

**Submission
No 186**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

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DRAFT SUBMISSION

Community safety in regional and rural communities

May 2024





Local Government NSW (LGNSW) is the peak body for local government in NSW, representing NSW general purpose councils and related entities. LGNSW facilitates the development of an effective community-based system of local government in the State.

OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SECTOR



Local government in NSW employs **55,000 people**



Local government in NSW is responsible for about **90% of the state's roads and bridges**



Local government in NSW looks after more than **\$177 billion** of community assets



NSW councils manage an estimated **4 million tonnes of waste** each year



Local government in NSW spends more than **\$2.2 billion** each year on caring for the environment



NSW councils own and manage more than **600 museums, galleries, theatres and art centres**



NSW has more than **350 council-run libraries** that attract tens of millions of visits each year



NSW has more than **400 public swimming and ocean pools**

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the Parliamentary Inquiry into community safety in regional and rural communities.

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) is pleased to see the NSW Government investigate the drivers and causes of youth crime in regional and rural NSW, including the impacts on communities, and also acknowledges the advocacy of the Country Mayors Association of NSW in calling for greater focus on this matter.

Community safety in regional and rural communities is complex and has multiple drivers. Beyond resourcing for policing, drivers include the housing shortage, cost of living crisis, accessibility of paediatric specialist care and mental health services and the availability of youth and community services.

Action across all government and non-government organisations is needed to support those most vulnerable in the community. Members of the community are fearful in their own homes, including elderly women and young girls, with these cohorts having high rates of homelessness¹. A focus on early intervention initiatives to support people and link them into the supports they need, is vital.

BACKGROUND

The terms of reference for this inquiry require the Committee on Law and Safety to inquire into and report on:

- (a) the drivers of youth crime across regional and rural NSW, particularly since the COVID pandemic;
- (b) how a whole of government approach can reduce the drivers and root causes of youth crime in regional and rural NSW;
- (c) the wraparound and diversionary services available for youth and families in the regions and rural areas and how they can be better matched to individuals, measured, improved and integrated into a coordinated approach to divert youth from crime, having regard to the NSW Government's commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal people;

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23, Feature topic: New clients accessing SHS, [available online](#).

- (d) staffing levels and workforce issues, including police staffing, in regional and rural areas and how services can be improved to reduce youth crime in these areas;
- (e) recidivism rates in regional and rural areas, and related impacts on the community, services and law enforcement;
- (f) the range of functions being performed by NSW police officers, including mental health assistance and youth welfare, on behalf of other agencies in regional and rural areas, and the supports required to assist police; and
- (g) any other related matter.

LGNSW notes the following NSW inquiries that are relevant to community safety in NSW, and requests the Committee revisit the relevant recommendations made from these inquiries:

- [2018 Committee Report on the adequacy of youth diversionary programs in NSW](#) – by the Law and Safety Committee, focusing on the availability and quality of diversionary programs and efforts in regional NSW.
- [2020 Report by the Special Commission of Inquiry into the Drug ICE](#), where 109 recommendations were made to strengthen the response to crystal methamphetamine and other amphetamine-type stimulants by law enforcement, education, treatment and rehabilitation services.

LGNSW POSITION

Policy Platform

LGNSW's [Policy Platform](#) consolidates the voices of councils across NSW, reflecting the collective positions of local government. Specifically relating to community safety in rural and regional NSW, LGNSW advocates for:

- *The NSW Government to allocate more resources for crime prevention and to holistically respond to youth crime and drug use. This should include increased police numbers and state regulatory inspectors, to improve response times, particularly in regional and rural NSW*
- *An urgent increase in the rate of JobSeeker & Youth Allowance by a minimum of \$100 per week*
- *Adequate funding for council-run youth and children services and recognition that councils are an essential provider of services to children and young people*
- *Practical reforms and initiatives that improve public health and safety but do not represent cost shifting or burden the limited resources of local government without providing adequate funding or cost recovery mechanisms*

- *New models for rural and regional infrastructure, service delivery, health, mental health care and aged care, including consideration of council coordination and/or implementation that avoids cost shifting and is built on close collaboration between local, state and federal governments and NGOs.*

Advocacy Priorities

LGNSW's [2024-25 Advocacy Priorities](#) identify the critical issues facing the local government sector and how better outcomes can be achieved for communities, informed by local governments across NSW.

