REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LAW AND SAFETY

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

At Council Chambers, Kempsey Shire Council, West Kempsey, on Tuesday 29 October 2024

The Committee met at 8:35.

PRESENT

Mr Edmond Atalla (Chair)

Dr Hugh McDermott (Deputy Chair)
Mr Philip Donato
Ms Tamara Smith
Ms Maryanne Stuart
Mr Paul Toole

WELCOME TO COUNTRY

UNCLE GRAHAME: Good morning, everyone. I am Grahame Quinlan, and I am Dunghutti/Thunggutti Elder. For those who don't know, this is Dunghutti/Thunggutti country, all one. We go right over to the Camden Haven River, right up to Nambucca River, and on the other side is Gumbaynggirr territory. On the other side of the Camden Haven River is Biripi. We go right up to Walcha, right across to Ebor. That's my country. I am here to do the welcome to country in my language.

(*Aboriginal language*)

Hello. Welcome to Dunghutti/Thunggutti country.

(*Aboriginal language*)

Morning good.

(*Aboriginal language*)

My name is Uncle Grahame.

(*Aboriginal language*)

How be you all?

(*Aboriginal language*)

Dunghutti/Thunggutti belong to this country—our river, our plains, to the hills from the mountains to the coast.

(*Aboriginal language*)

Dunghutti/Thunggutti belong to this country.

(*Aboriginal language*)

This country is mine.

(*Aboriginal language*)

You all be well in this country. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Uncle Grahame, for your kind and generous welcome to country. We really appreciate you taking part in today's Committee hearing.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You have a beautiful country.

The CHAIR: Good morning, and welcome to the third public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety's inquiry into community safety in regional and rural communities. I'm Edmond Atalla, Chair of the Committee on Law and Safety. I'm joined by my colleagues Dr Hugh McDermott, the member for Prospect and Deputy Chair; Mr Phil Donato, the member for Orange; Adjunct Professor Tamara Smith, the member for Ballina; Ms Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote; and Mr Paul Toole, the member for Bathurst. I also acknowledge local member Mr Michael Kemp, who is here with us in the gallery today.

Welcome to everyone attending the hearing in the public gallery and online. I thank you all for your interest in this inquiry. Please remember that today's hearing is a formal proceeding of Parliament. We respectfully ask everyone in the gallery to keep mobile phones on silent and to refrain from talking during the proceedings, as this can interrupt the proceedings and be a distraction to the witnesses. Finally, I thank all of the witnesses appearing before the Committee today and the many stakeholders who have made written submissions. Your input into this inquiry is very much appreciated. I also acknowledge the Mayor of Kempsey Shire Council, Mayor Ring, who has joined us today for this local hearing. I now declare the hearing open.

Mr GREG BROWN, Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, Police District Commander's Aboriginal Leadership Group, sworn and examined

Assistant Commissioner DAVE WADDELL, Northern Region Commander, NSW Police Force, sworn and examined

Superintendent SHANE CRIBB, Commander, Mid North Coast Police District, NSW Police Force, sworn and examined

Ms JUSTINE RUSSELL, General Manager Youth Programs and Social Impact, PCYC Kempsey, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our first witnesses. Please note that the Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly social media pages. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Could you please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses?

GREG BROWN: Yes.

DAVE WADDELL: Yes.

SHANE CRIBB: Yes.

JUSTINE RUSSELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about that information?

GREG BROWN: No.

DAVE WADDELL: No.

SHANE CRIBB: No.

JUSTINE RUSSELL: No.

The CHAIR: Do any of you have an opening statement?

GREG BROWN: I'd like to thank everybody in this room today who has attended. I thank my bosses for giving me the opportunity to be able to talk here. What I'd like to talk about is the Aboriginal community concerns and also what Mr Cribb has done in this community, bringing the Aboriginal people together at a table, talking about our issues and problems, and also what we want to achieve in this area.

DAVE WADDELL: I'm privileged to be here. I'm now the Northern Region Commander. I've been here for just over a month, but I've done a fair bit of my policing over time in the Northern Region, so I know it fairly well anyway. The Northern Region has had some big challenges and does have some big challenges, in terms of community safety. We've seen some of the emergency management issues across the region over the last five or six years. Crime-wise, our challenges are domestic violence, which is an issue across the command and a big driver of a lot of our workload. Our youth offending is an issue, and we see that. If we look at our property crime types, we haven't had a great increase in property crime, but in our violent crime, we have had an increase. But if we look at the corresponding youth crime, we have had those increases, particularly in what we term our 'mongoose-style' offending, which is our break and enters, stolen motor vehicles and pursuits, which obviously come at great risk. That is a big focus for us. Otherwise we have other challenges which are drivers of some of our crime, with mental health, drugs, and other causes, so plenty of challenges, but I think our police in the region do a really good job policing. I look at sitreps [situation reports] and review sitreps every day. We do some really good work to address those problem issues and particularly—we'll probably talk about it during the day—working with the community to resolve some of the challenges that we do have.

SHANE CRIBB: Thank you, sir, and thanks to the Committee for the opportunity to speak. I suppose being the District Commander here for a number of years, and having worked in a number of areas across New South Wales, I suppose for me it's about the partnerships involved, with youth crime, and how we work together as a community to try and pull all the agencies together is probably my opening address or what I'd like to talk about.

JUSTINE RUSSELL: Thanks for having me here this morning. It is a privilege to come and speak today on behalf of Kempsey PCYC. Obviously, around young offenders, from our perspective, the police have summed it up very well. We have the privilege of also working with other agencies and would like to just echo

the thought that it's probably not a singular focus of one person but a whole-of-community approach that we need, which is young person led, and we really understand where they're coming from and the challenges that we have. Thanks for our inclusion today.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We'll now move to questions from the Committee. I just want to get an idea of the Bail and Accommodation Support Services. I'm not sure who can answer that, if you can tell us if this is working. We're talking about repeat offenders that go to bail accommodation, where they're sent to bail accommodation instead of going to Corrective Services. Are you familiar with—

SHANE CRIBB: Sorry, could you explain it?

The CHAIR: There is bail accommodation for repeat offenders, so a judge can choose to send an offender that has multiple bails—instead of sending the offender back home, they can send them to bail accommodation. Is that something that's in the—

SHANE CRIBB: Without notice, sir, I'm not aware of that program up here or that system running up here at all. Actually, it's never been brought to my attention.

The CHAIR: I understand it's running in the Mid North Coast. I thought it might have been your region.

DAVE WADDELL: I'm not aware of a program running, as such, sir. I know there are issues with the bailing of young people to addresses where they go back to, I suppose, the same environment they came from, and they can continue to offend without supervision, and probably without adequate programming and resources thrown into them. I think that is a challenge for us. As I said, I'm not aware of programs, but certainly we do have ongoing issues where young people are bailed, they go back to an address, there is a lack of supervision, and they continue to reoffend. If we look at some of our offenders, 31 per cent of them—30 per cent of our charges of young persons are laid on a young person who's on bail, so there is a problem with that. If we look at, say, our mongoose style of offending, which is our break and enters and our stolen motor vehicles and our pursuits, which is part of our major crime problem risks up here, about 40 per cent of those charges laid are on people that are on bail, young persons that are on bail, so that is an ongoing challenge. I think that is irrespective of where they're bailed. We're having those challenges.

The CHAIR: One of the issues that was raised by the police is enforcement, putting offenders before a judge and the judge gives them bail, and it becomes a revolving door. They get multiple bails. The Parliament has moved legislation to restrict the number of bails that can be given. Have you seen any evidence that that's working? It's only recent legislation.

DAVE WADDELL: I don't know that I could comment as to whether we've got any evidence that it's working at this stage.

The CHAIR: It might be too early.

DAVE WADDELL: From experience locally?

SHANE CRIBB: Yes. Obviously the local police always have concerns about the revolving door. As we always say, our job is to put the people before the courts and let the judges and magistrates decide on outcomes, unfortunately, and that's my message to the local police. Our job is to put them before the courts. What happens from there is really not a police job, moving forward. Whether it's working, I wouldn't have any accurate data as to whether it's working. What's the definition of it's working? If it's something else, what's the definition of it's working? I'd probably be answering without any evidence, to be honest with you.

The CHAIR: The last question is to the PCYC. Can you tell us what programs you're running in the local area, and are they working? What is it that you want the government to do to help what you're delivering?

JUSTINE RUSSELL: In Kempsey we currently have some programs that are being delivered for young people within the community. There is our Fit For Life, which is really about addressing the issues around being up all night, and those negative patterns that young people might get themselves into with being up all night, sleeping during the day, and not going to school. It's really about getting up early in the morning, doing some physical fitness, having breakfast, doing some mentoring, and then heading to school. We take them to school in the morning. That runs twice a week in Kempsey. It's more of a targeted approach, rather than a general approach to the delivery of that program, so all of the young people are meant to be there. That's delivered in partnership with various organisations and New South Wales Police, obviously supporting that as well, at a local level.

We also have the U-Nites program, which is a Friday night program which is currently only operating until eight o'clock at night. Typically, we like to see that operating later in the afternoon. In some communities we are able to offer that until about 11 o'clock at night. Unfortunately, the risk assessments that have been done around incidents in continuing the service until 11 o'clock at night have stopped us temporarily from doing that

until we get some additional supports in place. Where we see there is a big issue is with being able to access people who are qualified and experienced and who are able to deal with behaviour management and young people at those at-risk times at night. At Kempsey we're seeing lots of issues with just being able to recruit.

At the moment, we're operating the service until eight o'clock with a view to, hopefully, lifting that. We do get generally a younger cohort when you operate the service only until eight o'clock at night. We would hope to move towards a model where we are focused on the delivery of the program to young people until about six or seven o'clock, and then moving to an older cohort, to keep them in a safe environment and busy, active, and engaged in our PCYCs. Our challenges really are that there is a problem with a lack of suitable people to recruit for roles that are fairly specialised in that area at the moment. We have short-term funding options that are available to us at the moment, so everything seems to go in a 12-monthly cycle up here, or slightly longer, which means it's hard to get long-term employment options for really highly qualified staff to operate in those services.

Transport—we are often working with large areas. When we're transporting out to places like South West Rocks and around Kempsey, you end up having to spend a majority of your night actually transporting people home, in order to get everybody home on 12-seater buses—the geographical dispersion of where the young people are living, and making sure that they're engaged in our PCYCs and then are able to be taken home safely after they've had a meal and participated in the activities. We like to focus as well on keeping them engaged through physical activities, but also through various creative spaces as well. There are lots of things being done at the PCYC at the moment. It is a targeted approach rather than a general "open the doors to everyone", and that is primarily just because of funding restraints.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you all for being here today. I want to get a proper understanding of what youth offending is here on the Mid North Coast. I'm looking at some of the data which has been given to us by BOCSAR. There has been an increase over the last five years of 50 per cent in sexual assault in the area. Is youth involved in that?

SHANE CRIBB: I can tell you that sexual offences in Kempsey are actually stable. There's not a massive increase in sexual assaults in Kempsey. What I will say in relation to the crime in Kempsey is that it's what we call our mongoose crime offenders, which is when our youth are going out and committing aggravated break and enters in the early hours of the morning into people homes, stealing their cars, and then becoming involved in pursuits with the local police. That would be my main concern in the Mid North Coast Police District right now, as we speak. It's a daily event. When you speak about the major crime, that's my focus right now. There's DV. That's up by 14.9 per cent in the last five years.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Are the youth involved in that, or is that elders?

SHANE CRIBB: No, I wouldn't think so. It's more the elderlies in the DV world. The youth are more in that property-related crime and serious crime.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What do you think the driver is? In Western Sydney it's because of drugs. What is it here?

SHANE CRIBB: I think, first of all, they follow their siblings, for starters. I will come back to that in a minute. We have identified that the older brothers are involved in some type of crime, and the siblings want to follow. That's when we talk about early intervention later on. They seem to do it for fun. It seems to be a challenge for them right now—goading the police to chase them, et cetera. They get whipped up by social media and they film it on social media. Everyone gets to watch them doing these activities. Obviously, there are drugs involved in it. They can be affected by drugs when they are doing it. We know that. It seems to become a game. I'm not sure if there's a lot of financial gain in it, because they are not actually breaking in and taking money and valuables; they are taking people's cars to get in pursuits with police. I'm mindful of the fact that it's more about goading the police to chase them in these situations. And then you've got the risk of them breaking into people's homes at two or three o'clock in the morning, who are in bed asleep.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Recently, we've put forward legislation and had it pass through the Parliament regarding civil penalties regarding filming their crimes. Has the DPP or anyone charged or moved forward with that legislation, do you know?

SHANE CRIBB: A lot of times, when enforcing, we have the age issues with doli incapax. That creates a lot of concerns for us. We've got some of these children who are 10, 11, and 12 years old involved in these offences. Trying to get legislation through, or even getting out of the Young Offenders Act, to be quite honest, with some of these children, is very difficult. That's a challenge in itself—their age, we're talking about. You talk about serious crimes—and we should be dealing with serious crime, and there should be certain penalties. But then, on the other hand, you are trying to deal with the Young Offenders Act and diversions. It's a very fine

challenge. I think the age probably doesn't come into that category as such. I'm sure if you spoke to the community of Kempsey, that would be their concern right now.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I reiterate my thanks for your time today and for being here to discuss a really important issue. Yesterday we had some informed discussions with some folks here and they spoke about the need for consequences. I'll ask you two questions. What do you think the consequences should be, and what do you need? What is missing here at the moment? I'll start with the police, and then I'll go to Mr Brown and Ms Russell.

SHANE CRIBB: From a local point of view, if we go to what we need—and it's interesting; we heard about programs, and I've spoken about this for some time now. I don't think the community is short of programs. In fact, I think they are overindulged with programs in the community. There is no coordination of the programs. Every government and non-government agency has numerous programs running in this community. I know that for a fact. I'd hate to put a number on it. When you look at the programs all running in isolation, and then you look at the funding that is coming in for the programs—to me, as a Commander who has been here for some time, and in other areas as well, if we could get those programs coordinated under one banner and then the funding came in under one banner, and it had measurable outcomes, and was reportable et cetera, then I think we'd go a long way to bringing all the agencies together to meet the same challenge. That is the answer, probably, to question two. I have been pretty passionate about that, and trying to get that model. It needs a lead somewhere above to coordinate it, because obviously I don't have the authority or the power to do that. I think, as you listen to what is even being said today, that's a thing there. Sorry, your other question was?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What do you think the consequences should be?

SHANE CRIBB: The consequences are these. I have a close relationship with the Aboriginal Elders. I have an Aboriginal Leadership Group that I work closely with, and I know Mr Brown will speak about this more in a minute. People committing serious crime need to face the courts. The community expect that. If you've continued, and you've taken all your points out of the Young Offenders Act, and you no longer qualify—and the seriousness of the crime—then you need to be punished, and you need to be punished through the courts.

Obviously, we then need to look at diversion programs for those that make that one-off, first-off mistake. But those diversion programs need to be done at a very early age. It's no good going up and trying to fix the problems when they're 11-, 12-, 13-, 14-, 15-year-olds. They've already got into that mould of crime. We need to be going back a lot earlier, and engaging them, and trying to get them out of that headspace at a very young age. Yes, I think you'll find the community expect serious consequences, but then you've got to balance that with giving everyone a chance to get out of that criminal element.

DAVE WADDELL: If I can touch on the consequences, clearly we've got some youth crime issues, particularly with the mongoose-style offenders, which is breaking into houses to steal cars, and then they get into pursuits. We can't arrest ourselves out of the problem, but there does need to be some strong consequences. From experience, speaking to youth liaison officers who work in the correctional facilities, it's in those facilities, with some of those programs, that the kids actually get some structure about their lives. If we look at the dip sampling when they go back out, and we talk about going back into houses for bail, they don't have that structure. If you dip sample that, they're from poor socio-economic areas. They've got drugs involved. They've got family and sibling members who are incarcerated, or involved with drugs and domestic violence.

So, there need to be consequences—we need some circuit breakers to hold those responsible to account, and to protect the victims—but then we need programs to actually work with the families and the siblings to break that cycle. To me, if we look at our problems through COVID with isolation and home schooling, it's that cohort that probably haven't gone back to school. We're seeing so many kids that aren't in schools and aren't in programs, and they need an education. We need to hold young people to account. They need to be doing something, so they don't have time to be running around and seeking notoriety on social media, which effectively is what they are doing with some of these crimes. As Mr Cribb said, they're not actually realising any gains from it. It's really entertainment value and notoriety.

GREG BROWN: I agree with Mr Cribb and what he said about the funding and things like that. We need to be accountable, not only to Aboriginal people, but for the funding that's come into Kempsey. There's a lot of funding come in here, but we're not getting any results. There's no improvement at all in the crime. This is not just coming from me as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer; this is coming from my Aboriginal community members, but also Kempsey as a whole. I've worked all my life, and I've worked with the community, I talk to the community and I'm a well-respected man in this community—and I don't see any improvement at all, any outcomes.

Mr Cribb, he's been really good, actually—I know he's got a big head; it might swell even more—because of what he's done with the Aboriginal communities. He's got community members coming to the station and

talking about our problems—what we're here to talk about today. Not only that, he's got some schoolkids coming in, years 5 and 6, coming into the station. That's something that I never thought I'd see, but it is happening. In Kempsey with our crime, the criminals are getting younger and younger. Like you people, I believe there should be something done, but it's not the answer by putting them into a detention centre. It's a good thing. It's a good start.

But outside that, when they come out, we have nothing here, nothing for them. Their Elders can't talk to them; their parents can't talk to them, because once they're out, they're gone. I'm talking about eight-, nine-, 10-year-olds, and they have no control over them. What I want to see is something where we could assist with education by stealth, or give them a computer or laptops and things like that to learn to use, but also where they can create something and build something. I'm not talking about just two or three hours like a lot of the programs. I want to see programs for at least five to eight hours, but to do that, we need a facility, we need the tools to work with, we need the funding, and we also need some good people. I can tell you Kempsey has a lot of good people—ex-teachers, ex-carpenters, ex-tradesmen, and things like that—who would be willing to give us a hand, but it's up to us to push for these things.

