities have a bit more rigid view, and they're right, and if young people are disagreeing with them, then they're just troublemaking young people. So I think young people interviewing young people is fantastic. (Keanu)

THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH VOICE

Also captured within the quote is Keanu's belief that young people may be more open and honest in peer interviews, given that older people can stereotypically be more rigid in their thinking and often dismiss the perspectives of young people. (This resonates with some of what is captured across other themes in relation to the rigidity of older generations/regional towns).

For Keanu, the training of youth researchers is an opportunity to "really shake up the system". In particular, he problematised the way, from his perceptive, Councils do not typically actively seek out youth voice.

I think one of the biggest struggles that I saw in council was that it was just accepting that young people don't fill out council surveys. So councils just didn't try to get young people to do the surveys and that, "Oh, only two people under the age of 25 filled this survey out around sidewalks. Yes, young people don't use footpaths. We don't need to hear what they have to say." And it's like, what do you mean? Just go and actively look for it. So I think the peer researcher stuff will be fantastic and can really shake up the system, which is what I'm all about. I love that. (Keanu)

That young people feel that research can be a channel for youth voice, was evident across what young people shared. For example, in his interview Robert expressed his desire for the council to read this report.

Robert - If you have any possible connection with, I don't know, if this is just for research or ... Is this just for research? Okay. Well, if there's anything that I could add, if you could talk to them possibly about, I don't know, just maybe asking the kids or the teenagers more specifically, like between sites 16 and 18, 19, what they'd be interested in doing. Because I know for a fact that I could get all my friends that live in Lockington and pitch that drive-in movie or thing to them, and they will all be like, "Yes, let's do it." (Robert)

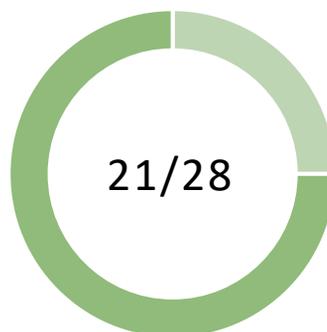
4. WHAT NEXT

We have pulled together the varied threads which run through and connect the experiences of the differently positioned young people who responded to surveys or participated in interviews. There were many shared reflections, and many divergences shaped by nuanced individual and contextual experiences.

HOW CAN WE FOSTER BELONGING AND CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

For many of the young people who participated in interviews or responded to surveys, there was much to be valued about the areas and towns they lived in. From the quietness and safety of a small town and proximity to natural beauty and parklands, to the friendliness of the local community. For some participants there was no place they would rather be. However, for some others leaving to find job and education opportunities was a necessity, and yet again for others, significant experiences of exclusion and marginalisation disconnected them from their local areas. However, a desire for belonging and connection reverberated across many of the young people's responses. Having a strong sense of community was something that young people felt was most important for them, with 21 out of 28 responded survey identifying this as important .

**It is important that where
I live has a strong sense of community**



HOW CAN WE FOSTER BELONGING AND CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

This project set out to answer a question of “what would make young people stay?”, and whilst we have been able to develop important insights into the desires and motivations of young people in the Campaspe-Loddon area, we have been left with perhaps a more useful question: “how can we foster belonging and connection to community for young people?”. There are many structural conditions which unfortunately exist beyond the scope of this project, and for many young people seeking wider experiences and opportunities reflects an important part of their life journey. But perhaps the reflections shared through this report offer us an important set of insights towards how young people in the Campaspe-Loddon area can derive a sense of belonging and connection to their communities:

- 1 The creation of varied and inclusive spaces, networks and resources that respond to the needs of young people.
- 2 Fostering diverse youth voices and supporting young people to be a part of change.
- 3 Sustaining and growing capacities, equitable practices and transformative structures.

These are not discrete but are interrelated and interdependent sets of practices and processes that align with the creation of resources and opportunities. We will now discuss each in turn, and provide some recommendations towards how each may be realised.

HOW CAN WE FOSTER BELONGING AND CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

The creation of varied and inclusive spaces, networks and resources that respond to the needs of young people

We call for the creation of varied and inclusive spaces that respond to the needs of young people. These are varied spaces that address a number of interests and needs, spaces to “just be”, to have things to do, to find help and support. Through such spaces important networks that offer support and connection can be developed, and resources accessed. Resources here, refers to both the tools and services which are essential in responding to the needs of young people, but also resources such as decision making power and material resources that enable young people to contribute to their communities in ways that are meaningful to them. These spaces must hold principles of inclusion at the centre, and the intention of considering the diverse identities and experiences which young people may bring into these spaces.

HOW CAN WE FOSTER BELONGING AND CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

Fostering diverse youth voices and supporting young people to be a part of change

We call for mechanisms, processes and practices to be developed towards fostering diverse youth voices and supporting young people to be part of change through collective action. This involves working alongside young people to reassess present mechanisms, processes and practices, and envision new ways of including youth voice in decision-making and community building. Importantly, this must recognise that young people are not a homogenous group, and the diversity of experiences and identities that young people hold. These experiences constitute valuable knowledge and the inclusion of youth voice must also mean an inclusion of diverse youth voices.