The priorities specifically call for the implementation of measures to holistically respond to crime and community safety concerns, particularly in rural and regional NSW.

Other 2024-25 Advocacy Priorities include:

- The implementation of all 44 recommendations of the rural and regional health inquiry
- Support and resourcing for councils to strengthen their ability to contribute to Closing the Gap outcomes
- Solutions that address the unique housing pressures in rural and regional NSW, including funding and other measures to support more housing density in metropolitan and regional NSW and 5,000 additional units of public and social housing.

LGNSW State Budget submission

LGNSW made a submission to the NSW Government 2024-25 State Budget², calling for:

- Investment of \$12 million over four years in **Domestic Violence prevention measures** to; implement the Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Toolkit for Local Government and the creation of a dedicated Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Officer in LGNSW to build the capacity of councils across the state (bringing NSW in line with Victoria and Queensland)
- Reinstatement of the **Crime Prevention Fund** and **Graffiti Initiatives Fund**, providing \$20 million of grant funding over four years, for projects that address local crime hot spots and promote safe and inclusive use of public space.

² LGNSW State Budget Submission 2024-2025, [available online](#).

ROLE OF COUNCILS

Councils in NSW offer a diverse range of social services such as early education and care and youth services, libraries, aquatic and recreation facilities and community events such as for New Year's Eve and Australia Day.

Councils are uniquely placed to influence and drive social change through existing partnerships, networks and structures. They also engage with people across their life span, from their early years to their senior years.

Council involvement in community safety and crime prevention initiatives is often in partnership with police and other government and non-government organisations, as well as engaging with communities to understand and develop strategies to address local crime issues. Many councils have arrangements with local safety precinct meetings and local police, including via their Crime Prevention Officers.

Councils also prepare local Community Safety Action Plans that include key community safety measures that council will undertake to make their local area safer for residents and visitors.

Councils have also undertaken work via the Local Government Prevention of Violence Against Women Toolkit, [housed on the Our Watch website](#).

LGNSW has long called for adequate funding of council-run youth and children services and recognition that councils are an essential provider of services to children and young people.

However, it is important to acknowledge that community safety and crime prevention are fundamentally the responsibility of the NSW Government.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS OF COUNCILS

Impact on communities

Crime in regional and rural areas is having significant impacts on the fabric of communities. Councils are reporting that crimes are leaving people vulnerable, afraid and unsafe in their communities and within their own homes, and that this is

particularly the case for more vulnerable cohorts including young women, girls and people who are elderly.

The performance crimes associated with the “Post and Boast” offences - having their cars, wallets and other personal belongings stolen whilst being recorded and published on social media platforms - are particularly violent and damaging for communities. Communities may start to feel a loss of faith in the judicial system if they witness repeat offending.

Councils run a range of youth and community programs, and managing and operate local community facilities host these services and other community services run by NGOs. When councils have to devote increasing resources for community safety, they have fewer funds to spend on other important services and infrastructure for their communities. Communities grappling with heightened levels of crime also suffer from lost opportunities, such as missed tourism and visitor economy opportunities.

The drivers of youth crime are complex and include a lack of access to appropriate services and people facing acute housing stress and living in poverty.

Early intervention and other social cohesion initiatives, alongside measures to address poverty and increase opportunities for education and employment are important to support those whose options may otherwise be limited.