I don't agree with incarceration. I go up the jail and see those. But at the same time, we're taking them out, somebody will ring up, "Have you got accommodation?", and they'll put them back in the same environment. This is the same thing that's happening to kids. We're putting them back in the same environment that they've come from—drug and alcohol 24/7; if not, gambling, and no parental guidance. I would like to see something in Kempsey, something similar to a hostel or something like that, where we could have them during the day. These kids, they're affected by drugs. They can't concentrate for any more than 15 to 20 minutes. But that's good if we have staff there that could control that, and go and talk to them and bring them back down, and then work with them again.

I know it's asking a lot for Kempsey, but this community here needs something like that. I know other communities across New South Wales need it. I understand that. I'm a Liaison Officer. We all have our conferences and things like that, and we get together, and we talk about these issues. I'm so grateful to Mr Cribb, and Mr McKenna before, and now Mr Waddell, that I have been given an opportunity to talk to you people. I've been given the opportunity to talk at PASAC [Police Aboriginal Strategic Advisory Committee], which you are all aware of, and the common theme is that we have nothing here. We have nothing in our communities, where their Elders, and their parents, and their carers and that can work with them. As a passionate Kempsey man, but also as a passionate Aboriginal man, I'd like to see something. I know you guys aren't in government yet, but it might be just around the corner.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: We are actually, so that's why we're here. That's why we're listening to you.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Some of them are.

GREG BROWN: I don't want to be here too long, but I want to thank you for listening to me as a passionate Aboriginal man and a Kempsey community man, and things like that. I'm sure you know the common theme—being out there at Broken Hill and Tamworth and other places you've been to—is the same. It's very difficult to go out there as an Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer with the police, and hear people say, "What's the police doing? What are you doing?" It's very difficult. You become a cracked record; you're saying the same thing over day after day, week after week, month after month, and then you could go years.

But it's very difficult when you say the court system is to blame. I know they have to work within their limits, these court judges. I had the opportunity to talk to Judge Skinner, Judge Johnson, and people like that. I know they're sympathetic towards the cause, but their hands are tied too. If I had the opportunity to show you the living environment of these kids, and where they're living and things like that, to show you where they're coming from, you would have more of an understanding of where these kids are coming from. I worked this morning, six o'clock, cooked breakfast for these kids. I enjoy it because I get a punch and a squeeze and a hug from these kids, and I'm very passionate about PCYC. At the end of the day, we need the tools to work with, and we need the environment to work in. That's about me, my dear.

JUSTINE RUSSELL: I just had two quick things to add to that. I obviously echo what these guys have all said, but from my perspective what I see is—I think it comes back to this collaborative approach, around community delivering to the same sort of outcomes. A lot of the time there isn't a really clear idea of what outcomes we're actually trying to meet. From a PCYC perspective, we work with young people, we are led by young people on the issues that they're having, and then we put a big framework around that. It's based on theory and evidence, but also local information, around what's happening in this community for these young people, from various perspectives.

PCYC is a large organisation. It has access to people that are subject matter experts in this field, around putting together program logic, and evidence-based frameworks for these to operate within, and developing theories of change which align with all of the things that everybody across the world is doing. Not every organisation has the access or ability to be able to do that. I think, when we're looking at a community-led approach, we really need to look to trying to provide the smaller organisations with that information, and with some ways of understanding that. All of our inputs will be different. All of our outputs and outcomes, though, should be aligned. The way that we do that is using validated tools, rather than just feelings that people feel, like "this might be having an impact".

There are ways to measure this. If we could have some alignment in terms of that, have some training available to smaller organisations who are doing great work across the community, and have this real approach around collaboration when funding comes out. It's within all funding requirements at the moment, but to various degrees. Everybody is still fighting over the same pots of money. It's going to take a while for us to all get on the same page. We might be the lead organisation, but nobody can do everything in isolation that's required for a young person. I also do want to reflect that, in our consultation across New South Wales with young people, we are seeing that we're able to have a really profound impact on the eight to 12s.

We've got some piloted programs at the moment in that really preventative space. There are lots and lots of complex vulnerabilities identified within the cohorts that we're working with. We're often working with New South Wales Police in our piloted areas to look to siblings, family circumstances, the role modelling around DV [domestic violence], and the environments that these young people find themselves within. They're really great indicators for us, around what young people we should be working with, in terms of prevention in that space of eight to 12s. It's a tough space to be in, because the behaviours are escalating all of the time. That sucks.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Thank you for what you all do. Yesterday we did meet with a number of members of the community, and they were very complimentary of the work that the police do in this region. I think that was very well reflected yesterday.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Hear, hear.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: I do want to ask for comment from the Superintendent and then the Assistant Commissioner, in relation to the actual strength of the Mid North Coast and the actual strength for the Northern Region as a whole at the moment.

SHANE CRIBB: We're acting on about 70 per cent authorised strength currently. That's what we are right now.

DAVE WADDELL: The region averages about 73 per cent, and that's looking at long-term sick and our vacancies. If we drill down a bit more, it's probably a bit lower, when we look at some of our short-term sick that we don't expect to be coming back, and restricted duties, and those sorts of things. Realistically, we are down below 70 per cent across the region, and some commands are probably down to the low sixties. Resourcing is a challenge. I think that's recognised across the organisation, and across pretty much most police forces in the state. We've obviously got some new recruitment going on, and mobility programs, like Be a Cop in your Home Town, which we're doing a lot of promotion on. There was an emergency services expo at Lake Macquarie last week, and we did a really big expo around Be a Cop in your Home Town. Some promising signs, but we're definitely in a rebuilding phase.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Following on from there, from your experience and your function as a police officer, are there core police duties that you perform that are actually outside the scope of your work? What are they?

SHANE CRIBB: Yes, definitely. Corrective Services, prisoner transport—that's a definite. I just went down south recently to assist another Commander down there, where police are picking prisoners up out of jail, taking them to court, and babysitting them for a day while they go to court, and then taking them back from the courts. That is one. We're involved with truancy—checking on children who are truanting from school, going to people's addresses to check on schools. Mental health—we take section 19 referrals. We have to pick them up and take them up to the hospital to be assessed to see if they've got mental health issues. Council—we get called for dog complaints; we get called for noise complaints. There are numerous that we're doing, but they're probably the main four—Mr Waddell might have some others—that I see as core police functions we shouldn't be doing.

DAVE WADDELL: Yes, I think Correctives is definitely one. We do a fair bit of work around mental health and supporting ambulance, which are not always key police responsibilities; the local council, as Shane has touched on; Department of Communities and Justice—we do a lot of welfare checks on children. We do welfare checks, and then sometimes we are stuck looking after the kids from time to time. Truancy is an issue. Out-of-home care takes up a fair bit of police time. Really, people are looking after kids that probably don't have

the necessary skills to do so, and then we're called to intervene. So, yes, there are definitely areas that we are still dealing with. I think mental health and Correctives are probably the two bigger areas.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Very quickly, doli incapax and the Young Offenders Act—do you believe they both need to be reviewed?

DAVE WADDELL: I think the diversion is good, so to me, the Young Offenders Act has a place. By the same token, you get to the sort of stage where there needs to be repercussions for young people's actions. I do believe that sometimes they do need to be incarcerated. We need to have programs within facilities; we need to have programs for people on bail. To me, the key is education. We need kids in school, in programs. And if it's not school, it's an alternative to school. It might be on the job learning, or it might be on country learning, but we need some options there. That's the key, to me.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: I'm going to let Phil ask questions, because I know we're running out of time, but thank you for the work that you're all doing. I've heard plenty to go away with.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: I'd like to thank you all for giving evidence today, for coming in and talking. As some of our other members have said, we did hear a lot yesterday from some local victims of crime. I thank Michael Kemp for organising that. I want to float an idea in front of you guys, and tell me if it's something that you think would work. From where I sit and from what I've heard, fundamentally it's what happens at home and education; they're the two basic pillars that are underlying a lot of these issues. I'm a big supporter of a boarding school on country, but it needs to have the community support. Something like engaging with the local Aboriginal Land Council, the local medical service and Elders—do you think that would work? I'd be interested to hear all of your opinions, from Greg right across to Justine, on how you think that would operate or work. Do you think there's merit in something like that in this community? I'd be interested in your thoughts.

SHANE CRIBB: I might start, Mr Donato, the reason being I have something that we speak about regularly. I'm not saying it has to be on country or off country. When you talk about it, you talk about education. I have a theory that if kids are engaged—whether it be education, TAFE, university, or whatever—they're less likely to commit crime, and that's evidence, right? If we look at education—and you talk about kids getting suspended from school—I also believe that kids at school who want to be at school, deserve to be at school without other kids causing dramas, affecting safety, and risk. So people getting suspended from school has a place as well. But what I think we need, especially in Kempsey, is—I call it a suspension school but I don't want to call it a suspension school. It's probably similar to what you're going to. Because when they get suspended, they get suspended for 20 days, or whatever it is, and then they virtually end up in police hands.

What I'd like to see is some type of boarding school, an alternate school: When they do get suspended from school, or when they're not capable of going to school under the current curriculum, they go to this other boarding school—and "boarding school" for the sake of a word—but in that school it needs to be like a hospital or a school, and all these agencies' offices are set up in that school. So whenever you're not at school, that's your alternate place you go. But it's very important that the education curriculum is amended to accommodate those children in that school.

Because, as Uncle Greg will tell you, a lot of these kids can't even read and write. When they go into the normal education system and on day one the teacher says, "Write your name on that book," they can't write. So what happens tomorrow? They don't want to go to school, because they're actually embarrassed. But if you don't change the curriculum from the mainstream curriculum and put them into this boarding school and teach them to read and write, and about life, and about how to fence, or how to be a mechanic or whatever, then we're just going round and round in circles.

We need to be picking up these kids early, back here, when they're identified at risk, and taking them on this big long timeline, right through to university, TAFE, or employment. Whenever they fall off this timeline, that's where they're in that boarding school or alternate school, but it's important that that school holds all these other agencies. Drug and alcohol counselling, mental health, et cetera, need to be in it, not called in when we need them. I described it like a big hospital ward. As you walk down the ward, that office says "mental health", that office says "drug and alcohol counselling"—that office is there. Then you talk about the Elders, and they can all be part of that—because I'm mindful of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. So it's all about one in, all in. I've been a very big fan of that, but obviously you need a facility for it, and then you need the right people in it. Even when you speak about being off the streets, and when you think about every issue that's come up today—I have to be honest, if you ask me one thing that I think would fix it, in my experience, that would be my whole answer.

DAVE WADDELL: Very briefly, because I will let Greg speak, I think the education is key. If we look at our correctional facilities, we know that plenty of people in those correctional facilities have mental health issues, and have been victims of sexual assault. I think the counselling and the mental health services that go with

the school are important for education. Touching on your point about on country, if we look at the percentage of young persons across this region that were charged, there is a large proportion that are Aboriginal, particularly in this area. So there probably is value in some on country aspect to it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I need to wrap up this panel session because we have a full program today, with a lot of witnesses sitting behind you, and we need to give everyone the opportunity.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Could we just ask how many kids?

The CHAIR: Two seconds. If you have additional information, you can always forward that to the Committee and it will be taken into consideration in our report. I thank everyone for appearing before the Committee today. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's hearing for corrections. The Committee staff will also email you any supplementary questions that you might need to respond back to. Thank you so much for your attendance.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mrs GAIL CHEERS, Community Member, sworn and examined

Mr JOHN ROYDHOUSE, Community Member, sworn and examined

Ms MARILYN FIGGETT, Community Member, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Our next panel of witnesses are community members. Thank you all for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly social media pages. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Particularly to the three witnesses, if you feel uncomfortable with the publication of photos and videos of you, please let us know. I know your positions are sensitive. Please advise if you have received the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders. Have you all receive those?

JOHN ROYDHOUSE: Yes.

GAIL CHEERS: Yes.

MARILYN FIGGETT: Yes. I would like to say, first of all, please all remember that I am profoundly deaf. There will be things that I'll have to ask you to repeat. This is not very easy for me.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. Do you have any questions about the information?

MARILYN FIGGETT: No.

JOHN ROYDHOUSE: No.

GAIL CHEERS: No.

The CHAIR: Before we move to questions from the Committee, do any of you have a short opening statement you'd like to make?

JOHN ROYDHOUSE: First of all, I'd like to thank the Committee for coming to Kempsey. This is a very important issue. Our community—and I'll be blunt—do live in fear of what's been going on, so we are very appreciative of your attendance today. I spoke briefly yesterday in regard to the home invasion that I experienced. I won't go through all the details, in the interests of time, but every day and every evening I reflect back on that vision of someone with a machete threatening me. People ask me, "Can't you get over that? Can't you forget it?" When you have to barricade your home every evening to feel safe, and you go around at dusk and lock everything up, take the dog out for its business outside, and hope that it doesn't wake up in the middle of the night to go again, you're immediately reminded of that vision. It doesn't leave you, so the mental health aspects are immense.

In the couple of weeks after the home invasion, in the media, we kept hearing about Moree and the actions that were going on up there. Again this morning, we've heard about the programs for the perpetrators of these crimes; there is very little for the victims from a mental health perspective, from just the simple support. I will acknowledge that the police were fantastic when they responded, and the amount of resources given was incredible. Having two officers come out about 25 minutes after the home invasion was great. Other officers were involved in a high-speed police chase through Kempsey shortly afterwards. Forensics came down from Coffs Harbour the next day. There were several visits from detectives. I looked at those police resources and I thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if that was spent on prevention rather than trying to deal with it after the fact that it's happened?"

There were simple things, and things I mentioned yesterday—things like two-factor authentication and the challenges of trying to deal, as a victim, with day-to-day business, with government, with your Medicare card, your private health insurance, your drivers licence, and trying to get those re-established without having access to a mobile phone. There have to be other ways. I know when I log on to the Qantas app—especially if you're overseas and you log onto the Qantas app—you've got the option of text message, email, or to answer a secret question. It would be great if all government agencies adopted a similar sort of thing. I get the reasons why there is two-factor authentication, but there have to be alternatives to having a mobile phone, because that's the first thing they take. Why do they take it? So you can't ring the police. It's as simple as that. They actually don't want the phone; they just don't want you to be able to communicate with the police.

From a mental health perspective, there is very little support. We're lucky in South West Rocks; a group of volunteers have established a men's group where we can come and discuss these things. We meet once a fortnight. We met last night. It was great to rehash some of these issues again and get them off your chest, but it's a self-help group. We don't have any resources. The funding for the whole thing comes from our local Rotary

club. There is no government support. It would be great if when the police come and do the incident report and things, they said, "Here is a card of where you can go to get help as a victim." They are the things that are lacking.

The CHAIR: Mrs Cheers, do you have an opening statement?

GAIL CHEERS: Once again, thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak on behalf of our community. Yesterday I told my story, but there are several other stories that need to be told. We were broken into three times. It's four times for another 84-year-old lady who is a friend of mine. Her car was taken; her money was taken. She has now had to build a safe room to lock herself in. It's just awful. She lives in total fear. She hears a noise and she has to go and lock herself in. I worry about her. If somebody sets fire to that house and she's in there, there's no way that she'll escape. Another 78-year-old widow had her car keys stolen, phone, and money. She was belted with a baseball bat very close to her head, on her shoulder. She was black from the neck to her hips. She was a widow living by herself. The list goes on.

With one of the submissions that I read, I didn't realise that the person came from Kempsey until I got to the end of the submission. It's horrific. This woman lives in South Kempsey. It's absolutely horrific what she goes through. It's wrong. The list goes on and on, of elderly people who have worked and lived in the valley all their lives, terrorised, terrified, and living in fear in their own homes. I know; I experienced it. These people have experienced it. I don't know if you've ever experienced it. If you never have, you have no idea what it's like. Something has to be done. The ideas that the police and other people have put forward are fabulous.

I was a schoolteacher. I worked in a disadvantaged school. I was a principal. I said yesterday in conversation with a couple of people that those children that are now out perpetrating crimes, I could've identified them in kindergarten as at risk—I'm sure other teachers can as well—and that families are at risk, but nothing is done. The most that we could do when I was teaching was report them to DOCS, but you could only report them to DOCS once something had been disclosed, or you knew that something was going on with that child. You report them to DOCS. We never heard anything more back, because it's just then in the hands of DOCS.

Those things need to change. Schools need to be brought in. I agree with what the police said. Those kids as young as four, five, or six are now being brought in with their siblings to get into houses, because they can climb through a small space. It has to start very, very early, and it has to be a whole approach. I agree with what John said: There is no support for victims from the mental stress of it all. It has to happen. We cannot go on the same way and doing the same things and expect a different result. I was told that was the definition of stupidity. It must change. Thank you for listening to us. Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

MARILYN FIGGETT: Good morning and thank you for having us here today. I wear two hats, one on the 75-year-old victim. I've been harassed in my home to the point where at one stage I was diagnosed with PTSD. I struggled for a little while until one day I just straightened up and said, "No, I'm not going to have any fear. I'm just going to move forward. I'm going to channel my fear into a more positive area, where I will fight for Kempsey and for the community and for some way of improving what's happening." I promised the Kempsey people a little while ago on a crime page that I would take this as far as I could in an attempt to improve the situation here in Kempsey for people. I think Kempsey is such a fantastic community that it deserves better. I made a promise that I would fight for that, so I've channelled all my energy into that. I've taken it away from fear and PTSD and all such things. Today, to me, is the culmination of everything that I've done in an effort to do that, and I so much appreciate the fact that you're all here for this. I'm happy to go on with the questions, if you wanted to go on with them.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Thank you for sharing your stories, which I think are very important as part of the inquiry. This is probably a quick one to John. You actually spoke about, as victims of crime, knowing where to go and where to get support. You did suggest in your statement that you'd like to see police, potentially, or someone give you a card that actually outlines what help or what services might be out there. I know it's on the spot, but could I get you to identify what areas you think would be best on that card for identification? There are some that are obvious, like for mental health support, but are there any others that you can think of that really need to be on that card for any victims of crime?