HOW CAN WE FOSTER BELONGING AND CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

Sustaining and growing capacities and transformative structures

We call for efforts to sustain and grow the capacities of young people and the potential offered from a shift from tokenistic to transformative structures and modes of youth engagement. Change must be sustainable and lasting and translate to material outcomes for young people. This means transformations that continue to support and respond to new generations of young people, shifting power in non-temporary ways, creating pathways for capacity-building and skill development that are linked to place-based employment and practical opportunities for experience.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SURVEY

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF

How old are you? [Drop down box 18-25 years]

What town do you live in? [open answer]

How long have you lived there for? [open answer]

If you've moved recently, where did you move from? [open answer]

What gender do you identify with? [open answer]

Which of these fit you? [tick box]

Employed full time, Employed part time, Employed casually, Student (e.g. University or TAFE), Apprentice, Unemployed, Carer of dependents, Volunteer, Prefer not to say, Other [open answer]

In what ways might you describe yourself? [tick box]

LGBTQIA+, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, Person of Colour, Living with a disability, Migrant or refugee, In residential/other care, A carer, A parent, Prefer not to say

Please describe any other ways you might identify with that are not represented in the list above: [open answer]

COMMUNITY BELONGING

What are the top three things you enjoy about the area you live in? [open answer]

Rate the following statements from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. If you are unsure you can skip a statement.

- I feel like I belong in my hometown.
- I would want to live in this area for most of my life.
- I feel that I am able to celebrate my identity in my local area.
- I feel that there is a welcoming atmosphere in my local area.
- I feel that Indigenous cultures are respected and celebrated in my local area.
- I feel that non-Anglo cultures are respected and celebrated in my local area.

KEY ISSUES FOR THE COMMUNITY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

What do you think are the top three issues of concern in your local area for young people? [open answer]

Which of the following issues are you concerned about personally? [tick box]

Bullying, drugs and alcohol, stress, financial security, family violence, mental health, discrimination (e.g. due to race, gender, sexuality, age, ability etc.), physical health, other [open answer]

APPENDIX A: SURVEY

QUALITY OF LIFE

Rate the following statement from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. If you are unsure you can skip the statement.

- I feel I am able to live a good life in this area.
- In my community, I have access to low cost/affordable recreational or leisure activities.
- In my community the cost of living is affordable.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND VOICE IN YOUR LOCAL AREA

Rate the following statement from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. If you are unsure you can skip the question.

- As a group young people in this area have a strong voice.
- As a group, young people's voices are valued by the local council.

If young people led community voice consultations, would you be more likely to participate?
[multiple choice]

Yes, No, Doesn't make a difference to me

Why or why not? [open answer]

OPPORTUNITIES AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Please select which statements apply to you: [tick box]

- I feel like I have what I need in my local area.
- I feel bored in my local area.
- In my local area there are a diverse range of activities to participate in.
- I feel like I am supported in achieving my goals in my local area.
- I am aware of support services available in my local area.
- I feel comfortable accessing the support services I need in my local area.
- In my local area there are a good amount of education opportunities.
- I think I could find my ideal job in my local area.
- It is important that where I live has a strong sense of community.
- It is important that I live close with my family.
- It is important that I have a short commute to where I work..
- Other [open answer]

Rate the following statement from (1) Highly Unlikely to (5) Highly Likely. If you are unsure you can skip the statement.

- How likely are you to leave your town or the surrounding area for further education (e.g. university, TAFE, apprenticeships)?
- How likely are you to leave your town or the surrounding area for employment?

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction:

- Welcome and thanks for coming to speak to us
- Introduce who you are and the We Hear Youth/Activate Youth Voice project
- Informed consent- What the research is about and how the information they provide will be used (privacy and confidentiality- e.g., use of pseudonyms and removing identifying information). The topics explored in the interview are about where you live and how you feel about where you live, your hopes for the future, issues important for you and young people in particular and your vision for your community. The questions are not sensitive in nature but you do have the right to withdraw at any time or not answer questions if you don't want to.
- Permission to record

Where they live and how they feel about where they live

- Can you tell me a bit about where you live in the area and what it has been like for you living here?
 - Did you grow up here/ How long have you lived there/here?
- We are keen to hear about what young people value about the places they live.
 - Can you tell me about what you value most about living in this town/place
 - E.g., people, clubs/organisations, activities, natural environment
 - Prompt: What about for other young people you know- what kinds of things are important for them?
- Would you say you feel a sense of belonging to this place?
 - What helps you to feel like you belong here?
- We've spoken about what you like about this place, is there anything in particular that you don't like about living here?
 - What could improve life here (for young people in particular)?

Hopes for the future and aspirations to stay in the area

- Can you tell me about your plans for the future?
 - Does this involve staying in the region?
 - In an ideal world, would it involve staying in the area?
 - If you left, do you imagine coming back here when you are older?
- What do you think keeps young people in Campaspe?
 - Have most of your friends stayed in the region?
- Why do young people leave this area/Campaspe?
 - How would you feel if you had to leave TOWN?
 - What could keep young people here?

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- What opportunities are available here for young people once they complete high school?

Community Vision

- What are the key issues you are concerned about within your community?
 - What are the key issues facing young people?
 - Are you involved in any local community groups?
- Currently, the Campaspe Shire is doing community consultation to revise the community vision and this project is being undertaken to help the shire include the voice of young people in the area (particularly 18-25). As a young person, do you feel like you have a say in your local community?
 - Have you been involved in the community consultation? (if yes, what did this involve?
 - If not, why not, have you heard about it?
 - This project (we hear youth) involves training young people as peer interviewers/researchers with the idea that we could potentially be employed by local government and other agencies to include young people's voices on local issues. Do you think peer interviews would be a good way to include the voices of young people?
 - Do you feel more comfortable sharing your story/perspective with someone your age (i.e., a peer)?
- If you and some of your peers/friends were in charge at council what are some of the changes you would make immediately?

Closing

- Thank them for their time
- Would they like to be informed of the research outcomes (i.e., preliminary analysis, final report)? (Provide email if so).