Adequate resourcing of services

Regional and rural NSW has seen an increase in homelessness rates, of between 15-32.5%, depending on geographical location. These rates of homelessness have especially increased amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (increase of 10%), children under 12 (increase of 6.8%) and youth aged 12-18 (increase of 3.7%)³. This data reveals the real vulnerability faced by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional and rural NSW and the importance of ensuring that homelessness services are adequately resourced.

Challenges faced by young people are worsened by a lack of youth counselling services, programs, and community centres. Councils across NSW operate youth centres and services, but often cannot fund these for full time staff or hours of operation.

Funding for wrap-around services including mental health services, drug and alcohol and justice diversionary programs can often be revoked unexpectedly. Funding should

³ Homelessness NSW, Homelessness Census Data Released, [available online](#).

be consistent and dependable, provided over a period of years (not just one to two years). The effects of funding cuts may not be felt immediately, which is also true for the reinstatement of funding: it can take years to rebuild trust within a community. Targeted, long-term funding is required to deliver programs in various settings for children from pre-school up to high school, including youth hubs.

Communities that do not have the highest rates of crime (compared to their neighbours) should also be able to access community safety funding and opportunities to ensure their relatively secure circumstances are maintained and built upon.

The LGNSW 2024-2025 State Budget Submission⁴ has called for the NSW Government to continue committing at least \$160 million annually towards the Stronger Country Communities Fund. This grant program, and similar programs, ensure councils can provide new or upgraded social and sporting infrastructure and deliver community projects aligned to their Community Strategic Plans, assisting the community both socially and economically. Mandatory minimum 50% co-contribution obligations for councils can function as a deterrent for councils that are already financially stretched. This requirement can mean that councils most in need of this resourcing may miss out.

The LGNSW Budget submission also calls for the NSW Government to immediately reinstate the Crime Prevention Fund and Graffiti Initiatives Fund previously administered by the Department of Communities and Justice, providing \$20 million in grant funding over four years for projects that address local crime hot spots and promote safe and inclusive use of public space.

Importantly, LGNSW continues to advocate that practical reforms and initiatives that improve public health and safety must be accompanied by adequate funding or cost recovery mechanisms to avoid any cost shifting or burden on the limited resources of local government.

Access to support services

Generalist, specialist and mental healthcare services

Regional and rural NSW experience a severe lack of generalist and specialist healthcare services, long wait lists and high costs.

Lack of availability of appropriate services means that complex behavioural and psychological issues within regional and rural communities, can remain undiagnosed or untreated. In some cases, much needed services may not be available or accessible

⁴ LGNSW State Budget Submission 2024-2025, [available online](#).

until a crime has been committed and a person has entered the judicial or carceral system.

LGNSW advocates for a more equitable distribution of health infrastructure and operational funding to support current generalist and specialist health services in rural, regional and remote NSW. This must also include funding to address transport barriers to accessing healthcare⁵.

Increased funding for specialised and appropriate mental health and wellbeing services to bolster resilience is needed to provide the broad spectrum of mental health services required to support and build healthy communities.

However - a qualified workforce is needed to deliver these services. LGNSW has long called upon the NSW and Federal Governments to provide targeted assistance to rural and regional communities to support the recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified mental healthcare workers.

In line with a past resolution of the LGNSW Annual Conference, LGNSW would also like to see the NSW and Federal Governments investigate and explore a partnership between councils and headspace to ensure young people in rural, areas gain access to appropriate and relevant youth mental health services close to their homes and support network.

Social housing

Councils have long been calling for much greater investment in public and social housing from state and federal governments after decades of neglect. This remains a key advocacy priority, and LGNSW calls upon the NSW and Federal Governments to build 5,000 additional units of public and social housing each year for the next 10 years.

Access to safe, affordable housing is critical to support those in the community that are most vulnerable.

Justice and behaviour change programs

A 2019 resolution of LGNSW's Annual Conference called for support for social justice committees across all councils, meeting the demand of rehabilitation services including drug courts, youth and adult Koori Courts, youth detox services, Magistrates Early Referral into Treatment (MERIT) program and Justice Reinvestment Initiatives.