JOHN ROYDHOUSE: Yes, you have put me on the spot. I think probably a checklist of the things that you have to do, so the things that you carry in your wallet that you don't always necessarily remember: credit cards, Medicare card, private health insurance, drivers licence, seniors card, Opal card for those of us who occasionally go to Sydney—all those sorts of things. That would be a good thing, because you're trying to remember, and you are stressed. That would be useful. Yes, the mental health one, if there are any support groups locally, or if there are any victims of crimes groups, something like that, or to make sure to check your insurance policies.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: I have no questions, but just to say thank you so much.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: I have one brief question. Victim impact statements—I'm just looking under the Charter of Victims Rights. Were any of you afforded the opportunity to make a victim impact statement at court for the perpetrators, or the offenders, when they appeared at court to tell the magistrate?

JOHN ROYDHOUSE: No.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: You weren't?

GAIL CHEERS: The perpetrators were never caught from our break-ins, and so we weren't given any opportunity—

Mr PHILIP DONATO: John?

JOHN ROYDHOUSE: No.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Marilyn, have you ever been afforded the opportunity to give a victim impact statement at court?

MARILYN FIGGETT: Yes, I have.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: How many times?

MARILYN FIGGETT: Only once in all our time. I was placed in the witness box and ridiculed and made fun of by the person that was being questioned. The whole thing was an absolute joke. The magistrate at the time couldn't pull it in and he just said to me, "I'm sorry." We tried to stop it but it just didn't stop. They embarrassed me and ridiculed me the whole time I was there.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Was that a victim impact statement or was that you giving evidence in court?

MARILYN FIGGETT: It was evidence in court on one of my own break and enters.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I don't have any questions but, Marilyn, I agree with you that this is a beautiful community, as are the people who live here and the way that you support each other. You definitely deserve better, and that is what we will be working towards. Take care of yourselves.

MARILYN FIGGETT: Thank you.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Firstly, thank you all for the strength of character you have shown and care for your own community by being here. We do a lot of work with victims of crime over the years and we see your strength to be able to give this evidence. Know that today this Committee is listening to you. Understand that we are going to act on this. The government has already committed to creating a victims rights commissioner and an independent commission for victims services. The things you are telling us today will help us make sure that it works. My heart goes out to you and I'm sure it does from this whole Committee. We talked about your evidence and what you talked to us about yesterday. We understand where you are coming from. I think one of the reasons we don't have questions for you is because you've given us such powerful evidence. That doesn't often happen, to be honest. You should be proud of yourselves for that because it's quite an achievement.

MARILYN FIGGETT: Thank you. There are two points I hope to have the opportunity to make today. One is there have been wonderful things happen in this community to try to improve what's happening with the youth. They've put in the lovely PCYC. They've got a beautiful park out south. None of that has worked. It's there. It's used by some, but it hasn't answered any of the problems that we're having. This is my own personal opinion. I think it's time we stop passing out iPads and colouring-in books and looked at something more punitive. Getting into the second subject, I see this as a layered problem. It's like treating the scab but not delving and finding what caused the scab. This is a generational problem in Kempsey.

We have a massive problem here at the moment with ice. The parents are sending the children out to earn enough for their next fix. If we don't treat the layers—there's not much point punishing the kids if we don't try to stop the problem that's causing the kids to do what they're doing. My second hat, that I mentioned before, is a welfare situation. This is not just my own personal thinking. This is what I've seen over the last 20 years. Ice is so massive. We have such a big percentage and, especially in the Indigenous community, ice is a major problem. We can punish the kids all we like. We can send them to juvie. We can do all that, but they come back to the parents who then say, "Go back out and get me this." I can tell horrific stories. I won't tell them, but I could tell horrific stories of the punishments that they get if they don't come home with the loot. So what's the point of punishing the kids if we can't get to the root of the problem? This is what I'm hoping that you people see today. My challenge is to present that to you. I just hope when you go away that I've given you something to think about.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you, Marilyn. That's very important. Gail, you mentioned about being a principal, how there was a breakdown. When you identified a child or there was an issue, you talked to DOCS and it went nowhere.

GAIL CHEERS: Absolutely.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: That doesn't surprise me because of what we hear, but it should. I'm going to ask you, Gail, what should happen. If you had a perfect way of making the process correct, how would you do it—just pass it on, or would the school be involved? What would happen? Could you tell me what needs to happen?

GAIL CHEERS: The school needs to be involved, because it's the school that has first contact with the child. It's the school that has contact with the parents, and quite often it's the parents who are also at risk, because they have no idea on how to address the issues with the child, or they don't have the accountability or responsibility. There need to be services involved as well. If that child is at some physical harm, DOCS needs to be involved. But it all needs to be a much more open process, and the schools need to work with and accommodate those issues.

We had a program that the police were talking about, with suspension of children. Where I taught, it was a pretty rough area to start with. Our policy was we didn't suspend the child to go home, we had an in-school suspension, and that child was supervised, mostly by myself, because I was a non-teaching principal at the time. They were set up with work, and I could talk to them, help them with their work, and so on. They didn't get sent home to go out in the streets to run and create havoc. They were supervised within school, but they were withdrawn—they weren't in the playground with their friends, they weren't in the classroom with their friends, until they worked their way through, and were ready to go back into the playground or into the mainstream class.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What would you do with these kids? They'd do something and you'd take them away from the mainstream class.

GAIL CHEERS: Yes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What would they be doing in this special class?

GAIL CHEERS: School work. School work suitable for them. It's nothing—it wasn't requiring a massive amount of teacher input, but yes, something that they felt they could achieve, that was well within their ability to work at that level. That was something that was pretty innovative at our school. Children worked at their levels; they didn't work at the whole class level. If you had children in your class—we used to actually swap them through different classes and change about for the basics, for English, and maths, and so on, literacy and maths, and it worked. We had quite a large percentage of Indigenous children at our school—not as big as some—and we had great results in basic skills with those Indigenous children. Some of them were the highest in the state. Somebody asked me once, "Well, what is it that you do? What are you doing? How are you getting these high results?" I said, "We're treating them as normal kids. We take the time. We don't make them different."

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What school was this?

GAIL CHEERS: Frederickton, which is just down the road a little bit further.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: The police and Mr Donato talked about the concept of a boarding-type school, because what we're finding in evidence before us, as the Committee is progressing, is that the home life is the main problem.

GAIL CHEERS: Absolutely.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: It isn't drugs; it's the home life.

GAIL CHEERS: Yes, absolutely.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: And putting kids back into that time and time again, each evening after they leave PCYC, or whatever they do, leads to where we are.

GAIL CHEERS: That's right.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: So this idea of having a boarding school where they have a place to stay, where they have to do schooling, where they basically have a routine, they have meals, et cetera, what are your thoughts on that concept?

GAIL CHEERS: I think it's fabulous. All services must be involved in it as well, but I think it's great to be able to give those kids education at the standard that they are at and work on that. Don't start them if they're at a standard of, say, a year 2 child and then try to teach—but they're 11 years old. That doesn't work. You must start; you can't skip and start. I think it's fabulous. I think it also needs to work with the parents. The parents must

have some sort of education system on parenting. I know, as Marilyn said, there are huge drug problems and it's very hard to do that. It's not going to get fixed overnight, because there have been generations of this happening. It's going to be a very costly exercise. This is Australia-wide this problem; this is not just in Kempsey. This is right across Australia, and I have no doubt it's probably right across the world. But we are in Kempsey and we see it and we live it.

There are solutions, but it has to be a whole approach, and it has to be not this service operating there, and that one over there. As the Inspector said, if you could bring it all together in one thing that would be fabulous. With the boarding-type thing, I think it needs to be perhaps when the child is—if they come up to court. As I said, none of the perpetrators in our crimes were ever caught or brought to court—not that we knew of anyway. I think if they do get to court, and if this is their second offence, part of the bail conditions—if they're going to be on bail—is "Yes, you must attend this boarding school, and your parents must attend this education on parenting." The responsibility and accountability for parents is gone; it's just gone.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: The final question from me can go to any of you. Obviously, you have a better idea of the community than we do. We're talking about Indigenous kids, Aboriginal kids. How many other kids, non-Aboriginal kids, are involved in crimes like this? Is there an issue there as well or are we just talking about Indigenous kids?

MARILYN FIGGETT: It's mainly Indigenous.

JOHN ROYDHOUSE: There are not as much. There are non-Indigenous kids involved, but not the percentages.

MARILYN FIGGETT: There is more percentage.

GAIL CHEERS: I think you'll find that the non-Indigenous kids that are involved are running with the Indigenous kids. That's the cohort. It's not "them and us", sort of thing; it's a cohort of "Oh, I'm accepted in this group. I'm going to run with it." A lot of it has to do with poor education.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Is it predominantly boys or is there a mix?

GAIL CHEERS: No. I can only speak from my experience. The ones that broke into our home, the 3 times, were a mix. The last time they came there were four of them. Two of them were obviously girls, and two boys.

MARILYN FIGGETT: With my home invasions, as I've said before, I had more than 20 cars stolen, and I've had 17 home invasions. Out of those 37 combined incidents I would say there were three non-Indigenous people involved. The rest were Indigenous. I really think we need some focus on building Indigenous self-esteem in this community so this stops happening.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Marilyn, the things you've gone through, you're a real credit to this community. Your strength of character is unbelievable, mate.

MARILYN FIGGETT: Thank you. I'm getting a bit old for all this, but I'm not going to give up. I'll still keep trying, thank you.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Good on you, mate.

The CHAIR: I have one question. Throughout all of the hearings we've had there is a common theme that you're probably aware of, and that is the home. The home is the core issue where it's broken. Kids don't want to be at home. We've had evidence in past hearings from the police that sometimes when they're doing the patrols and they see kids in the street they pick them up and—where do they take them?—they take them back home because there's nowhere else where they can take them.

MARILYN FIGGETT: You've hit the nail right on the head there. These kids wander at night because they're too frightened to go home. They're too scared to go home because the punishment for not bringing home the bounty is too big.

The CHAIR: My question is two-pronged. One is, in your opinion, how do we address the home situation? What does the Government need to do to address the home situation?

MARILYN FIGGETT: That would be such a massive project. That's a massive project. It's beyond my ability to predict what exactly is needed. It would be a very costly thing to do. I just ponder about this very question all the time. It's just too big for me to answer.

The CHAIR: The second part of my question is what facilities should there be so that, when police do pick up kids, instead of taking them home, they can take them somewhere else and to a safe place.

MARILYN FIGGETT: They need a safe environment.

The CHAIR: Do you support that concept?

MARILYN FIGGETT: Yes, I do. Definitely.

The CHAIR: I put that on the record. That's why I've asked.

JOHN ROYDHOUSE: Mr Chair, could I just add to that? We've heard about children who are less well educated. Something that I haven't heard mentioned very often is, when I reflect on my own childhood and my own children's childhoods and upbringings, I was fortunate that I went to boarding school. I paid the price, and sent all my children to boarding school. I am still paying off the debt. My children were not academic at all, but the most wonderful thing for them was sport. We need to encourage kids into sport. It teaches them to be part of a team. It teaches them discipline. It teaches them the most important thing in the world, which is respect. Yes, there may be difficulties at home, but they also learn what's right and wrong through sport, outside the home environment. All kids are good for a certain period of time.

The CHAIR: Thank you, all, particularly for yesterday's session. That was very informative for us. The Committee may send you some supplementary questions. We ask you to return those to the Committee. On behalf of the Committee, I thank you all for appearing today, which is very courageous of you, and also for yesterday's session with you.

MARILYN FIGGETT: We'd like to thank you for providing the opportunity for us, just to know that someone is listening. It is such a major issue.

The CHAIR: The whole purpose of this hearing is to listen to the community.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr MARK MORRISON, Community Leader and Educator, sworn and examined

Ms JILLIAN ASHLEY, Chief Executive Officer, ShoreTrack, sworn and examined

Mr PAUL IRELAND, Operations Manager, ShoreTrack, sworn and examined

Mr MARK ROBERTSON, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, One Vision Productions, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Before I start this session, I acknowledge the federal member for Cowper, Mr Conaghan, has joined us here today. Thank you for your attendance. I welcome our next witnesses and thank you all for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearings, which may be used for social media purposes on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly social media pages. Please inform the Committee should you wish to object to having photos and videos taken. I ask that you confirm that you've been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders for today's hearing.

JILLIAN ASHLEY: Yes.

PAUL IRELAND: Yes.

MARK MORRISON: Yes.

MARK ROBERTSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about those terms of reference?

JILLIAN ASHLEY: No.

PAUL IRELAND: No.

MARK MORRISON: No.

MARK ROBERTSON: No.

The CHAIR: Do any of you have a short opening statement that you wish to give, or shall we move into questions?

MARK ROBERTSON: I can maybe start. I'm a kid that was—I'm a ward of the state. I left home about 12½, just before I was 13 years old. I grew up a lot on the streets of Inala. From my personal experience, and now I'm director of a leading grassroots organisation in Australia, One Vision Productions, what I really wanted to do—we've got programs that work. I was re-diverted, through Youth Justice, when I was younger, and now I'm in a position where I can actually voice on a level where I've been through it, and also how diversion programs can work. In opening it, I just wanted to clarify my position.

PAUL IRELAND: I'd just like to say that my background includes 22 years of policing in rural and remote communities with high Aboriginal populations and with youth crime the focus of police operations. I've been out of the police service since 2012 and involved in youth organisations ever since.

JILLIAN ASHLEY: My background is in education. Also, I've had experience, I guess, working in the community. I think that's really important when we look at diversionary programs—that the diversionary programs are run by people who are place based and understand the particular problems or issues of that community.

The CHAIR: Are witnesses happy now to move to questions from Committee members?

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: I think Mark wanted to say something.

The CHAIR: Mark, did you want to make a statement?

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You've been thrown into it, mate, sorry!

MARK MORRISON: That's all right. I've been in Macleay Valley for 34 years and had experience in education in three of the main schools here. I had the privilege of working alongside a number of community agencies at Macleay Vocational College, which looks after disenfranchised youth, young mums, and a lot of youth returning from detention or crime.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you all very much for being here. We've read about your organisations but, for the record, we might get a bit more about what you do. We might start with ShoreTrack. Can you explain what you do, your programs and what you're seeing in the community here in the valley or

anywhere else? What needs to be done to try to fix some of those problems? I know it's a big, loaded question; you probably could talk for 12 hours about it.

JILLIAN ASHLEY: That's exactly right.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: If you can just give us around about, and we'll explore it later at another time if we can't today.

JILLIAN ASHLEY: Sure. I'll start. We started ShoreTrack because I had been involved with TAFE and education for a number of years, and neither system was really working for the youth cohort we're talking about, that are disengaged from school. That system is not working for them. They came to TAFE. That system didn't work for them. They continued to be disengaged young people, with two failures behind them. We started ShoreTrack to work with that cohort, to provide a safe space for them, where they could develop relationships with people, and feel that was a safe place to take positive risks around their learning, to re-engage back into learning again. Our shed is in the industrial estate in Macksville. It's a place where young people come and build their trades-based skills. That is either based on respite from school—so it might be between one and five days a week, and that is a cohort starting at 10 years of age—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What do you mean by "respite"?

JILLIAN ASHLEY: It's just time out of school. The schools would refer a young person for between one and five days a week, depending on what was happening at school for them. But what we found was just even being able to come out of school one day a week would help a lot of them to re-engage back into learning again, because at least there was one day where they were learning the way they liked learning, and they were learning the things they wanted to learn, which was trades-based skills. These kids are 10 to 16, and then we have another cohort who are young people who have left school. They've been given early exit by the principal, and they're doing a Certificate II. The cohort that has just finished, so these were kids who weren't going to school, they've come to ShoreTrack, they've done that Certificate II in Rural Operations through Tocal College, and 83 per cent of those kids are now in full-time employment. They felt safe, and I think that was the first step, after the failure at school.

The first step was coming into a place that they felt safe to take risks again in their learning, and it was a positive relationship that they had. They also say that one of the things they found very comforting was that we gave them the responsibility of doing things like learning to weld and learning to drive an excavator, and that showed that we trusted them, and that we really felt that they were good people and had that capacity. Mind you, our staff to student ratio is one to five, so it's very well supervised learning, and that also enables that relationship building. Next year will be our fifth year. We work with about 160 young people a year, whether it's through those school respite programs or the more diversionary programs.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Are these kids getting in trouble with the law before they come to you or are these kids who are at school but they're not quite working out and come to you? What are their backgrounds?

JILLIAN ASHLEY: Some of them have disengaged, and they're in that cycle where they're not going to school so they're getting into trouble because they've got lots of spare time, and they're coming to the attention of the police, and potentially are on the road to incarceration. Some of them are coming to us five days a week from school because they've been expelled. The schools don't want them back again, and they don't really know what to do except send them to ShoreTrack, and those kids would have ended up in incarceration as well. About 33 per cent of our kids have had contact with the justice system, whether that's through family members, or their own situations.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: How do they find you?

JILLIAN ASHLEY: They're referred from school, or the word is out now, that you can come to ShoreTrack. But we're not government funded at all, so the problem is, and the information we're starting to gather now is, the number of young people who want to come to ShoreTrack and their needs are not met. We do get phone calls from young people and parents saying, "My child or my sibling is not going to school." I know there is this term "school refusers", but I don't think that the kids are the problem, honestly. I just don't think that the school system, the education system, has the capacity to deal with these young people, who don't want an academic pathway, and they're not learning by sitting in a classroom listening.

They're desperate to learn. They really love learning, but they want to be doing it hands-on. They like to learn by being shown and then doing. From our experience with the Certificate II, once they realise why they need to do the writing and why there needs to be evidence collected, then that's okay. They understand, "If I want to get the Certificate II, and I want to go and work, then I've got to follow through this process." Before that, it's not really meaningful learning for them.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you. We've only got limited time.

