



# Improving access to youth mental health services in growth areas

September 2020

## Summary

Nearly 1.7 million people under the age of 25 live in Australia's outer urban growth areas. Even before COVID-19, mental health ranked as one of the most pressing problems for young people in growth areas. The detrimental impact of the pandemic on health, employment, study, family and community dynamics is only exacerbating the problem.

Access to mental health services is a significant challenge for many NGAA member councils and their communities. The lag time between population growth and sufficient delivery of health services is evident in all states and improvement is needed in advance planning for communities being established in growth areas.

A successful approach to securing services includes:

- Council partnering with health agencies, services providers and youth workers to share data and insights to build an evidence base to identify community needs.
- Council taking a pragmatic approach and providing secure long-term premises for service providers to set up in a community, achieving results faster than waiting for Government funding for a dedicated space.
- Co-locating with other community services increases accessibility and embeds agencies within the community – an important step during the period when the evidence base for long-term State and Federal Government support grows.

## Background

- Half of all mental health conditions in adulthood emerge by age 14, and three quarters by 24 (Beyond Blue).
- 1 in 4 young people aged 16–24 experience a mental illness (Youth Action).
- More than 70% of young women and 80% of young men who need help and support don't get it (youth Action)
- Mental health is the primary concern raised by all children and young people who contact Kids Helpline
- Many raised the impact of COVID-19 on specific mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression, phobias, eating disorders, obsessive and compulsive behaviours, intrusive thoughts, self-harm and suicidality, to name a few." (Australian Human Rights Commission, September 2020).
- Prior to COVID-19, mental health services were already overloaded. The demand for mental health and wellbeing support for children and young people has only increased with the advent of the pandemic" (Australian Human Rights Commission, September 2020).
- The effectiveness of early intervention is poorly recognised in the current system and schools and early childhood services are generally ill-equipped to identify problems early and intervene effectively. Additionally, the child mental health services in

Australia that do exist can struggle to bridge the gaps between health and the settings where children spend much of their time – education or child care (Department of Health, 2013).

## Outer Urban Growth Areas

- Growth areas have a higher percentage of people aged 4-19 than the Australian Average (.id,2018).
- Rates of disengagement amongst 15-24 years olds around 2 per cent higher in growth areas compared to the rest of Australia and while the percentage has dropped on average, the rate has remained the same for growth area populations.
- Many hospitals are experiencing increasing pressure due to rising numbers of patient presentations and Emergency Room admissions related to mental health (N, et al., 2018).

## Case Study – Camden Council and Headspace Campbelltown

NGAA Members explored the challenge of securing youth mental health access for their communities during a panel discussion with:

- Tina Chappell, Director Sport, Community and Activation, Camden Council
- Cr Charishma Kaliyanda, Liverpool City Council and also Community Engagement and Development Officer, Headspace Campbelltown
- Aysun Goktepe, Clinical Services Manager, Headspace Campbelltown.

A recording of the discussion is available on the [NGAA website](#).

Discussion focussed on the rapidly growing young population of Camden Council, and the actions Council took to provide access to Headspace service in their community. A strong partnership with Headspace Campbelltown, strong political commitment to addressing the service gap and an holistic approach by Council to supporting young people were key elements to success.

Camden Council, situated in south west Sydney about an hour from the CBD, has experienced a tsunami of growth since 2007 when it was delegated part of the south west growth corridor. The population has grown from 43,000 in 2000 to 150,000 in 2020, with large scale growth in the last 5 years.

The population is becoming more culturally diverse as the population of young homeowners and families grows. The 5-19 age group is dominant. Council has responded by focussing on soft infrastructure and building social capital as well as the hard infrastructure communities need to function.

With such a rapid phase of growth, embedding health services and community service agencies in the local community – rather than relying on neighbouring regions or outreach services – has been critical to meet demand.