⁵ LGNSW Submission to NSW Inquiry into the delivery of specific services and specialist care in remote, rural and regional NSW, [available online](#).

LGNSW would like to see these services expanded throughout rural and regional NSW, in particular to combat the lack of diversionary programs, rehabilitation and treatment programs outside of the metropolitan area.

Early intervention initiatives

LGNSW advocates for an increase in front line police numbers, ensuring that communities that are most at need are adequately resourced and responding to crime rates in areas in a proactive manner. Further, each police region in NSW should have an endorsed, publicly available “First Response Policing Agreement” in active use to help curb the instances of crime and ensure a more adequate allocation of resources.

However early intervention initiatives, especially soft entry points and prior to the need for first responses by police, are necessary.

For domestic and family violence, LGNSW has long called for the NSW Government to invest in domestic violence prevention initiatives at a local government level. This could include primary prevention measures such as evidence-based men’s support and behaviour change programs in rural and regional areas. The 2020 House of Representatives inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence called for a dedicated domestic violence prevention officer in every state and territory local government association. As demonstrated in Victoria and Queensland, a dedicated officer in the state local government association has made an enormous difference in increasing the capacity of councils in those States to counter domestic and family violence at the local level through targeted, ongoing support. The Inquiry also recommended additional resources for local government to take a more active role in preventing and responding to family, domestic and sexual violence.

The LGNSW submission to the rural healthcare inquiry⁶ calls the NSW and Federal Governments to sufficiently resource proactive and preventative health and wellbeing measures including mental health check-ups in remote, rural, and regional NSW.

LGNSW also recommended that telehealth services should not replace vital, in-person services, as this could jeopardise early intervention efforts.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) provide culturally safe, person-centered early intervention initiatives for people who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. However, the issue of adequate, consistent funding remains.

⁶ LGNSW Submission to NSW Inquiry into the delivery of specific services and specialist care in remote, rural and regional NSW, [available online](#).

Investment in early intervention initiatives and diversionary approaches via ACCOs is recommended.

Councils that operate early education and care, before and after school care, and vacation care frequently report to LGNSW that they have high numbers of children attending with additional needs, particularly as council-run services more often cater to vulnerable children, low-income families, children with disability, or that these children have been turned away from private providers. Councils do their best to cater for these children but this is extremely difficult in mainstream services without extra support. Local government has an essential role in early childhood education and care and can be a place to roll out initiatives that set up children to thrive, but must be funded accordingly.

Coordinated service delivery

LGNSW calls for the NSW Government to form alliances with police, local councils, NSW Government agencies, community representatives and NGOs to holistically tackle the serious increase in youth crime and drug use in NSW communities.

A coordinated, collaborative approach between all levels of government and relevant organisations that work in this complex space is vital step forward.

Further, councils are committed to Reconciliation and Closing the Gap and share the goals and priorities listed in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Councils can provide localised initiatives and respond to local need in partnership with local communities. However, greater collaboration is needed to ensure all targets are on track. Closing the Gap priority reform areas and socioeconomic targets should be considered in all NSW Government planning and resourcing for service implementation and delivery.

Young people are disproportionately impacted by high unemployment and high turnover, and are overrepresented in insecure work. The implementation of an inclusive Youth Employment Strategy for NSW would bring a coordinated approach to youth employment. Adequate resourcing that ensures meaningful employment for young people will go a long way towards combatting disadvantage and anti-social behaviour.

A localised response

Derelict sites impact upon the public domain and become a concern to the community for various reasons including amenity concerns, crime and anti-social behaviour, impact upon tourism and businesses and property values. If sites remain derelict or dilapidated, issues of anti-social behaviour can quickly escalate.

Stronger legislative powers are required for councils to manage derelict sites that are not just deemed unsafe, and allow the problems associated with these buildings to be managed in a reasonable timeframe.