JILLIAN ASHLEY: Yes. Sorry, I talked and talked.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Mark, do you want to say what your organisation does and what you think needs to be done?

MARK MORRISON: I guess, backing onto what Jillian is doing, what ShoreTrack is doing, is building a place of trust, but also building somewhere where young people feel that they have an opportunity to belong. Finding opportunities for them, when they go to VC [Macleay Vocational College], which was necessarily a school, but also had a vocational training program to it. It also had a young parenting program that was in it. A lot of those were built from listening.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: How young are we talking about with young parenting? Are we talking about teenagers?

MARK MORRISON: Yes. Sorry—you're taking me to a place I didn't want to remember. I guess that the secret in listening is valued conversations, and then building safety around those conversations, and then being witness to some young people who don't want to finish school. They don't want to follow an academic program. They would like a job. They would like to be, sometimes, the first in their family to get a job. Others want to be the first in their family to get an HSC, because—in this particular state, anyway—people bounce up and down about getting an HSC. The school itself opted that that was a pathway.

That became an easier pathway when we listened to what the pressures were of the young mums who were trying to raise a child, not having anywhere to have that young child looked after, and being worried about where they're leaving that person within community. Not because they're worried about the volatile nature of some of the places that they live in, but simply because they can't take their mind from their baby or their child being safe to come in and do education. That was a real eye-opener for us, I think. We provided the network to pick the mums up and give them food and do all of that, but wondered why they weren't coming, and why they weren't a part of that.

Also, with all the other young people who were there, finding food, finding safety, and finding people who would sit down and have the big idea conversations with you, and having time for that. No matter what group of educators we represent, mainstream education is not supported to do that in the same manner that we do. You have to fight. You have to raise money. You have to put in for every opportunity that you can, and for every program that is available, in order to find that. You're losing a lot of energy, as these organisations do, in trying to find a way to fund it.

I guess the benefit in doing that is the creativity that comes out of that, and the place-based solutions that are here, for the children that live in the Nambucca Valley, the Macleay Valley, up in Mullum, and everywhere else that's around the place. The value is in having people who live within those communities, who understand that, and who can go out into the areas where the young people live, and foster and develop those relationships. They then give the young people an opportunity to feel not only that they are valued, but they have a pathway for success. The trick is that education in schools doesn't seem to provide young people with a pathway to success after they finish.

What is that pathway, and how is that attachment? You will hear many, many schools talk about year 13 and year 14. There are people that are making industries based on that by advising schools. The reality is, if the trust is in the organisation that those young people are going to and being with, why wouldn't we work on helping that funding and that relationship, and allowing those young people into the next form of life that they're going to take? It's very hard leaving school and then trying to pick up a job while not having somewhere to live or not being able to afford somewhere to live. Accommodation, food—lots of stuff. I could keep going.

MARK ROBERTSON: Going back from, I suppose, since I was a young fella growing up in the system—I was a ward of the state—I was very lucky to do my first program when I was 22, in two communities where we saw police coming to the Indigenous communities to work with the kids. Since then, I've gone on to work with over 10,000 youth around Australia doing mental health workshops; aligning kids with passion and purpose; instead of them going to jail systems, engaging them with mentors based on their passion and purpose; directing their life to be able to go to a place of love and connection. It can be seen like a bandwidth. At the moment our system is actuating trauma, with protection and care up here, but we're just giving nothing but trauma on trauma, like a kicked dog, instead of actually putting money in the systems.

For example, instead of a kid being incarcerated for up to $800,000 a year, we can run services for $50,000, and keep kids out of prison systems. So I think in Australia the Australian Government has to start thinking about different ways of redirecting the youth, allowing not trauma on trauma happening, but actually

being able to put it in a position of going, "How do we actually aid and abet that?" For example, Finland, Norway, Sweden—there are some great systems that do that. I was a Churchill Fellow researching different sorts of systems of how that worked. Like I said, I've worked with over 10,000 youth around Australia. We're federally funded.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Can I just interrupt you? You did the Churchill.

MARK ROBERTSON: Yes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: I would imagine the cohort they're dealing with—of youth justice—in those countries would be very different from our Indigenous community. Do you agree?

MARK ROBERTSON: Absolutely. I've been from the Bronx, to a lot of different places. There are always different cohorts. But it works also to—it's like a kicked dog. If we keep kicking the dog that's trying to get help and support, with no support it's going to end up isolated. Kids are going into institutionalised systems from 10 years old, and our three-strike policy right now, instead of actually aiding, caring, and creating systems of direction and care—for example, for me, I was looking at two years when I was 17. Instead, I got redirected, and now I've founded and started one of the grassroots mental health organisations of Australia, because I was put in a position to be able to do so. We just had 10 kids a while ago who went through with us. All of them stayed out of jail systems. Eight out of 10 of them—one of the kids just opened for the State of Origin, singing.

It's about putting kids with passion and purpose, directing them with mental health strategies, giving them support around that, showing them different ways of existing as children. The three-strike policy, kids going to jail systems from 10 years old, and 23 hours of lockdown, is not the way to be helping our youth. Once a kid is incarcerated, they'll be incarcerated over and over again, because they find adaptions inside of that, because they know nothing else. So we have systems; we have opportunities for the way forward. We were nearly funded $1 million last year to be able to do this. Again, COVID expenditure, all of the money got shipped back from mental health organisation, and we're back in a shed working, where what we do really works.

But in Australia it takes us, from a political level, to start thinking differently about how we're actually dealing with our youth, how we're creating protection, how we're creating care systems, what the kids are into—passion and purpose, like what these guys are doing. If they're into trade, get them into a trade. If they're into music, get them into that. Have mental health support around that, have ways for them to go into TAFE education, or into schooling systems as a part, instead of going through incarceration.

We've got our program over there that we're proposing and that we've proposed before. I'm just an example of how that does it. For a tenth of what it costs for our kids to be incarcerated, we want to be thinking, "Keep our kids out of jail", and we want to be thinking, "How are we going to do that?" That is creating paradigms of these systems that work. It's what we do well. It's why we got really successful and why we've had a lot of funding from federal [government] for different programs and that. Because what we do—it's not rocket science ideology. It's how do we create systems of care, how do we wrap services around that, and how do we work together to be able to place that.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you very much, guys. I appreciate it.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: You've covered a lot in those opening comments. I've taught with Mark—full disclosure. I know exactly the sort of incredible work you do. If you ruled the world, if you were the Premier of the state, what would be a couple of things you would do immediately?

MARK ROBERTSON: On this topic, I'd put a whole lot of money into reinvestment strategies, into what's happening in the care systems—people like ShoreTrack, who are using alternative methods of education, finding kids pathways of passion and purpose, creating environments where kids can feel safe, where they can learn mental health structures and how to adapt, where they can be put into places of care and be able to learn stuff. A lot of the time when you're on the streets, like when I was, you don't get any opportunity. There are no services out there that you can go to, and say, "Oh, I need help." A lot of kids—everyone I knew from when I was young—were sitting incarcerated, in and out, drug addictions, dead.

Unless we think about it differently from a state political structure—for one, we should not be funding people like Serco and privatising prison systems, because there's money being made off our kids being in jail systems. We need to act as a country to be able to say, "Right, we need to take this system into our hands, and we need to be able to put in so much more into intervention strategies in ways that actually help our youth. As I say, it's not rocket science. We've got to stop putting trauma on trauma. The whole system is actuating trauma on trauma. While we're doing that, we're only creating more kids that are being incarcerated, and doing the same system over and over again. We need to be keeping our kids out of prison, not three-shot policies putting them in, because we know the cost that happens to our state, and we know the cost that happens to our kids' lives.

From right away, if I was the Premier, I'd be enacting whole different ways of thinking, and the outlook of the system. I'd be looking at systems that work from other countries. That's more of an energetical scale. We're dealing with different demographics here, but the whole ideology works. We can do something, and we should be enabling that and doing something as a country, and we should be doing something fast. Especially in the Northern Territory, where 99 per cent of our kids in jail systems are Indigenous, one in four Indigenous people that go through our system at present will end up in long-term incarceration. Unless from us and from political leadership we take a strong hold of that, then we're going nowhere.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: I'll direct this question to Mark Morrison. I was looking at your website for the Eungai Creek Newington College facility that you've got. It looks pretty interesting. I've read a bit of the details. Can you tell us how that works—what a day looks like and what a program looks like?

MARK MORRISON: I can easily do that. It's not really around this. That's not who I'm representing in coming here, but I am happy to share that. What does a day look like? In tents with them for, at the moment, 12 nights—32 boys are up at the moment. What do they do? Social service—

Mr PHILIP DONATO: What age group are we talking about?

MARK MORRISON: So 14- and 15-year-olds.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Up from where?

MARK MORRISON: From Sydney—from Newington College. They have social service and cultural immersion programs while they're up here. Social service is working with some of the younger kids in primary schools, and the kids who are in preschool in Kempsey, and then spending time with Kinchela Boys Home survivors, spending time with local cultural identities, and touching base around the fact that if we are really going to have influence—and I know this Committee is about influence—in systems that I've worked in, then they are a school of influence. The young men who come through that school—and it's going co-ed—will have influence in the future to make change.

They can be educated on what is actually happening in the areas that we're talking about here, in particular, the Macleay Valley, and where they're spending their time. They spend a little bit of time in Gumbaynggirr country as well with Elders, and they learn their stories. They have a look housing crises, and they meet young kids who are leaving homes to get to school. They want to go to school, exactly like everyone here has spoken about, but they don't have a transport mechanism. They're learning those lessons, and they will go back and share those stories, and those stories will be powerful, under the influence of the opportunities they have, through their parent or guardian and community bodies.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Paul and Jillian, in terms of your ShoreTrack program, you said there are about 160 students or young people involved in the program per year. How does the structure of it look? What's involved? What sort of success stories have been achieved through that program?

PAUL IRELAND: The first thing that I'd like to reiterate is that a lot of this stuff is based on relationships. We've identified that. That's why we have the ratio of about five to one. We try not to have any more than those kids so we can give them the time that they need. Our program starts with what we call First Tracks. We understand that, if we're going to have an influence on these young people's lives when they're 14 and 15 and they can make decisions then that really do affect the rest of their lives, you've got to have a relationship early.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: What age are we talking about when you say early?

PAUL IRELAND: Primary school—so nine, 10. It's really needs-based sort of stuff. The schools will identify young people that are starting to act up—maybe because of the background that they come from or live within—and they'll send them to us. We build relationships. They start having fun building their skills around trades. We've got 10-year-olds that are welding.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: How often would they come and be involved in your program? Daily?

PAUL IRELAND: The First Tracks kids, they're once a week. We then have other young people—I call them kids, because we treat them like our kids. We have other kids that are there five days a week. We have some that come in—they're the older ones that are there. We actually employ some young people. Today's a real work day at our work for them, where we actually keep them there for eight hours. We use the language around work—smoko, lunch—and we drive them, because we're trying to prepare them for work.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: How have you found the transition for those boys, or those children, in your program once they've been through it—either going back into mainstream schooling or going into work? Can you tell us about that?

PAUL IRELAND: I think that's around that reason for learning. If you provide a young person with a reason to learn, they'll want to learn. We've got kids that are re-engaged. They've come to us through a trades-taster program. It's a 10-week program where they come and they've actually gone back to their school and said, "Okay, now I'm ready to learn, because I've got a reason to learn. I want be a mechanic when I come out." Or they want to do some sort of trade. We've got success stories. We've had at least 50 kids that are now in jobs. They stay in touch with us, and we provide everything for them that we see. We don't say "barriers"; we say "challenge". We try and deal with their mindset so we talk about, "Okay, let's look at getting a licence," and all of those little things that we do—the little one per centers—to get them to a point. We go and pick them up. We don't allow transport to be an issue, because it's one of the biggest issues within our area. The first thing that we purchased when we started the organisation was two cheap buses for 15 grand. We got two buses so—

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Lastly, how are you funded?

JILLIAN ASHLEY: Grants. Bit of philanthropic. We do get some funding from the schools, but that has really been reduced lately, that support funding. But can I just say, in terms of that retention in employment, most of the kids who have gone into employment have been retained, because what's underpinning all of their skills development is also an understanding of employability skills. So that's a huge part of the learning. The employers—and we've spoken to local employers about this—don't necessarily want someone who's got a qualification; they want someone who understands the requirements of a workplace; the expectations around turning up on time, and not using your phone. So by the time that these young people are getting there, they are understanding what the employer wants. Sorry, it's taking a bit longer. Local employers also say they don't necessarily need someone to have a qualification in CAD—computer aided drawing—they need someone who can do computer aided drawing. So, although we're non-accredited training for most of the work we do, non-accredited training is actually quite valuable for employers, in terms of first employment for young people.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: First of all, can I say thank you so much for being here and for your submissions today. With your stories that you're telling and the recommendations that you're making, it's very clear that there is a lot of passion and a lot of dedication for the work that you do and the young ones that you do that for, so thank you.

I'm going to throw a question to you, Jillian. We had the police in before and they said that there are numerous programs here. "We don't really need any more programs," is what I heard them say. But they're running in isolation, they said. Others spoke about funding that is given, the outcome should be measured, but the police were talking about having programs coordinated and running under one banner rather than in silos or in isolation. What are your thoughts on that?

JILLIAN ASHLEY: I'd like to comment in terms of the Nambucca Valley. We are the only youth organisation that is located in the Nambucca Valley, that's place based. Other services that come into the Nambucca Valley are services that are actually located in Kempsey or Coffs, so it's outreached to Nambucca. That means insufficient service. In terms of us all working together, we're desperate to all work together. It would make things much easier, but I don't necessarily think the funding is there to do that. In terms of impact measurement, we are totally aware that we need impact measurement. We can give anyone who would like our statistics about how effective that money has been. We don't have a social return-on-investment figure. We have absolutely got figures about how the money that we've been given through grants has led to successful outcomes for young people who weren't going to have successful outcomes without that money.

MARK ROBERTSON: I will weigh in on that too. I'm from the Mullumbimby region. We don't really have any services that are dealing with helping kids stay out of prison systems—absolutely none that I'm even aware of. If there is, there's no funding being injected into any of these areas of these organisations that do work. As for an example for us too, we've got impact over 12 years showing completely how this works over and over—statistical measurements. We work a lot with federal; sometimes we're working with state. Philanthropy and impact measurement results are of critical importance. But I'm still shaking my head. Where are these services that are actually working with intervention strategies? In Armidale, there's a great thing called BackTrack that does something as well. That's really good. ShoreTrack and these guys are doing some stuff. We had the Minister come out to us this year, going from a two-storey building where we were doing workshops in mental health all throughout New South Wales, and saying, "What you do is of critical importance." But then coming back, there's no money for mental health in 2024. There is definitely so much need, not just here, for reinvestment pathways all throughout Australia. It's the paradigms that I spoke of before.

MARK MORRISON: I have no problem with accountability. I'm not exactly sure of the number of services that are in the Macleay Valley that get money for exactly what we're talking about, but a lot of the services would work together on a regular basis. They share. Their caseworkers in each area would come and be present in schools if that's what they were doing. The conflict for me in that wouldn't be that they're not doing their job,

but it's a little bit of opening up an opportunity that people work out of hours. If ShoreTrack and VC [Macleay Vocational College] are providing opportunities for these kids, they're actually being looked after within whatever the system is, and they feel that they have a place where they can pursue their big ideas or their dreams, they can do it safely, they're fed, and any other members of their family that need to come—which is a bit of a disjoint. If we're talking about some places where these young people come from, they might be worried about leaving who they're leaving at home, so they might need to bring them in. There are a lot of rules and regulations that stop that within systems.

You need to make changes based on those stories. How do you do that? Do you take your classroom and do some teaching in a gutter on a sidewalk somewhere, because that's how you are getting these young people involved in what they're doing? Do you run your lessons on country elsewhere, and involve some of the cultural leaders within communities, so that they can attach? Everyone needs to know who they are, not just kids from a specific group, which has a tendency in this area to be identified that that's where they're coming from. I don't think, in any way, that organisations don't work together. I think the funding systems for organisations, and the tenders that people have for organisations actually cut the throat of the experience that some of those organisations, over many years, have had success with.

A conversation for me around that would be some of the caseworkers who are working with an agency that I don't want to disclose. They couldn't go to the detention centre, whereas I could go and visit the detention centre any time I liked. The detention centre would happily make space for me to go and be with the kids who are there, or even shoot baskets with the kids who are there. So, when people are saying that it's not working there, well, there are some things that work there. Do I want the kids to go? No. Why are we giving up time to go and see them then? Because you need that connection. If they don't have the connection, it's exactly what Mark was saying: When they come out, where do they go to? They haven't had other people visit them. The people who have been given funding to visit them don't have transport, or they don't feel that they're in a position to leave where they're living, because things might happen in that area.

I believe that organisations put their hand up for money because of the tender process. Every time they put their hand up for money because of the tender process, it's like we can't work on the back of the systems or organisations that are working. We have to go to the next—I know it's not called KPIs now. Sorry, I don't have the lingo, but whatever the next version of that is, let's come up with a new set, because we need to have a new value. Because, if we don't have a new value, the people who don't understand and don't have witness to what's happening within community, they won't like us giving more funding to that.

When you break it down to a nutshell, is everyone here able to go, this is the value that would be per young person, keeping them out of hospital, keeping them out of drug addiction, keeping them within a workplace, helping them be supported, allowing them to get the mental health support that they need, so that their next generations—because if we're not taking care of the mental health that these young people need, we all know that they're going to build bigger families. As a result, all of their children are going to have some epigenetics or intergenerational trauma that they're going to take from that. At the moment, those kids are surviving, in a way, because they want to come. Community is trying to provide them with that. They're just not listening enough to the kids around what's there.

The last bit is housing. If they don't come from a house that we call a home, and they have to have a bag packed because they're not sure what's going on, then—and those kids still want to come to school. They still want to be involved with ShoreTrack. They want to catch up with Mark and all of his people. The desire is there; the passion is there. They want their world to be different. We really need to work with them. So I would disagree. I say agencies do work together. However, the 24-hour period of agencies working, that needs to be changed.