Tina Chappell said a key challenge has been the lack of hard data to convince State and Federal government to fund services. She said that ‘planning for a community that doesn’t yet exist’ is difficult, and to wait for data to become available means planning with outdated evidence. Like most growth areas, the latent need was clear but data to back up anecdotal evidence prevented Government investment.

So Camden Council took a proactive stance and made local access to youth mental health services a priority, partnering with Headspace Campbelltown. Headspace provides preventative mental health support and services for 12-25 year-olds.

Aysun Goktepe said that in 2018, Headspace yearly reporting showed a postcode distribution of around 30% of clients accessing Campbelltown Headspace were from the Camden LGA. She noted that the young people from Camden accessing the service were travelling significant distances, indicating that many more people may need support but did not have access to a car, someone to drive them or funds for public transport.

Council and Headspace Campbelltown collaborated to co-locate within the community facilities at the new Oran Park Library, which opened in August 2018. Council provided furnished professional rooms at no cost, and Headspace Campbelltown have been delivering services from within their existing funding allocation. The community space provides a discreet entrance to self-conscious teens wanting help, has fast tracked the process and proved to be an effective way to quickly deliver services to the community.

Key to achieving fast delivery was political support from Camden Council and having a Council-provided furnished space ready to occupy.

Today, over 40% of youth in the area are accessing Headspace resources.

2020 has been a difficult year for Australia's young people. Cr Kaliyanda, explained how young people were already facing an uphill battle before 2020, "Under 25s are more educated than previous generations yet poorer. Economic, environmental and housing outcomes are also poorer." Almost all young people have been heavily impacted by Covid-19 by either changes to study or reduction in employment opportunities. As such, the risk to mental health is higher than ever before.

With research showing a growing sense of helplessness amongst young people, Cr Kaliyanda said genuine engagement across all areas of Councils' work – community and strategic planning, arts and culture, recreation, sustainability and economic development – is vital.

## **Growth Area Challenge – Access to services**

Access to treatment is essential as approximately 75% of people admitted to public sector mental health inpatient services improve notably. In particular, primary mental health care services are central in addressing signs of mental illness in children and young people with appropriate treatment providing both immediate and long term positive outcomes (blackdoginstitute, 2020).

Flexibility is key in a post COVID health setting: "greater attention needs to be given to providing more flexible and appropriate access to health care services in the community setting" (Australian Human Rights Commission, September 2020). Young people, however, are hard to reach, as they don't necessarily make regular visits to traditional medical or community health services (Department of Health, 2013).

Research suggests colocation can be effective to remove complex relationships and organisational structures, to more effectively deliver care (Ginsburg, 2008).

## **Collaboration and planning**

Mental health prevention remains a complex policy challenge. A range of small risk factors cumulate to progress from vulnerability to disorder. Gaps between knowledge, policy, and practice need to be bridged and any future steps should seek to improve early detection and interventions more broadly, including in the home, schools, community and clinical settings (Prof Celso Arango, 2018). "A coordinated approach to early intervention and prevention for mental health is needed to ensure that investments in early intervention and prevention strategies are sustainable and effective" (National Mental Health Commission, 2019).

A key lesson for Tina Chappell, Director of Sport, Community and Activation at Camden Council, was to not wait for data to support delivery of youth services such as Headspace, "Be

proactive with community services – if you wait for data it's often too late and vulnerability has set in." For greenfield areas, she suggests investing in social services is just as critical to plan for as infrastructure.

## Conclusion

The lessons learned by the Headspace and Camden team can be applied more broadly in other LGAs.

- Sharing data is key – it is hard to build a case on evidence when the community is brand new, but at the same time agencies, services providers and youth workers do have useful data and insights.
- Taking the first step and taking a pragmatic approach and providing secure long-term premises for service providers to set up in a community will achieve results faster than waiting for Government funding for a dedicated space.
- Co-locating with other community services increases accessibility and embeds agencies within the community – an important step during the period when the evidence base for long-term State and Federal Government support grows.

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