Many communities have been grappling with the high rates of crime for some time and may need support to deliver on potential solutions to address these issues. For example, some councils may wish to pilot a new program, or expand or revise an existing program but face funding or resourcing constraints, including where funds are tied up by unnecessarily burdensome administrative processes.

CONCLUSION

LGNSW acknowledges that the drivers of youth crime are complex and welcomes the focus of the Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety on this matter.

To discuss this submission further, please contact LGNSW Senior Policy Officer, Elle Brunson at [REDACTED].

Recommendations

Police resources and alliances

1. That the NSW Government, through the NSW Police Minister and the NSW Commissioner of Police, direct the commanders of each police region in NSW to ensure that each police station have an endorsed, publicly available “**First Response Policing Agreement**” in active use.
2. That the NSW Government **form alliances** with police, local councils, NSW Government agencies, community representatives and NGOs to holistically tackle the serious increase in youth crime and drug use in NSW communities.
3. That the NSW Government review the allocation **methodology of its policing resources**, allocate resources to communities most at need, ensuring an increase in front-line police numbers, and commit to ensuring that there be no reduction of police numbers in any areas as a result of the review.

Health and wellbeing

4. That the practical reforms and initiatives that improve public health and safety must be accompanied by **adequate funding or cost recovery mechanisms** to avoid any cost shifting or burden on the limited resources of local government.
5. That the NSW Government provide a more **equitable distribution of health infrastructure** and operational funding to support current specialist health services in rural, regional and remote NSW.
6. That the NSW and Federal Government sufficiently resource proactive and **preventative health and wellbeing measures** including mental health check-ups in remote, rural, and regional NSW.
7. That the NSW Government increase **funding for specialised and appropriate mental health** and wellbeing services to bolster resilience.
8. That the NSW and Federal Government investigate and explore a **partnership between councils and headspace** to ensure young people in rural, areas gain access to appropriate and relevant youth mental health services.
9. That the NSW and Federal Government provide targeted assistance to rural and regional communities to support the **recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified mental healthcare workers**.

Wraparound services and addressing complex drivers

10. That the NSW and Australian Governments fund and build 5,000 additional units of **public and social housing** each year for the next 10 years to contribute to addressing the homelessness and housing affordability crisis right across NSW.
11. That the NSW Government consider **Closing the Gap priority reform areas and socioeconomic targets** in all planning and resourcing for service implementation and delivery.
12. That the NSW Government support **social justice committees** across all councils, meet the demand of rehabilitation services including drug courts, youth and adult Koori Courts, youth detox services, Magistrates Early Referral into Treatment (MERIT) program and Justice Reinvestment Initiatives.
13. That the NSW Government implement an inclusive **NSW Youth Employment Strategy** to ensure a coordinated approach to youth employment across NSW that is adequately resourced.
14. That the NSW Government review and address **transport barriers** to accessing social services and ensure better coordination, links and funding arrangements between different modes and providers of transport.
15. That the NSW Government to increase councils' legislative powers to **manage derelict sites**.

APPENDIX 1 - Relevant LGNSW Annual Conference resolutions

LGNSW Annual Conference resolutions calling for action to improve community safety outcomes in rural and regional NSW are listed below:

62 (2023) Gunnedah Shire Council – First response policing agreement

That Local Government NSW calls on the NSW Police Minister and the NSW Commissioner of Police to direct the commanders of each police region in NSW to ensure:

1. Each police station have an endorsed "First Response Policing Agreement" in active use, and
2. That each "First Response Policing Agreement" commitment is made available to the community in which it represents.

56 (2023) Liverpool City Council – Medicare psychology services

That Local Government NSW writes to the NSW Minister for Health, seeking an increase in the number of psychologists employed by NSW Health, with priority given to:

- a. Community based positions.
- b. Improving the capacity of community based psychologists to assist patients with complex needs.
- c. Growing the Aboriginal psychology workforce.