If you can change anything, don't change the tenders. Don't make everyone have to reapply and re-establish themselves every time for what they're doing. Have a critical friend. Have someone who can check in with them. Have someone who holds them accountable. There would be community members who would do that, who don't have a buy-in or a belonging to that, and people who come from other communities, who can come in and go, "Here's an idea." At the moment, there is back-ended funding coming from the federal government, where they're trying to pick a system that works in a town in another state, or in a town out west, and trying to implant that system in places like this. It doesn't work that way, because the people with the experience here can't operate in that manner. They try to do it, and they lose respect.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That's very helpful. Thank you very much. That was amazing.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Thank you for what you do. I have been to ShoreTrack on a number of occasions. I have spoken to some of the kids who have actually been involved in the program, and have seen the success and the benefits that have come out of that. I know that you've partnered with Tocal College in the past as well, through

one of the previous grant programs that you've received. I'm just curious, for both organisations, how do you actually collaborate with law enforcement and community organisations in the work that you do?

JILLIAN ASHLEY: We do a lot of community work. One of our values is generosity, and that's absolutely giving back to the community. We also have a social enterprise. Social enterprise works with the community, to provide the opportunities for us to employ the eight trainees that Paul talked about before. Us giving back to the community also gives us the opportunity to employ young people. That also means industry. It's really important to connect with industry, because industry needs to realise that the young people in our community have lots of potential. If there's a skills shortage, why not look within the community and back those kids?

In terms of the local Police Force, they're very supportive of us. They can see the difference on the streets ShoreTrack has made. We'd probably like them to drop in a bit more and form a different sort of relationship because, as we keep on saying, it is about relationships. If that can shift slightly to be more of a mentoring-type relationship, that would be much better. We'd like them to potentially drop in a bit more, have a cuppa in the morning, and talk about the weather. But absolutely, Paul, we base our work very much on being part of the community. It takes a village for these young people. They need to know the community are backing them if they need that support.

MARK MORRISON: I've worked very closely with the police in all the schools that I've been in, but probably the closest would have to have been at VC [Macleay Vocational College]. I'm working closely with them in what I'm doing at the moment. Would every police officer like not to have been reactive to what's going on? Would they like to be proactive? The answer is yes. We all take up our jobs for our passion and purpose, and that's why they took it up. Do they need some more time and assistance around that? Yes. Have we seen some wonderful little implementations of police who are on bikes, travelling around, coming in, dropping in and playing basketball with the kids? Yes, we've seen that. Did that work? Yes, it did, but now they don't have enough people to do that. Are they still walking around? Does the PCYC have positive relationships in community? Yes, they do.

Certainly, the more reactive they are, the less—the community has a tendency not to trust them. But the more reactive they are, the less youth and them combine together. When we had touch football days and stuff like that in the past, they've been really good things. I know they want to do it. It's how do you do it, and how do you find that. I guess that comes from the opportunity to do that, being involved in community days like they just had down here. The police were there, and they had a great stall. I know that lots of young kids went up and spent some time with them, so they are trying.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Good.

MARK ROBERTSON: A lot of that is the bigger issue of trauma-informed care happening inside the police, and their training, which doesn't happen enough, and the reactive situation of what's happening. Police are out with the kids who have gone through trauma and not knowing about it and being quite aggressive. But we work with PCYCs all throughout Australia. We love it when the police have interaction with us as an organisation. They all know us in our area; they help out. When you have the PCYCs, a lot of the time when we're doing workshops, we decide to invite the police along to have a talk to the kids, in an environment where they can talk about their systems and what's actually happening. It's all about a collaboration. Coming back to what we were talking about before, having more people that are coming together, from all fields, and working together in unity is so important.

Going back to understanding this KPI thing, it needs to be mental health, housing, the connection to community, and a whole understanding. I was just down at the Treasury department a while ago saying, "Why is it just bums on seats and this is how we are measuring it?" A holistic individual works in a rounded understanding of what it looks like for a person to succeed and to have care inside their life. We work with police all the time throughout Australia, and it's really handy when they do come on board and work with the youth, because the youth get to see them in a bit of a different light. A lot of the time, especially with our Indigenous youth, there has been a lot of reaction on reaction. There's a lot of trauma that gets built up inside of that, and reactionary methods instead of trauma-informed care would be a highlight in the national police force, and learning how to deal with traumatic situations. That's a bit of a backdrop on how that could work better.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You keep on talking about trauma, but a lot of these kids have committed serious crimes and given major trauma to victims or crime survivors.

MARK ROBERTSON: Say it again, sorry?

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Sorry, I'm talking as I'm thinking. You're talking about trauma, and I'm acknowledging that and appreciate their home lives.

MARK ROBERTSON: Yes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: But they've also committed serious trauma to victims—not all, but certainly we've heard a lot of evidence of elderly people, young people et cetera who have had constant trauma because of break-ins or threats to their lives with weapons. What needs to happen to these kids so they're not duplicating that and continuing to do that?

MARK ROBERTSON: A hundred per cent. Trauma enacts more trauma. These kids go through trauma for most of their lives. They don't know much different, so they're enacting trauma onto other people. It's teaching them the foundations. What we teach with all of our youth is, we teach kids how to think differently, so how self-actualisation is, to understand where aggression comes from; learn what anxiety is, what depression is; for a self-actualised individual, how do you actually deal with all these things that have happened at you since your own birth; forgiveness; how to operate in that sphere—all these sort of things that you're not getting taught in an orderly way, to actually enact outside of the environment of trauma that they've only been dealt with, and they will enact trauma on trauma.

When I was a street kid in Inala, I used to have my money in my sock when I was growing up, and having to fight and getting stood over all the time. It wasn't until I was given an environment where I was actually connected, I went back and did my grade 11 and 12 as part of a reinvestment, went to university, and met beautiful people and started travelling the world, became a social worker, not-for-profit, because I was given the measurement of actually showing the care and support to do that. To basically answer that question, unfortunately, they're going through this. Our society deals with it a certain way, enacts more of it, and then we're going, "Why is this not getting fixed?" It's like going back to the simple solution of a kicked dog, you know? If we keep kicking the dog without giving it care and support, it's just going to get more wild and vicious. This is what's happening to our kids out there.

When I say those words, there's a deeper connotation behind it, because if you don't get taught different principalities, and understanding for self-existence, and how to be a self-actualised human, and you don't actually get given that care to be able to do it, you'll never learn it. This is where a lot of what we're doing is like creating passion, purpose, creating models for success where kids are actually learning, put in environments. If it's actually just doing farm work, or putting them out where you can enable the environment and teach all around that on how to actually be a better human, and put them in a system for success, that's what works. Otherwise, in jail systems—they were saying up to 23 hours a day being put in isolated prison cells. They're going into incarceration and they're learning how to become better criminals. Not only that, because they're not given any modalities, they're actually going, "I'm safe to go back into an incarceration model. I don't know anything else, because that's the only thing that's ever been given to us." That's where we go back to those systems of trying to work through that.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Do you think parenting should also be part of that training?

MARK ROBERTSON: Unfortunately, a lot of the kids we're dealing with have had, I'm going to say abuse, growing up from word dot—from bad parenting situations, from not given proper homes, from going through major amounts of different psychological, emotional, physical abuse from day dot. So, absolutely, and that's a housing thing that really needs to happen in Australia. I was trying to reach for a village for Youth Off The Streets. I went to Sydney to speak to Parliament, to do everything a while ago, but it was too big for the Australian Government to think about and they tried to pass it over to Serco. Serco was like, "Oh, we'll fill it up here. This is one of the best incarceration systems, and then we'll make it work somewhere else." And I'm like, "Fill it up? We're trying to keep kids out of prison systems."

That's the accountability, I think, as Australia, about actually coming in and going, "Right, we're not giving it over to privatised corporations," thinking about how we can actually move in a state of trauma effect, and how we can actually—This is why these systems work, because you're given a safe environment where kids are looking for their passion and purpose around mentors that are actually giving them the skillset to be self-actualised individuals. You have to learn these things. You have to be put in an environment to do that and incarceration is not where they learn these things. They have certain things inside that, for education and stuff, but it's not an environment—once you see a kid that's actually incarcerated, you'll see it over and over again. Incarceration will continue. It costs the Australian Government, it costs the taxpayers, it costs everybody a multitude of money. It's just thinking differently and creating systems like we're talking about or allowing them to go forward—as I say, for a tenth of the cost—where they're actually put in environments where they can succeed.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: You have run great programs and have great success. How do you involve parents and families to share in that? We know that a lot of these kids come from broken families. Parenting isn't the same as what it was for a lot of them. These kids don't have parents that actually parent them; they've grown up on their own. How do you get the parents and families involved in the success of that child?

MARK MORRISON: You invite them in, and you make it an opportunity for them to come and be part of that. But you need to pre-empt some of their frustration, some of their lack of understanding, because school hasn't been a positive mechanism for them. When school's not positive—and for the majority of kids that came to VC [Macleay Vocational College], they were excluded from everywhere else, so they were coming—there's no such thing as a court order to attend school. But if they didn't, they were going back into incarceration. It's building that knowledge. It's taking those young people, not only picking them up, but taking them home, and then having the confidence to go in and have a chat, having a look at what's going on, trying to sort out the web of all of the other witches, I guess, back to that question around how do all the services interact together?

If you know how they are, and you take the time to be involved in those families and you just have gentle conversations which, once again, are all about building relational trust, and then you invite them in. Then it's a celebration for them, and it's a short celebration for them. Some of these parents don't have the opportunity to get dressed up and go out and celebrate with their kids, so maybe that's on us to do. What's the value in that? That's a minor cost to us. It's a major cost for staffing to do that, but really, in general, it's a minor cost. If that changes the feeling and the belonging, the connection between the parents and education in a positive manner, what we're finding is—there are some people behind me that I know that will get this—the nanas are the ones saying to the kids, "Finish school." How do you do that?

We had a little bit of success in bringing the grandmas in, and having the grandmas do Dunghutti stitching, working with Sue, who is sitting behind me in the public gallery, and having some stitching classes. The benefit for that was that they would then say, "Mark, you've got to finish school. I got this certificate. This is what I got for what I'm doing. It's not that hard." So you've built another form of education, and another form of link for them. The messages everywhere they're going are positive ones, but definitely bringing them in. Yes, in some places it's a safety issue, but we're smart. We can put cameras in, we can let people know what's going on. You can separate groups that are going to have, not fights, but verbals with each other—we're smiling because that's a definite—and just be smart.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You've been smiling a lot, mate, I've noticed, every now and again.

MARK MORRISON: Just be smart around those things. You have a wealth of experience sitting here, and probably even a greater wealth of experience sitting behind us. They're conversations that can help, but a lot people running places are in isolation, because instead of us all working together, we feel that we're competing, because we are competing in places for the same dollar.

JILLIAN ASHLEY: I think picking up our young people from home definitely creates a really good relationship between us and the parents. Often it's an intergenerational relationship as well. There'll be the siblings that come along, because the older sibling has been successful, so the younger siblings will end up with us. But I think it's really important that the parents can inform us about what's happening at home as well, what's changed in that young person's life.

PAUL IRELAND: Positive.

JILLIAN ASHLEY: Yes, positive changes. It's hugely important to involve everyone in this journey. As I said before, it takes a village to raise a child. It's the family, it's the parents, and the grandmothers, and the person down the street. Everyone needs to be involved in the change that we want to see in the community, because it's going to affect us all. We definitely don't want to operate in silos; we all want to be working together to get the outcomes. Potentially, as Mark said, they were all fishing from the same pond, and that does create definitely some barriers around that collaborative approach.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before the Committee to give evidence today. You will be sent the transcript of your evidence for any corrections and the Committee staff may send you some supplementary questions. We ask you to return those. Once again, thank you so much for your valuable contribution today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms LEISH MORRISON, Policy Manager, YP SPACE MNC, affirmed and examined

Ms DEB TOUGHER, Outreach Manager, YP SPACE MNC, affirmed and examined

Ms ANIKA MALCOLM, Community Development Worker, Benevolent Society, sworn and examined

Ms MEAGAN PROBERT, Acting Director, Operations, Child, Youth and Family, Regional, Rural and Outer Sydney, Benevolent Society, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. Thank you all for attending today's hearing to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media purposes on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform the Committee if you object to photos or videos being taken. Will you please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses?

ANIKA MALCOLM: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about this information? No? Okay. Would any of you like to make an opening statement? Who would like to go first?

DEB TOUGHER: Thanks very much for this opportunity to speak. I'm here representing YP SPACE, but I'm also representing the Macleay Youth Interagency Network, as the chair. I thought I'd share some of the regular findings that we discuss. Youth crime is, of course, a very regular topic throughout our meetings. The issues are very complex and entrenched, as we all know. The children involved in crime activities are carrying the weight of intergenerational trauma, living in poverty-stricken conditions that include hunger—many of our children are coming to school every day starving—malnutrition, living in overcrowded houses, and exposure to domestic and family violence on a regular basis. There are high rates of undiagnosed disabilities and mental health issues, and many of them are untreated. This includes fetal alcohol spectrum syndrome. They are disconnecting and engaging in antisocial behaviours at an increasingly younger age than they were before—school refusal is rising.

For many, a lack of accessible after-hours activities only deepens their sense of boredom and disconnection. Local organisations like YP SPACE and the Benevolent Society are very limited in their capacity to offer after-hours activities, due to funding restrictions and staffing issues, even though we all know that that is when the crimes are happening, and that is when we need to be operating and keeping them busy. Young people are lacking basic life skills, which adds more challenges to their lives, and there is a general distrust of government and organisations and programs. Local organisations, as Mark and Jillian were saying before, are competing against each other for the same limited grants and funding. We are finding that the grants of a lot of organisations need to be more flexible, to allow local on-the-ground organisations to tailor-make what they do with that money to be able to meet the local community needs. The solutions must begin with the community. I think I will leave it at that for now.

The CHAIR: Are there any further opening statements?

ANIKA MALCOLM: Yes, I have written something so that I don't forget some key points. My name is Anika Malcolm and I'm currently employed at Benevolent Society as a Community Development Worker. My passion is my community and engaging, particularly, with the youth. My passion has led me down a number of roles, both professionally and in a volunteer capacity, throughout the Macleay Valley. I would like to take a moment to welcome you all to our community. I am very proud to be from Kempsey, and I welcome you all with very open arms and heart. I want to acknowledge Michael's efforts to get you here today. I am joined today by Meagan Probert. She's the Acting Director for Operations, Youth and Family, within the Benevolent Society.

I would like to share with you that the trusting relationship that I have gained with local youth in the Macleay Valley has led them to share some really deep and personal stories with me, stories that include things like terrible hunger, unsafe living conditions, homelessness, exposure to domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual assault, and relentless racism. That's just to name a few. All of these points, I feel, are strong contributing factors to some of the behaviours and the statistics that we're seeing coming out of Kempsey and the Macleay Valley. Our particular organisation, on a professional level, facilitates a whole-of-community approach. We are funded federally through the Communities for Children place-based initiative here in Kempsey. We predominantly focus on children from birth to 12 years, and also engage with their wider families.

In 2016 the Benevolent Society conducted a strengths and needs assessment of the Macleay Valley. From that, we found four key priorities were needed for our community. They included children and adult mental health and wellbeing, healing together, domestic violence, and engaging with children and youth. From that finding we

were able to engage five community partners to deliver much-needed programs across the Macleay Valley. Over the past 12 months those community partners have directly engaged and delivered these programs and services to 754 unique participants in the Macleay Valley.

Whilst the Benevolent Society continues to respond immediately to the help that youth and family face, we're also aiming to make a long-term investment to strengthen and capacity-build these individuals that we work with, for a brighter future. Unfortunately, those programs that we do offer are not enough. We do need to offer more. That comes to a personal note—that I have witnessed within our community a level of, I suppose, challenges that I never, ever would have imagined for our community. I've also witnessed parts of our community—individuals, businesses, and families—going above and beyond to try and fill some of the gaps that we're seeing within our community. I know myself, personally, that I continue to try and do that at a really unsustainable rate.

As I mentioned, I have built strong and trusting relationships with a number of the youth. Seeing the impact that this cycle is having on them and, more importantly, the impact that these cycles are having on the victims within our community, I really want to acknowledge that. While today is a fantastic place for us to start having these discussions, I do not believe that we will find all the answers we're looking for today in this room. I believe that the community and the youth themselves do hold a lot of the answers that we're all seeking here today. I do strongly encourage the Committee to have opportunities to speak to individuals and to youth within the communities to ask them what they feel they want and need as well. Thank you.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you, firstly, for all the work you guys do. It's an incredible amount of work. We're seeing in our evidence more and more that at a very young age these children are being thrown into a situation of a lack of guidance and lack of leadership amongst their parents and amongst their community.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: Excuse me, Dr McDermott, they can't hear you up the back.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Sorry, guys. As I was saying, thank you for the work you do. We're seeing that amongst youth there is a real lack of leadership and role models, I think is the term. When you're involved with the youth, with the work you're doing, you mentioned racism, which is the first time someone has said that to us. You gave other things which you think are leading to this happening. Of all these drivers, what is the number one? What is the one thing, when it comes to why these children are offending whilst they're not going to school—what's leading to this, and what are some of the solutions?

DEB TOUGHER: I don't think there is even just one answer. I think it's a culmination of everything that we've already said. It's hunger, it's lack of direction, it's lack of hope—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: When you say "hunger", is that because at their home life they're not getting meals?

DEB TOUGHER: Yes. They're starving. I have teachers ringing me up on a regular basis at school; "Hey, Deb, do you have any spare food? I have X amount of kids that are starving, and we don't have any budget to feed them." It's almost a rite of passage for some of them. Some of them are telling us that they've watched their older siblings, their cousins, their parents, their uncles et cetera leave the lifestyle that they have lived, and so once they hit a certain age, that becomes their lifestyle as well. I had one young man who was 17 and we were discussing what he was going to do when he turned 18. He shocked me by saying that he's looking forward to 18, as he will now be eligible to enter into adult prison, as that is a rite of passage for men in his family.

LEISH MORRISON: At YP SPACE, we work alongside young people from the age of 12 to 25 who are homeless or experiencing homelessness. One of the key aspects that you were talking about earlier this morning was about the bail and accommodation system that you asked the police. Currently we have the BASS [Bail and Accommodation Support Service] system that we operate here at Kempsey, but it has only been utilised five times since December last year. It is a program that works; we are getting outcomes, but we are not getting the referrals from the police. They do a fantastic job—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: But where do the kids go or these offenders go?

LEISH MORRISON: Some of the outcomes is that they've returned to family. We've ensured that they have got CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] and they've returned to school. One of the other accommodation outcomes was that they got accommodation with their sister. It doesn't have to be mum and dad; it can be another primary caregiver. We are reaching out to families. We are going to families that perhaps are better role models than their mum and dad.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: So you've only got five. Say you had 50 or say the police said, "Right, they're all coming to you," do you have the resources? Do you have the family members to deal with that?

LEISH MORRISON: We don't have the resources for 50, but if you give us the resources we can make outcomes for that.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What would the outcomes be? More family members?

LEISH MORRISON: We can link them into private rentals; we can link them into social housing. From a housing perspective, we have links to local real estate agents that support us. Stone Real Estate supports us in property management. VC [Macleay Vocational College], they help us through education.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: But that's adults, isn't it? We're talking about children. We're talking about youth.

LEISH MORRISON: I'm talking about people under 18.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Really?

LEISH MORRISON: Yes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: And you would put them into real estate?

LEISH MORRISON: We provide intensive case support management around that. We don't just give them a home and leave them be.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: That's why I'm asking.

LEISH MORRISON: We give them living skills. They attend our programs. As part of the thing to get a rental, they have to attend our programs. We do a renting program. We do a money program. We do a living skills program, coaching for success. They get a certificate at the end of these courses. We've had young people turn around and go, "This is my first certificate I've ever received in my whole entire life," by attending one of our courses.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: So what you're giving those kids is a safe space, is that right, sometimes away from their parents? I'll say that because that's what all the evidence is pointing to.

LEISH MORRISON: Yes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Away from their parents but a safe space where they can learn and you can basically give them guidance, meals, things like that. Is that what you're saying?

LEISH MORRISON: Yes, we give them meals. We give them food hampers on Monday. Every Monday is food hamper day. We provide them transport to get to school, or to get to medical appointments, or to headspace. We provide them with birth certificates so they can get onto benefits. Just little things like that—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What about at night, after eight o'clock?

LEISH MORRISON: At night-time we provide 24/7 crisis accommodation.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: No, those kids who are already in the home, you've got them referred, you supervise them, you give them meals, you give them all this stuff. What happens to them at night? Do they still go out? What happens to them?

LEISH MORRISON: The caseworkers are only working up to 5.00 p.m., and the youth refuges that we have are 24/7.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Why I'm asking is because the specific crime that we're looking at happens at night.

LEISH MORRISON: Yes, I understand that.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: So I'm trying to look at what the solutions are for that.

LEISH MORRISON: They were talking about a diversional house, or some sort of wraparound support service. We have VC [Macleay Vocational College], which has a wonderful program. Extend their college; put the house there. They have the programs; they have the support. Give them more resources. We work alongside them so often, getting these kids into education, getting them staying at school. Hunger is a big issue, so they started a breakfast club. "Okay, I can go home at lunchtime but I have no food," so they started a lunchtime program. We are coming up with solutions. We need more support.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can I go back to you, Leish? What does VC stand for?

LEISH MORRISON: Macleay Vocational College.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: MVC?

LEISH MORRISON: We call it VC, but it's Macleay Vocational College. We shorten it to VC.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I wanted to acknowledge that you are all wonderful women doing wonderful work. Again, I can hear the dedication and the passion that's there. We all appreciate the work that you're doing. Deb, you said it was a rite of passage to go into an adult prison when someone turns 18. Can you talk me through that? Why would someone say it's a rite of passage?

DEB TOUGHER: Because it is in their family. That's what they do. They've watched their older—

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What does "in their family" mean?

DEB TOUGHER: That he will be considered a man by the members of his family once he has spent time in an adult prison. He is no longer going to juvenile detention. He is no longer a child. He is technically a man. That is his words.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That is seen as a good thing in some families?

DEB TOUGHER: He was saying yes. That's why I was shocked to hear it.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you. Anika, you spoke to us about the importance of having young people as part of this process, at these tables and at these hearings.

ANIKA MALCOLM: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: It is something that's come up before when the Committee went to Bourke and Broken Hill. It's something that we would like to do. What is your recommendation? What is your suggestion about how we go about that? Who would we go to and where would we go to, in your opinion?

ANIKA MALCOLM: First of all, I think this particular environment may not be the right environment to get the youth to engage. I definitely want to acknowledge that. I think the place to start is to lean in on the trusted people that already have established relationships within the community, and ask them to walk alongside you through that process. Finding creative ways to get the youth to engage in conversations like this, I think, is also key. I am really passionate about community-based and community-led programs, and voices being heard. I have come up with some really creative ways in the past of doing that, particularly bartering systems with Zooper Dooper icy poles. It really encourages the youth to engage and share. I think it really comes down to those established, trusted relationships. They will be the key. It wouldn't be something that the youth would feel comfortable with in a formal setting. I would love to take that on notice and share with you some ideas that I've had that have previously worked.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Terrific, thank you.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: I have two questions from your opening statements. Deb, you mentioned grants being more flexible. Could you just explain what you mean by that?

DEB TOUGHER: We often find that when we're looking for grants, as a very small organisation—there's only 20 of us at YP SPACE, and we don't have a full-time grant writer—we are constantly looking at different ways of raising money. We're constantly looking at different grants. Sometimes there's grant eligibility criteria that almost fits what we need to do. We have to be a little bit creative in making it work, or we just don't go for it. If we were able to somehow get the money with a general consensus of, "You need to," for example, "spend this money on preventing youth crime," we could then come up with a program or an idea and then send it back. "Yes, yes, yes—do that," rather than somebody living a very comfortable life, down in Canberra for example, saying, "This is how you're going to solve youth crime in Kempsey. These are the guidelines. Make it work." Quite often, it's really hard to follow that through and make it work.

ANIKA MALCOLM: Just to add to what Deb is saying, we're starting to see some real wins in place-based initiatives and community-led initiatives. It is a new space that I've worked on, and I'm starting to see some of that flexibility, understanding, and community voice being heard. That's really made a big impact on our C4C [Communities for Children] funding here in Kempsey, having a facilitating partner on the ground, such as myself, to help navigate, mentor, and work alongside those organisations, making sure that their outcomes are being met and holding some accountability in that space as well. It's a great model. I would ask the Committee to look at those place-based initiatives, because I think it's a future direction.

LEISH MORRISON: We've actually funded the Ngurra project, which is a temporary accommodation. We took over the Central Caravan Park here in Kempsey, and we've self-funded this. There was no funding from government. We've hiked for homelessness, we've climbed mountains, and we've funded this ourselves.

DEB TOUGHER: Literally.

LEISH MORRISON: We started off with three cabins and we've now got six cabins. We are looking at another grant—again, a grant—to get another six cabins. We're doing that closely linked with community housing. We can provide accommodation for young people. We can give them that, but it's the system structures that are barriers for us as an organisation, and the people who work in this organisation.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Anika, you mentioned that there were gaps in wraparound services. I'm curious to understand as to, in this area, what you see as the main gaps in those services that could be provided here in this community.

ANIKA MALCOLM: I think the gaps are coming down a lot to restrictions around funding. We're finding that you may be funded to deliver a program, but there's no funding part of that for nutrition, or supplying food. So we're needing to pull resources, work collaboratively, or sometimes fill those gaps ourselves to get that engagement from participants. I really would like to see more work happening with young parents and families. I think that is a gap within our community. It is something that has worked really positively in the past, as Mark Morrison mentioned with the program at Macleay Vocational College, or VC. We're not seeing much work happening in that space. That would be key. I would also like to see safe spaces for everybody to come work with the youth, somewhere in a central location. There is a lot of disconnect between our community, and I would like to see a centralised hub where everybody could come and work together. That would help with transport, which is a big gap in our community—those participants only having to come to one location to get access to a range of services.

The other big gap I noticed in our community is around allied health access, and the waiting times in regard to getting perhaps NDIS assistance or diagnosis, or access to mental health facilities, even for our youth. I was speaking to another service provider who said, "I was able to get my participant into a psychologist in December 2025." Living rurally does have a big impact on getting that help in a timely manner. What could happen in that young person's life between now and December 2025—they could join these cycles that could have a big impact on their lives. That's just to name a few.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: If there are any others, I'm sure you can provide them to the Committee as well.

ANIKA MALCOLM: Absolutely.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: I have no questions, but thank you so much. It's been very comprehensive.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you for your evidence. I wasn't having a hard time. I was just trying to get down to it. We really want to get results on this Committee and honour that process. You were saying you only got five referrals from the police, from the court system. Why do you think that is?

LEISH MORRISON: They didn't even know about it this morning. If this is a police program and they don't know about it locally, then how are we supposed to support our young people? We can never imprison our way to a safer community, to make our community safer. But these programs are underutilised. The police do a fantastic job, please don't get me wrong. But if they don't know their own programs, and the staff within the Police Force don't know the programs, then how can we help them?

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: That probably links in to what the Superintendent was saying, about coordination of services so that we're all working together as one modulus group rather splintered.

LEISH MORRISON: Yes.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: If you have a 10-year-old who is referred to you, what does that look like? How much capacity do you have?

LEISH MORRISON: Unfortunately we only go up from 12. We start from 12. If a 12-year-old comes into our service, there will be heavy involvement with DCJ. DCJ tend to have a little cut-off around about the age of 15 and that's where we pick up the slack, but then you're talking about child protection issues.

DEB TOUGHER: Can I just say something?

The CHAIR: Fairly quickly, please.

DEB TOUGHER: When someone between 12 to 18 comes in through the BASS [Bail Accommodation Support Service] program, they stay in our crisis accommodation, the youth refuge, so they are supervised 24/7.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before the Committee. You may be sent some supplementary questions. Please return those via email to the secretariat. Once again, on behalf of the Committee, we thank you so much for your valuable contributions today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr CLARRIE HOSKINS, Board Member, Dunghutti Elders Council, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Mr Clarrie Hoskins, thank you for your attendance before the Committee. Please note that the Committee staff may be taking photos and videos for our Legislative Assembly social media page. If you're not feeling comfortable with that, let us know and we can take care of that. Also, can you confirm that you've been issued with the terms of reference for this Committee?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: I have.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about those terms of reference?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: No.

The CHAIR: Committee members, other members who were supposed to appear with Clarrie said they are happy to make a separate submission to the Committee. Due to the shortness of time, we will move straight into questions.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Clarrie, do you want to say anything before we start or talk about things that we need to be dealing with?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: First of all, I just want to say yawayi—welcome—to Dunghutti country. I apologise for being late; I had a meeting that I wasn't expecting. I am a member of the Dunghutti Elders Council, and I also work for the NSW Education Standards Authority. What's relevant to this meeting, I think, is how do we deal with these types of issues that we're going to talk about. I've been a member of the Dunghutti Elders Council now for four years. We've had a lot of meetings around the crime issue, and I think the time for talk is over. We need action. When we look at the action that I talk about, how do we deal with our youth, who are reoffending all the time? They go to juvie, then they come out, they are put back into the same environment, and they are reoffending. So how do we deal with that?

The other issue is, is it only the youth? Is it the parents and the carers of the youth who we should be talking to, as well, and supporting them in what we're trying to do to keep our kids off the streets at night? Because we know a lot of these things in particular are drug and alcohol related. When we look at that, as the Dunghutti Elders Council, we are trying to bring a lot of people under the one umbrella, with proper consultation in and around that. We are over talking.

We've had a meeting with the police Minister and other organisations. What we also are finding is that there's quite a few agencies in Kempsey that are putting their hands out to help youth, but they working in isolation. So how do we get organisations to work together for the common purpose of what we're trying to deal with here? It's been an ongoing dilemma, in relation to how we approach this, so it's about getting all those agencies to come together, share what they're doing and also, I believe, combining their funds. I hear different agencies saying they're finding it hard to get grants and things like that. When they apply for these grants, they're taking away from other organisations and so, to me, it makes sense to get the agencies to come together to pool their resources.

I'll say this: I find a meeting like this is—and I guess I'll be blunt—culturally inappropriate for Aboriginal people. I believe that a meeting like this should also go to the Aboriginal community to get the proper consultation in how the Aboriginal community sees this. Don't get me wrong; I feel privileged that I've been asked to come here and talk about this, because it is an ongoing issue that we've been battling for many, many years, and it's just gradually getting worse. We also talk about when our youth come out of juvie or detention centres, they go back into their same environment. So what sort of structures can we put in place so that when they come out of those institutions, a keeping place till they're settled back into community? When adults get out of prison, there's a place in Nowra where they go to rehabilitate themselves and get back into the community.

I guess the emphasis is on prevention after they come out, because they get into that cycle around same old, same old. They come out, stay with their parents and caregivers or family members. At times I see a lot of our kids who are homeless, who prefer not to go back with their parents, because they're on that same cycle as well. That's why I mentioned that we need to look at assisting the parents or caregivers as well, because they have the same issues as what the juveniles have.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: How do we assist these parents and these caregivers?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: Good question. When we're talking about organisations, we have Aboriginal organisations, and we're also looking at places such as the Elders Council, where we're trying to put in place programs to help our caregivers and our parents to be able to address their own issues. We're really just getting back onto our feet again, as the Elders Council, and we're in the same dilemma as a lot of the other organisations, to deal with funding to be able to run those programs. We're a not-for-profit organisation and so trying to get the

right people to talk to our parents—we have a lot of Aboriginal community people who have the skills with counselling, looking at DV, looking at drug and alcohol issues to address that. However, a lot of them are reluctant to do that. Even though they want to help their mob, there's a financial thing around that as well, where Aboriginal people do a lot of good things from goodwill and the love of our mob, but those days are gone. We need to give incentive for our community people to go and help ourselves as well.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thanks, Clarrie, for being here today. I appreciate what you do. You used a reference before that this setting is culturally inappropriate. I think I understand what you mean, but I'll just ask for confirmation, if I may. Do you think that we should go where Indigenous folks are and sit with them to talk with them and to listen? Is that what you meant?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: Definitely.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Just quickly, how does the Elders Council actually deal with young people and families when we are seeing situations of youth crime?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: At this stage, there's not a great deal happening. I think one of the aspects that we're doing is that we're running Dunghutti language programs at the centre. We are trying to engage more community people to come in to talk about their issues. We offer services. We have been running food services for the community to be able to address some of the social aspects of that. We've started setting up a range of programs and training, trying to entice our younger people to give them some way forward, in particular with our post-school options. We have to look at what direction we're going to give our kids, to keep them on at school. Quite honestly, there is a small group of people that we're talking about who are not attending schools, getting the education, and are allowed to do whatever they want to do. That goes back to two things. What are schools actually doing about that? I know schools try their hardest. But it also goes back to the parents and caregivers and how we're going to look at that as well. If we can give them some career pathway and the kids can see that, I think they would stay on at school.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: I just want to say thank you so much, Clarrie, for coming. I really heard and took on board that we need to be doing yarn ups and making it less formal and institutional. None of us have intended that, but we take that on board.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Mr Hoskins, thank you for coming along today. I wanted to keep it brief and ask you a couple of questions. One of the things that I wanted to raise with you is, as a local Elder in the community here, your attitude and, more broadly, the Dunghutti community Elders' attitude towards boarding schools on country. Would that be something that Elders would agree to or be minded to support, where you have Indigenous kids going to a boarding-type school set up in a local community on country, with the support of the local Land Council, the local Indigenous medical service and other Elders or other community groups as a wraparound support service? Is that something that you would support, as an Elder?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: That sounds great.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: That's good. That's the answer I need.

CLARRIE HOSKINS: I will say one thing: It has been tried and tested.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Where at?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: It was back in the late '80s at Pemulwuy Koori College at Newtown. I was part of that. The standards of setting up a culturally safe school, to be able to run with it, was eventually put down. Consistency has to be put around that. Also, to set something up like that, you would have to have quite a few dollars, in particular. Again, I'll give an example—the Giingana Freedom School in Coffs Harbour is a K-6 school at the moment. Specifically, it's not a boarding school, but it's set up for Gumbaynggirr language. This is what we're trying to instil in our kids as well. If they're talking their language and identifying with their culture more—and we try to get that respect back into the community. In a boarding school, there would be a lot of set boundaries in relation to that—house parenting, who is ideal. I'm an ex-boarding school person myself. It can be difficult.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: This would require community support, and obviously Elders would have to play a big part in it. But you think it's something worth exploring?

CLARRIE HOSKINS: Of course, yes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: I think the big difference—and I find it amusing that the college you talked about is in Newtown, in the centre of the city, when it really needs to be in country. Certainly, the feedback from Elders in Bourke, Broken Hill and other places is a similar idea, rather than taking the kids all the way down to boarding in Sydney.

CLARRIE HOSKINS: That's right.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What we've seen—and I want your view on this—is that the home life is the problem. If the kids can be in an environment, rather than juvenile justice, where they're still learning about country but they're doing also the education programs, they're getting their meals, they're safe at night, they're not out in the streets, they're not having problems at home and can be somewhere safe, they're not prisoners, they're there as part of a schooling education—and it's on country, so you have Elders there—maybe that's something that actually works for these kids.