63 (2023) Kempsey Shire Council – Youth crime and drugs

That Local Government NSW lobbies the NSW Police Minister and Premier to form alliances with police, local councils, NSW Government agencies, community representatives and NGOs to holistically tackle the serious increase in youth crime and drug use in NSW communities.

119 (2022) Shoalhaven City Council – Closing the Gap

That Local Government NSW calls upon the NSW Government to provide support and resources to Councils in NSW to drive Closing the Gap outcomes and Reconciliation initiatives.

128 (2022) Gunnedah Shire Council – Increase policing in the bush

1. That Local Government NSW calls on the NSW Government to:
 - a) review the allocation methodology of its policing resources to ensure equity between Metropolitan and Regional, Rural and Remote Local Government Areas.
 - b) increase spending on the NSW Police Force to increase front line policing numbers in Regional, Rural and Remote regions most at need.
 - c) conduct a review into the allocation of resources that are devoted to non-frontline policing.
2. That there be no reduction of police numbers in any areas as a result of points (a), (b) and (c).

132 (2022) Bellingen Shire Council – Youth Employment strategy

That Local Government NSW advocates to the NSW Government to respond to the findings of and support the Bearing the Brunt report by The Australia Institute.

48 (2021 – Special conference) Albury City Council – Mental health crisis

That Local Government NSW advocates that the NSW and Australian Governments address the mental health crisis for all people and ensure adequate access to emergency and specialist treatment, intervention, acute and inpatient services, including consistency of access across rural, regional and metropolitan NSW.

92 (2020) Hawkesbury City Council – Coercive control

That Local Government NSW:

1. Notes the alarming increase in the prevalence of domestic abuse in NSW, including as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the devastating impact this has on individuals and communities.

2. Recognises that coercive control is a form of domestic abuse but that it is not currently a criminal offence under NSW law.
3. Contacts the NSW Premier and NSW Attorney General calling for the criminalisation of coercive control in NSW, in line with The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act, currently considered the best-practice example of criminalising psychological, emotional and financial abuse as forms of domestic abuse.

95 (2020) Snowy Valleys Council – Local government’s role in children’s and youth services

Following the much-welcomed April funding package from the NSW Government of \$82 million for 260 council-run early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; that Local Government NSW:

1. Advocates to the NSW Government to continue to recognise the essential role of local government in early childhood education and care, and fund it accordingly, particularly as council-run services often cater to vulnerable, low-income families, regional and rural communities and children with disability; and
2. Enhances Local Government NSW’s Strong and Inclusive Communities Position Statement, and the Services in Rural Communities Position Statement, by including the recognition that local government is an essential provider of services to young people 0–24 years old.

96 (2020) Lake Macquarie Council – Partnership with headspace

That Local Government NSW calls on the State and Federal Governments to investigate and explore a partnership between local government and Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation to ensure young people in rural, remote, isolated and public transport-deprived areas gain access to appropriate and relevant youth mental health services.

32 (2019) Port Stephens Council – Amendments to derelict building regulation

That Local Government NSW lobbies the NSW Government to increase councils’ legislative powers to manage derelict sites.

91 (2019) Lismore City Council – Increase Newstart and Youth Allowance

That:

1. Local Government NSW lobbies the Federal and NSW Governments to urgently increase the Newstart and Youth Allowance by a minimum of \$100 per week in order to address low quality of life issues for those on allowances, and their families; and
2. Such an increase would see the economic benefit of disposable income in NSW rise by about \$1.2 billion.

92 (2019) Lismore City Council – Establish social justice committees across all councils

That Local Government NSW:

1. Recognises and supports social justice committees across all councils with a specific outcome of meeting the demand for residential rehabilitation services, regional Drug Courts, Youth & Adult Koori Courts and Justice Reinvestment Initiatives.
2. Requests that the NSW Government establish funding across regional NSW for youth detox services and expansion of the Magistrates Early Referral into Treatment (MERIT) program.