CLARRIE HOSKINS: Definitely. It has got to be on country, yes. We did have a school here. It was a Seventh-day Adventist school, Mirriwinni Gardens, up near Nulla Nulla, which was specifically for—mostly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids. It worked well there until such time as it closed down. I don't know what the circumstances were behind that. That was an example of what happened. But I think something, like what you're talking about, on country—we do have the expertise. We do have Aboriginal teachers within the community from here, who have their bachelor's of education, both primary and secondary. I'm secondary-trained. When we look at that, we do have the human resources to be able to facilitate something like that. But, again, are you going to cough up the money?

Mr PHILIP DONATO: That's what we're here for, as a committee. This is obviously going to be—it's not a short fix. It's long term and something that will have to take some time setting up. It costs a lot of money, no doubt, but look at the money potentially saved in the long run and the lives and the communities, minimising harm and victims and all that sort of stuff. Yes, it's a big thing to try to achieve, but we've got to do something. We've got to do something to change what's not working.

CLARRIE HOSKINS: Yes.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: We'll explore any solution that's getting put to us. We're hearing similar things all over where we're going. That's why we're throwing it out there. I think there was evidence earlier today—$800,000, or around that figure, for incarcerating a kid for a couple of years. That's crazy. If you take a fraction of that and you put it into a boarding school, then the long-term effect that has for a community, for those kids, for those families—it's worth doing, but we've got to work out what result we can find rather than just throw away money.

CLARRIE HOSKINS: I really appreciate what VC [Macleay Vocational College] has done with a lot of our kids. They've taken them in, who were long-term suspension or expelled from school. To take those kids in and turn them around, that is something that we would try to do as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hoskins, for appearing today. Your contribution has been very valuable. You will be sent a transcript of today's evidence for corrections. Once again, on behalf of the Committee, thank you for your attendance.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Mr JAMIESON WILLIAMS, Assistant Manager, Kempsey Youth Justice, Department of Communities and Justice, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We welcome our next witness. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that the Committee will be taking photos and videos during the hearing, and those photos and videos will be used on the parliamentary Legislative Assembly social webpage. If you have any objections to those being taken, please let us know. Mr Williams, can you please confirm that you've been issued with the Committee's terms of reference?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions in relation to that information?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Certainly. I'm a Wiradjuri man. I was born, grew up, and reside on Dunghutti and Biripi country. Kempsey Youth Justice covers areas from as far south as Kew and up to the Scotts Head, addressing criminogenic risk across this area with young people.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: How long have you been up here working in your capacity at DCJ?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: With DCJ in particular, and Youth Justice, I've been here since 2023. But before that I was in a Youth Justice funded service, Youth on Track, for a 2½-year period.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: How many children would you have on your books that you are responsible for at the moment?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Currently there are 15 young people in community-based supervision orders.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: What are their ages?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: That would range between the ages of 14 and 17.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: What sort of programs are they involved in? Tell us a little bit about how that's going, how they're going, if they're going to school, what they're doing or if they're involved in any other programs. What's working? What's not working? Tee off, mate.

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: That's a hard question to answer. We do have quite a number of Youth Justice endorsed behaviour interventions, ranging from CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] to interventions that address alcohol and other drug use, and family and domestic violence. Issues young people in our area are facing would be around education engagement, the availability of services, mental health, and access to services. General risks would include homelessness as well.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: The 15-odd are all boys, I take it? Or are they a mixture of boys and girls?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: They are a mixture of boys and girls, but mainly boys, yes.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Are many of them going to school? Or what are they doing?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Not particularly. That's not without trying, of course.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Why is that?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: The reason would vary from young person to young person, of course. A lot of the time we find our young people are risk-assessed out of school, or there is truancy, even—not attending altogether. Often our young people are on attendance plans that don't meet their needs.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: What are they doing during the day?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Again, it's on a case-by-case basis. They could be engaging with peers in the community or anything, really, but not a whole lot in terms of official community engagement.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: How do you find the Young Offenders Act working, from your experience?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Have you got a more specific question?

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Well, a lot of these young people have been involved with a Youth Justice program for a period of time, whether it be through warnings, cautions, conferences, or circle sentencing. Do you offer circle sentencing around here?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: We have youth justice conferences.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Are they effective, do you think?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: I would think so, yes. Definitely, there's an opportunity for the young person to sit down with the victim, or the victim to sit down with the young person, and get their point across as to how that offence has impacted them. It really gives a young person an understanding of the impact that they're having on the general community, for sure.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Do you find recidivism or repeat offending a problem with a lot of the kids that you've got in your program?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Yes, definitely. A lot of the young people that we do see on community-based orders reoffend, of course, or have potential to at least. Young people coming to us—as you said, it's not their first time being in trouble with the police in most cases. They usually have prior offences.

Mr PHILIP DONATO: Finally—I don't want to hog up the time, but I'm on a bit of a roll so I'll keep going—what about their attitude? We've heard evidence earlier in this Committee hearing that some of the kids see it as a bit of a badge of honour to go to juvie or to go inside Corrections. From your dealings with them, do you agree or disagree with that, or what do you say about that statement?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Again, as I said prior, it's sort of a case-by-case basis. Some of the young people definitely would have that sort of notion towards offending behaviours. It's not overly common. I suppose if I could speak for the local Kempsey area, I've experienced young people who try to one-up other areas, of course. You heard probably earlier today, it's through postcodes really, upping other areas in their types of offending behaviours really.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Thank you for being here today and also thank you for the work you're doing. It's a hard job. I'm going to ask some questions that are not pointed at you, but we're trying to find solutions rather than just going through process. Obviously, youth offending has significantly increased, especially violent crime, but also break and enters and property crime et cetera. You've got 15 kids at the moment that you're dealing with—young adults—and they're reoffending, or some of them, it appears. Do you think your program is failing? Do you think it can be better in some way? That's probably what I'm really asking: How can we make this better if it's failing? Is there a better way of doing things?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Very good question. A better way of doing things? I suppose there's always a better way of doing things. This is what we're currently trying, based on the evidence that is available. I think in our local area, as I said previously, young people are facing issues with alcohol and drug use, issues with education, community conflicts—whatever it might be. I think we need to focus on not risk-assessing kids out of services in our local community. We find that a lot of the young people who are involved with us, or have similar behaviour, are risk-assessed out, and therefore services are not available to them that would be available to others.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: What do you mean by risk-assessed out? What does that mean?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: As in they're deemed too high risk for services that are available in our area.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Right, so nothing happens with them, everyone just walks away?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Fall through the cracks, unfortunately, and it could be from a young age. As I said, we really have issues with homelessness and mental health and other like issues–and credit to the services that are here. We do have really good relationships with a number of the services. I think you heard from Macleay Vocational College before and a number of different people. I have a list of people here that we do work with, and I know they're doing good work, to the best of their ability.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You've got 15. Do you have a cut-off number? Can you only deal with 15 because that's all the resources you have or is it open-ended? How does it actually work?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Young people come to us based on court orders, really, or a range of different things, a range of different work really. We might be made aware of a young person who's in police custody, and that's where we might become involved, to assist in the initial bail application. This is prior to them actually being before the court. That doesn't have to be young people who have a significant history with Youth Justice. We also have young people who come to us via police referral for a youth justice conference, as mentioned just before, and then, alternatively, there's the court option, whereby a young person might receive a request for a

background report, where we provide the magistrate information on what's happening in this young person's life and factors that may be contributing to their reoffending behaviours. Further from that, there's an option for a young person to be given a supervised community order, which could take place in a good behaviour bond or probation order et cetera.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You mentioned in your evidence before that you don't know what the kids or young adults are doing during the day—and I don't expect you to be holding their hands. Do you think that's a problem? Do you think they should be put into programs or that they should be given activities during the day or in their off time?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Most definitely I think there should be something available. I think there are services available such as the PCYC in Kempsey in particular, or in Port Macquarie there is the Macleay Vocational College, or Nautilus College. But if a young person is not engaging with them, then really there's nothing else. What else is there available? There's no central young persons' space that young people can go to receive all the services that they require.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: There is no compulsion for them to go back to school or to go and do something else?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Many young people do identify that they'd like to. They'd like to engage in school or engage in some sort of employment or further education. Again, that sometimes comes down to the young person's motivation to change or whether they're feeling heard in that setting. A lot of the young people that we work with have different diagnoses—intellectual disabilities, for example—and often don't fit the mainstream setting of education that's provided in this area.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: We found in previous evidence in other places, not just here, that there were often children, young adults, who had come out of juvenile justice who would reoffend again on purpose so they could go back into juvenile justice where they could have education, where they could have meals, where they'd have a safe place a night. Do you see any of that happening?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Unfortunately, we do. It's sad to acknowledge, but it's definitely a fact that some of the young people that we work with have experienced quite a lot of intergenerational trauma, even just complex living circumstances. Sometimes that predictability of being in custody, and of knowing that they're going to be fed, knowing that they're going to have a bed for the night, a roof over their head, access to education, access to different resources, and medical that they might not have in the community—so, yes, it is definitely something that we do see, sadly.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: Thanks so much, Jamieson. I'm very conscious that you're a government employee. I know, as a former public school teacher, that there are limits about how critical you can be of your employer, so I'm not going to put you in a tough spot. In terms of your workload, would you say that most of your workload is really about supporting young people? What is the capacity, noting that there are 36 officers across the state? How many workers? Do you find that most of your time is about the nuts and bolts of correction orders and young people before the courts? Or do you find that you do have time for intervention or is it more about referring them to other services? That is my first question. I will come back to the second one.

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: I guess it's definitely a mixture of all of that. A lot of the time, like with the case management support, there is that time that we are providing behaviour intervention to address criminogenic risk. That does involve linking the young person within their community with services that are available. Of course, there are times when we do get bogged down with those different court reports or the nuts and bolts, as you said. But I'd say in our area, in particular, there's a pretty good mixture of all that work, if that answers the question.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: What does that look like at the moment with your caseload? How much time are you spending face to face with these young people?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: That would really be determined by their risk of reoffending. When a young person first comes to us, we conduct an assessment that determines their risk of reoffending, and that falls under the "risk, needs, and responsivity" [RNR] model, whereby from that risk we also determine how often we actually have to see the young person. That could be weekly, fortnightly, or on a monthly basis, depending on that risk. The majority of the young people on our caseload would be in the medium to high risk, which means that we would see them on a weekly basis, whether that's out in the community, or in our community office. That ranges. If a young person is in crisis we're addressing that. It could be doing behaviour intervention to again address that criminogenic risk.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: Do you have that flexibility? It sounded like there was a matrix that mandates how much you can do. Can you surge if there's a crisis and spend a lot more time with a young person?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Most definitely, yes. As I was saying, with that RNR model—risk, need and responsivity—we're responsive to what's happening to the young person who's in front of us, where we can act accordingly. Again, most of the time, it's linking in with other services.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: But in terms of your case load, there is the reality of how much time you can—you can't buy more time, necessarily. Would you say that your case loads are really high?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: At the moment, not particularly. As I said, we do have 15 young people on community-based orders. There are eight young people in a youth justice centre from our area, who are all Aboriginal males. But, no, I think at the moment we are managing.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: Which youth justice centre are you mostly dealing with?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: That would be Acmena Youth Justice Centre.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: I've taught there.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Thank you for being here. I certainly admire the job that you do, because it's not an easy one, and it covers a lot of areas as well. Please don't take my questions as criticism. They're not to you personally. They are trying to understand what is happening not just in your region but in other regions as well. The police indicated this morning that they actually do out-of-call police work, which actually means that they are doing the welfare checks on young people in the community, which means that, in some cases, they feel that they are doing the work of DCJ. I know you said your workload is not necessarily maxed out, but is it a resourcing issue? Is it an issue about having people on the ground to actually go out there and do the welfare checks? I am curious to know what your opinion might be.

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: Welfare checks are not really in the scope of Youth Justice's work in particular. There might be an occasion where we do have concerns for a young person, and we will attend if we are unable to locate a young person. We will definitely do a home visit if the risk assessment permits that. Sorry to ask a question back, but is that more in relation to child services?

Mr PAUL TOOLE: A bit of both. Police have actually indicated, and not just in this hearing, that they are doing welfare checks on behalf of Communities and Justice in a number of areas. You don't have to answer that.

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: I suppose, if that's what they're doing, I'm sure—we collaborate with police regularly in this area, in particular the Youth Engagement team, and the Youth Action Meeting Coordinator, and the YLO [Youth Liasion Officer]. There are times that I have no doubt the police would be attending for home visits, and we would be doing the same thing where necessary.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: We all know the situation around families. Some of these young kids actually come from broken families, and there are a lot of incidents inside the family unit where there are drugs and alcohol involved. Therefore, even sending them back into that environment is not always going to be the right solution. Have we ever thought of potentially looking at widening the scope around foster carers to allow for situations where we could put children up to 18 years of age into foster families to try to actually get them to understand a little bit more how that family unit might work differently? We've got kids, unfortunately, whose home environment is not safe. It is an environment that they are not safe to go back into. Knowing that, is there another system or another way, in your opinion, where we could consider looking at foster carers to take these children on in some situations to try to assess and help them?

JAMIESON WILLIAMS: In relation to foster care and other kinship arrangements, that's more the Child Services unit that would be dealing with that. In terms of if a young person is on bail, we make a recommendation to the court, as to where we think a suitable arrangement may be. A young person is subject to the environment they are in. I would agree that a lot of the time a young person is going into an environment that may not be safe. In terms of placing them into a foster care arrangement, I'm not sure if I can make a comment on that. Maybe I can take that on notice and have someone from Youth Justice provide an answer for that one.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Jamieson, I just want to say thank you so much for what you do. You are a young person and you are working with younger people. I hope you have the support that you need because you must hear and see some horrific things. I wanted to acknowledge the work that you do and say thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing today before the Committee to give evidence. The Committee may email you some supplementary questions. Committee members will seek further information regarding the question you have taken on notice for Youth Justice.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Ms JULIE HOURIGAN, Chief Executive Officer, SHINE for Kids, sworn and examined

Mr KEVIN THORNE, Aboriginal Family Support Worker, SHINE for Kids, affirmed and examined

Miss WILLA HERRON, YOUth Speak Participant, YOUth Speak, affirmed and examined

Ms ELLIE TREE, Project Coordinator, YOUth Speak, affirmed and examined

Ms JASMINE SMITH, Team Leader, Youth on Track, Mission Australia, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I thank our next witnesses for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly webpage. Please inform the Committee should you object to having photos or videos taken. Can you please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses?

JASMINE SMITH: Yes.

ELLIE TREE: Yes.

WILLA HERRON: Yes.

KEVIN THORNE: Yes.

JULIE HOURIGAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions in relation to those terms of reference?

JASMINE SMITH: No.

ELLIE TREE: No.

WILLA HERRON: No.

KEVIN THORNE: No.

JULIE HOURIGAN: No.

The CHAIR: Would any of you like to make an opening statement? We will start with Ms Hourigan.

JULIE HOURIGAN: Thank you, Chair. SHINE for Kids has more than 40 years of experience working with children and young people affected by the youth justice system, including young people transitioning out of custody. We deliver holistic, innovative, trauma-informed programs and services to break the intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and incarceration. We support around 6,000 children and young people each year. On any day in Australia there are about 44,000 kids who have a parent in prison. Those kids are six times more likely to end up in youth detention than a child not experiencing parental incarceration.

When a parent or primary carer is arrested, their dependent children face sudden separation, which is highly distressing and traumatic, and which is compounded by living disruptions, instability, family breakdown, child protection interventions, poverty, poor communication and information about what is happening, and inadequate connection to trusted support. It is essential to identify these at-risk children before they disengage, disconnect, or offend. SHINE for Kids recommends that the New South Wales Government invests in identifying children experiencing parental incarceration to ensure they are counted and connected with specialised community-based support. We recommend investing in effective early intervention social and emotional wellbeing programs. We recommend that the Government invests in pre- and post-release services for young people, like our Belonging to Family and Stand as One programs.

Over 80 per cent of young people released from sentenced detention in New South Wales returned inside within 12 months of release. This revolving door costs taxpayers enormously, and does nothing to address the root causes of offending and reoffending. SHINE for Kids believes that investment to scale quality services, which are co-designed, culturally safe, place-based, effectively evaluated, and which address the well-researched risk factors, is essential. Every step along this road will help rewrite a young person's future. We need to keep young people out of prison, so that cycles of offending and reoffending are broken.

WILLA HERRON: I want to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Dunghutti people, and the traditional owners of the land I am representing today, the Gumbaynggirr people, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and future. My name is Willa Herron and I'm 17 years old. I'm in year 12 at Bellingen High School. I'm excited to share my experience with the YOUth Speak project, where we discovered that 78 per cent of young people in Bellingen feel they have no say in their community's future. This sparked the

creation of Project Pawn, aimed at revitalising our local chess tables, a place that is known for youth vandalism and crime, to turn it into a place where we are focusing on fostering a sense of ownership among young people. Through initiatives like this, we are not just participating, we are leading the way to meaningful change. It is crucial for us to be included in these conversations, as our voices are key to building a better future. Thank you for allowing me, a young person, to contribute. I look forward to sharing and hearing your ideas.

The CHAIR: Ms Smith, do you have an opening statement?

JASMINE SMITH: No, I'm okay.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: This question is to YOUth Speak. Who is involved in your program? You have a year 12. Can you explain who is actually involved?

ELLIE TREE: My name is Ellie Tree. I'm the project coordinator of YOUth Speak. I'm also the deputy mayor at Bellingen Shire Council, serving in my second term. It was created because there was a gap between youth service collaboration, local government, and community organisations. The young people just felt like they didn't have a say, and they either were involved at the beginning of a project, or at the end of a project. We saw a way that we can really increase community connection to support young people to be involved in community, rather than it being community versus young people.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: That's great. Of the youth that's involved, what percentage of them are from the Indigenous community?

ELLIE TREE: We have run the program for the past 2½ years. The last survey was done in the Nambucca Valley, and we captured 39 per cent of the youth population. From memory, I believe 12 per cent were Indigenous, and 16 per cent identified as having a disability.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: That's a good spread. We're looking at what is happening with youth crime and the impact and what solutions there are. You guys are at the front line. You have your cohort of friends and others you're dealing with. You're leaders in this community. What do you think is the main driver of youth crime in your community, first of all? Secondly, what do you think are the solutions to maybe us dealing with that?

WILLA HERRON: I think the main things that are driving youth crime are the fact that there is nowhere safe to go for many of these kids, and so they're stuck in places, like the chess tables that we worked on revitalising. When they're surrounded, as you were saying, by the same cohorts, it's very much peer driven, and it's the surrounding external factors that are pushing on the kids, whether that's coming from the parents, the lack of funding and support, particularly in mental health areas, and that when you do a crime, there's not much support after. That's just what I've seen as a young person.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Touching on mental health, was that because of trauma in the home? When you say "mental health", is that depression? What are you seeing?

WILLA HERRON: A bit of everything. Especially in my generation, it's a big problem. Trauma from households and the community as a whole tends to lead to things like depression and anxiety.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: You say they're getting involved in crime. Why? Is it because of boredom? Is it because they need to break in to eat and get meals?

WILLA HERRON: Boredom would probably be a large driving factor, especially in rural communities. There is nothing to do as a young person, and for lots of them that does then lead them to go, "I'm going to go do this. I'm going to go vandalise and stuff like that." It's not being able to have access to support. For some of them, it feels like doing this crime is their only release, and their only way of trying to find a way to have someone to help them.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Do you feel there's a bit of helplessness for the future, or that they have no future?

WILLA HERRON: Yes, for sure.

Ms TAMARA SMITH: My question is going to be directed to Julie and Kevin, but I want to say how wonderful it is to have young people here before us. We're going to work towards more of that. I really took on board what you were saying. I want to ask about the SHINE for Kids recommendation around parental incarceration, because that's something that we haven't really heard about, and the likelihood that their dependent children end up interfacing with the criminal justice system. Did you want to say a little bit more about that?

JULIE HOURIGAN: The first and most alarming fact is that, at the point of detainment of an adult, no-one asks, "Are you the carer of a child?" There is nowhere hardwired into the system that children are identified early enough. That leads to children being immediately disconnected from their parent or their primary carer.

Research that we've done with Monash uni and Griffith uni shows that if a child has a parent in prison, they're 50 per cent more likely to be suspended from school, and a third of those kids are likely to have been expelled.

When we talk about kids not having anywhere to go or not feeling safe, we are seeing that parental incarceration is a very large driver, not least because it is completely disruptive for the child. At SHINE for Kids, we talk about kids being the invisible victims of their parent's crime. We can't solve a problem that we can't see. If we cannot connect with these children early, and keep them connected to school, sport, faith, music, culture, and all of the things that keep young kids grounded in their community, then we lose them to the system early. We don't see them until the police are arresting them and they are coming into our justice systems.

KEVIN THORNE: In saying that, we also run programs within SHINE right across. We are a nationally recognised organisation. We run a lot of parenting programs within our systems as well, where we do capture the kids when their parents have been incarcerated, and progress forward in terms of further education around acting out, and teaching parents how to still be connected to their kids. Our Belonging to Family program is the only Aboriginal program that is run within the state or within Australia. We have a large participation of Elders that participate in our programs as well. They work with the parents, and help us deliver our programs within Corrections. There are a couple of Elders here today that actually do that. We have a hands-on approach. We are very well aware of a lot of the situations that are happening within communities, in regards to what old mate said there about kids offending and all that sort of stuff.

There's nothing in this community for them. You have the PCYC program that goes—I forget the hours, but it caters only for most of the good kids that are here. The bad kids, that are the ones actually doing all the trouble, don't have access to the PCYC unless they come good. They're falling through the cracks. We don't have many youth officers that actually work with the kids in this community. It's a pretty well-known fact that this community has had trouble for many, many years, in regard to juvenile crime, as well as the older ones and kids following in their father's and mother's footsteps. Without these resources that are available to help these younger kids, and guide them on the right path, they're just going to continue going down the path of wrong. We're seeing it regularly—mum and dad in one side of the jail, and their son is in the other. It's a sad state of affairs. It doesn't just target Aboriginal people either; it targets right through the community, as we're representational within the corrections of many communities.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you to all of you for coming today and for your insight. Like the member for Ballina, I also acknowledge the young ones and thank you so much for making sure that young people have a voice in this process. It was something we were talking about beforehand. It will be interesting to see how you find this experience later. My question is to any one of you who would like to answer this question. If you had one wish that you could do to change things at the moment, what would that look like? I ask this because it is the Committee's responsibility to look at the issues and challenges that are in front of us, to get solutions and to seek from you any recommendations that you think we might be able to implement. That is our job, hence my question: If you could make a wish, what would it be? Would you like to kick off, Julie?

JULIE HOURIGAN: I'm happy to kick off. Pre- and post-release programs for both parents and for young people, it is absolutely key that whilst young people are inside that we build those relationships of trust and connection. When people are inside a youth justice centre, they do get access to support, health care, and they have all of that structure. As soon as they walk out that gate, that's gone. Often the only thing they have to return to are all of the networks that brought it unstuck in the first place. So having pre- and post-release programs in place, where they have a trusted person who goes with them, has to come from the NGO sector. Being a non-statutory worker is a big part of being outside of the system but alongside of the system, so that we can follow those young kids.

We know that young people most likely reoffend in the first six months, and we have to be able to provide the support. The other thing that pre- and post-release support programs give us the opportunity to do is, while we're working to build trust with the young people inside, we're working with the families outside. It's a two-way street to understand what the families need, to ensure that they've got everything in place. Building those trusted relationships and building those bridges is critical. Making sure that the young people feel like they've got someone in their corner, that the families feel like they've got someone in their corner, is absolutely crucial.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Does anybody else want to answer the question?

ELLIE TREE: I would love to speak to that. Aside from my role with YOUth Speak and being the deputy mayor, I've spent my whole career as a youth worker in housing, TEI and diversionary programs. I did a service review for the Department of Communities and Justice in the Nambucca Valley a couple of years ago. I wrote something as we were driving down here on some things that I've witnessed and experienced as a service provider in all of those fields. I think you could ask that question to every service and it would be relevant to the

service that they're providing, but what we need to remember—and I think it's point (c) of the terms of reference—is that we need to consider the wraparound support and what the challenges are for these services.

The points that I made were that there's a frustration for services who are already at capacity being expanded to cover a bigger area with no extra funding; services fear to offer a program in one LGA because they don't have capacity to duplicate it in the other LGA they're funded to support, because their funding requirement is to split their time 50/50; grassroots organisations embedded into the community losing their contracts to a large out-of-area organisation, who are not required to have a physical presence in the community, lead to things like the closure of our local youth hub in Nambucca; target group shifting, leaving critical service gaps—we saw that when there was a spike in youth suicide rates in the Nambucca Valley and they pulled the funding from AOD [alcohol and other drug] programs and put it into suicide aftercare and intervention support programs, which meant that all of the AOD supported young people no longer had a caseworker—and communities forever being the spoke in the hub-and-spoke model, and never realising that some of the services are there and funded to provide support to communities.

I know it sounds like doom and gloom when you spit it all out at once. It's great that we're looking into this now, but the reality is we need to understand what services actually exist within these communities, and what the barriers are for the young people in providing accessibility. Someone in headspace in Coffs Harbour can say that they're outreaching on request to Dorrigo, but Dorrigo young people don't even have public transport.

JASMINE SMITH: I'd like to mirror what Ellie has already highlighted. For us, at this point in time in community, there's so much focus around working with early intervention. Once we're working with a cohort of young people that are already entrenched in these criminogenic behaviours, we're actually missing out on access to working with these younger people that are classed as more earlier intervention. Therefore, are we going to miss working with earlier intervention, or are we going to focus on working with the people that are already entrenched in these behaviours in community? There is a really big need to work on early intervention. However, when they're coming to us, we have to assess whether it's best practice to be working with our early intervention cohort, or to be working with higher risk offenders. So there is a gap there, and how do we navigate that with providing support?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So you have to, in effect, make a choice, do you?

JASMINE SMITH: We have to make a choice, yes. How do you turn away a young person and say, "Sorry, what you're doing right now is not quite bad enough, but please come back"?

ELLIE TREE: Or, "You're not quite old enough yet to meet our service requirements."

JASMINE SMITH: Yes. Or, "I know that I'm working with the rest of your family, and I know that you're heading on the path of behaving like they are; however, please wait." What does that say to a young person? It's another layer of rejection that they hear on a day-to-day basis from a lot of services, I think.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: I want to go to Youth on Track. They're easy questions. I want to know how you identify youth at risk. In your organisation, how are those kids assessed to receive a service?

JASMINE SMITH: We have discretionary referrals. Historically, up until January, we actually had an automated system. As soon as a young person came under notice with police, they were referred to us. We found that the uptake of those young people was quite limited, and the discretionary referrals were a warm referral. At the moment we are only really taking discretionary referrals for our young people. And, once that referral is completed, we're speaking to people at allocation meetings through child protection—whether it's the YAM [Youth Action Meetings], stakeholder meetings with police that we have prior to court and the solicitors at Legal Aid—to assess who is the most at-risk young person, and making contact through a priority list like that. Internally, we're assessing who we know historically may have had a sibling on the program. That's how we have to do it. At this point in time we can only work with 30 young people in a full year. It's not a lot of young people to touch on.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Is it discretionary because of the limited funding that you have, which only allows you to identify so many?

JASMINE SMITH: Yes.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: But there would be a demand and a need for a greater opportunity to provide the program for others if it was there?

JASMINE SMITH: Yes, absolutely. At this point in time, we're waitlist expiring endless young people because we can't get to them.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: So the waitlist is actually expiring?

JASMINE SMITH: Expiring, yes. We can't work with all the young people that we get referrals for.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: Can you tell us for the Committee's benefit what Youth on Track's program provides?

JASMINE SMITH: The Youth on Track program is an at-risk young offenders program. They have come under notice by police, but they're not supervised by the court—they're not supervised by the magistrate or Youth Justice. Therefore, it's an early intervention program, aimed at reducing the risk of ending up in custody. Quite frequently, what will happen, though, is they have offended, and we're working for three, six months. Their matter goes before the court, and we've worked with them for that period of time, and then we're no longer allowed to work with them once they receive a supervised order through the legal system. They may only then receive a three-month order, so really they could have stayed with us for 12 months. That's three months to build rapport and connection with a new worker, when we're essentially doing the same thing in community versus in a community centre.

Mr PAUL TOOLE: My final question is one I want to ask because you all deal with young people. Is there a level of remorse from young people who break into people's homes? We've also heard stories of people who have been traumatised from actions of young people. Do they understand the impact that that's had on their lives, because their lives have been turned upside down in the way in which they live as well?

I know there's a lot of bravado. There's been social media where people share their stories. I'm curious to understand, is there an element of young people that are actually realising, "Hey, this has an impact"?

JASMINE SMITH: Yes. If a young person's offending and they're put through a youth justice conference—which is a diversionary option through the court system, where you're sitting down with the victim of the crime, the person that's committed the offence, and support people—that is a moment in time when you're getting the most remorse because you're actually talking to that victim. You can see them face to face and have that discussion, and you're collaborating to have an outcome plan to go back before the magistrate. It puts some responsibility on the young person that's committed the offence to say, "All right, I take ownership over this and I'm sorry. How can we repair this?" That is the instance where you see the most remorse. I think when you're going to court, and you're sitting there for endless hours on end thinking, "When am I going to go in there?", they're tired, and they don't feel sorry. They want it over and done with. That's not conducive to a young person's needs, that legal system, unfortunately.

KEVIN THORNE: Through one of our programs, we actually visit a lot of juvenile justice centres up and down the coast here, from Acmena right through to—

JULIE HOURIGAN: Frank Baxter.

KEVIN THORNE: —Cobham as well. In regard to remorse, a lot of the kids that we've worked with are not so much remorseful, but more ashamed of what they've done, and acknowledging that to the Elders. This is in our program. It's the Elders that are bringing out that factor, where they're acknowledging that they've done wrong, and they're acknowledging what they need to do, in terms of trying to change their life around. Between there and what Julie was talking about, in regard to post-release, that acknowledgement of wrongdoing is happening within the facility itself. Once they've come out of the facility, a lot of our Elders are saying to our young people, "You come to us and talk to us. We'll mentor you at the end when you come home." Unfortunately, we're only in one community, and a lot of the kids that we talk to are spread out through New South Wales. They may not have the luxury of going back and speaking and having the Elders mentor them, in terms of changing their life. That's one positive thing in terms of what we're doing from a SHINE for Kids perspective, that Belonging to Family. That is having a little bit of impact in regard to changing some. "You can't change all, but if you change some", as the old saying goes.

WILLA HERRON: Going off what Mr Thorne just said—"You can't change all, but you can change some"—as a young person, with members of my cohort who have offended, or have reoffended on a previous crime, some of which I am friends with, I definitely see remorse from them. I think it was Julie or Mr Kevin Thorne who mentioned it—it's the shame. They're not necessarily always remorseful, but so many of them feel ashamed of the fact that they've offended, and that this is something that's going to carry on with them for the rest of their lives. I know I have at least another 70 years left and, for people offending at my age, it's needing those things to help them feel the remorse because, for lots of them, they don't understand what they've done, and they don't realise that they have impacted other people all the time. We have things in our area such as ShoreTrack, which really helps the younger people benefit from it, because it's somewhere to go and to be able to go, "Oh, this person's telling me I've done something wrong."

As SHINE for Kids was saying, it's a lot of the parents who are incarcerated, and it's following in their footsteps, because that's what they've been taught. That's where they've grown up, and that's who they've learnt

from. Even being around other friends, I've had friends come to me and say something and I've gone, "That's not right," and then they sit and look at you. I've had friends cry to me and be like, "I'm ashamed for what I've done." It's the feeling of being able to finally understand it, and going through it, especially young offenders younger than me who have offended, who are 10 or 11 years old. They don't really understand what they've done until they're able to speak to someone from Mission Australia Youth on Track, SHINE for Kids, YOUth Speak or somewhere like that—a organisation that benefits from helping them, while the younger kids benefit from being able to talk to an adult.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Could I just go back to early intervention? Jasmine, you mentioned turning kids away. How old are the kids you're turning away?

JASMINE SMITH: We work with a cohort of ages 10 to 17, so we're seeing young people aged 10 or 11 who are committing offences that are high threshold, whether it's being in the car or the stolen vehicle, or whether it's doing the break and enter, but standing out the front. Their peers, who have gone into the home, or that peer who is driving the car, they're learning from them. Instead of being able to say, "Let's work with all of you together, collaborate and have a shared outcome goal," it's, "Sorry, we have to just work with that one young person."

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Are you seeing an increased number of kids who are 10 years old?

JASMINE SMITH: Yes, we definitely are. In our community at the moment—and in a lot of communities—there's a lot of poverty. Let's highlight that. That, in turn, can often lead to unsafe environments within the home, and disconnect from family and caregivers. Therefore, these young people are hanging out with their peers as a sense of connection, family, and belonging. They're seeing their peers do these offences. They're seeing these peers then obtain support, care, and supervision from service providers. Therefore, that's what they want as well. If their peers are ending up in custody, it's, "Well, I'll go to custody because my friends are there." It's not uncommon for us to have a young person say, "I'm just going to keep offending until I get locked up. When I get locked up, I'm going to have a Christmas gift. I'm going to be fed. I'm going to have a shower. I'm going to have—

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Someone who cares.

JASMINE SMITH: —basic needs met, and somebody that cares about me, someone that has time for me." It's a massive issue.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: I notice that everybody—and I'm saying this for the record—on the panel is nodding their head. Does anybody else want to make a comment regarding that?

ELLIE TREE: In my time as a youth worker for the Bellingen Shire Youth Services, which is now the Bellingen Nambucca Youth Services and has been expanded, as I was mentioning earlier, with no extra funding—the group is targeted at early intervention. It's young people aged 12 to 17 who are at risk of disengaging from community, school, or family. Nine times out of 10, that starts at about 10 years of age. We often have a case where we go, "We can't support you yet. The service that can is about an hour and a half away." Sometimes they outreach on request. That's an issue. What we see, as a wraparound in the community, is younger people on the streets. Younger people have access to phones. They're more likely to post and boast. They're not as advanced mentally as other peers who are still considered to be young people. They haven't had that experience yet. It's definitely getting younger. It's a huge issue when your early intervention service starts at age 12.

Dr HUGH McDERMOTT: Are you saying that we should aim for younger—say, 10 years old?

ELLIE TREE: I think it should be flexible on both ends. If you've got a young person who is 18 and you can no longer support them because they've aged out of your service, they're still a young person, but technically you can't support them, because they're an adult now. From both ends, there needs to be flexibility, and not rigid LGA boundaries. Sometimes a young person might live in one LGA and go to school in another, but depending on what your service is restricted by in the contract is what determines whether they receive support.

JASMINE SMITH: I think it's also looking at a more fluid step-up, step-down care model as well. We're seeing these younger people who we might be able to do a light-touch support service with before they reach the threshold for our services. However, you might be working with a young person and our service specifications say "12 months", and then it gets to the 12 months and we know good and well that they're not ready to be exited, but the guidelines say we have to, so we have to. When we talk to our young people, it's reflected, "My time was up and you couldn't care about me anymore," and they're going on to reoffend. If we can look at having that variation, where we can work with them, as we're exiting them, for a little bit longer, I think there's potentially more opportunity for more positive outcomes to be able to touch base, check in and link up to appropriate services, although we might not be the right service for them anymore. They miss out on that case management, that care, and someone to do all the linking that they've just had for eight to 12 months.

The CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee, thank you for appearing before today to give evidence. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's hearing for any corrections. The Committee may send you supplementary questions, should members seek further information. Once again, thank you so much for your attendance. That concludes today's public hearing. I place on record my thanks to all witnesses who have given evidence. In addition, I thank the Committee members, Committee staff and Hansard for their assistance in the conduct of the hearing.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 13:45.