



Regional Visit Report

Laverton and Leonora

4 to 6 April 2017

Commissioner's comments

I was pleased to have the opportunity to visit Laverton and Leonora and meet the children and young people and service providers who are enthusiastic and committed to making their communities better places to live and work in.

Visiting regional areas is an important part of my work to ensure I understand the challenges and particular issues children, young people and their families experience in these areas.

Although Laverton and Leonora are closely located, I learnt each community has a unique profile and population, and diverse needs.



Photo: Commissioner Colin Pettit with student leaders from Leonora District High School.

The young people I met with at Laverton School and Leonora District High School spoke positively about their communities. They value their friendly and close-knit

communities, and enjoy exploring their natural environment and participating in sporting activities. They had some excellent ideas about how to improve their towns and it is important that communities continually explore ways in which children and young people can have a voice and guide decision making, particularly around the services and infrastructure they need.

It was apparent that many children and young people in Laverton and Leonora are doing well and making the most of the opportunities their community has to offer. Nevertheless, efforts must continue to ensure children and young people in these areas have equitable access to education and employment to give them the best opportunity to reach their potential.

I also heard about smaller, but significant, groups of children and young people in each community who are seriously affected by disadvantage and family dysfunction. Service providers are working hard to help these vulnerable children and young people to remain in school and develop their skills. However, it is clear that more intensive services and supports are needed to assist their parents and families, many of whom also face disadvantage and adversity, to provide safe and nurturing environments for their children.

I was encouraged to see the number of programs and activities developed and driven by passionate community members who have recognised and responded to the needs and strengths in their community.

Provision of services to regional areas is always a significant challenge, particularly to smaller and more isolated communities. Among all community members and service providers I met with, there was a strong desire for improved collaboration and co-delivery of services to the community, to ensure services are meeting each community's unique needs. While the right level of funding and mix of services is important, effective coordination of services was identified as critical to seeing improved outcomes.

I will be including the insights and issues raised on my visit in the advocacy work of my office as I continue to liaise with government and service providers to advance the wellbeing of children and young people from across our regional areas.

I thank everyone who took time to meet with me in Laverton and Leonora to discuss local children and young people's wellbeing.

Colin Pettit

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

Who did the Commissioner meet with?

In Laverton the Commissioner met with:

- service providers for children and young people from government and non-government agencies including WA Police, Department for Child Protection and Family Support, Shire of Laverton, Laverton Leonora Cross Cultural Association, family and youth outreach
- Aboriginal stakeholders from the local community
- staff and students from Laverton School

In Leonora the Commissioner met with:

- Aboriginal stakeholders from local agencies and the local community
- service providers for children and young people from government and non-government agencies, Shire of Leonora, and family and youth outreach
- staff and students from Leonora District High School

What the Commissioner heard from children and young people in Laverton

They like Laverton because:

- the town is safe
- people in the town are friendly
- it is a good community.

Things that could be improved include:

- building a water park
- having more activities for young people to do
- having more shops and a shopping mall.

What the Commissioner heard from children and young people in Leonora

They like Leonora because:

- it is quiet
- there's lots of trees
- you can go out bush and go walking up the hills

Things that could be improved include:

- having more (modern) equipment in the park
- building a water park
- free entry to the pool in town

- more activities in town because there's nothing to do
- re-opening the game shop in town
- to stop families drinking (alcohol)
- a safe place in town for children who feel unsafe at home.

What the Commissioner heard from service providers and community members in Laverton

Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan

- In 2016 the Shire of Laverton developed a Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan (2016–2020) and work is underway to continue the development and implementation of the plan. A working group of community members and agencies has been convened to oversee the Plan and will meet quarterly.
- As a result of the Plan, a community program was initiated by two Youth Officers for youth in the town, with the support of Police and other community members and agencies. It involved organised activities for children and young people including going out bush, trips to Perth, cooking and sports, with a particular focus on building their resilience. Access to some of the activities was linked to school attendance and the program saw some very positive outcomes, including reduced juvenile crime and improved school attendance. Although the two Youth Officers are no longer working in Laverton, the Shire is seeking to fill the vacancies so the program can continue.
- The Shire is currently in the planning and development stages for a new multi-facility centre for youth, which will include a pool and a skate park.

School and education

- More intensive education support is needed for students in foundational areas such as numeracy and literacy.
- Truancy is an issue and a stronger whole-of-community effort is needed to encourage and support children and young people to attend school.
- It was identified that Aboriginal children may miss school for extended periods of time because they have lore and sorry business obligations with their family.
- It was recognised that because many parents may have had negative experiences with schooling or did not attend school themselves, there may be fear or reluctance to send their children to school. This needs to be addressed through improved communication and assistance for parents.
- High school-aged young people do not have their own area at the school to spend recess/lunch. It is recognised they would benefit from having their own space, separate to the primary-aged students.

Families

- Many children and young people are being raised by their grandparents who do not receive financial support, which can be very challenging.
- Children and young people need safe houses they can go to in the community when they feel unsafe at home.
- There was strong agreement on the need for parents and families to receive much greater support in order to provide nurturing environments for their children.

Service provision

- Laverton needs more locally-based services. As the town is 345 kilometres away from the regional centre of Kalgoorlie, distance is an issue. Visiting services are not able to build relationships and provide the level of service needed. There should be a focus on building the capacity of people in the town, rather than relying on visiting services.
- The large number of visiting services do not communicate well with each other and therefore may duplicate programs/services. Central coordination of all the services would be helpful.
- Short-term funding is counterproductive for communities. Programs need long-term funding with a focus on outcomes. This means building evaluation as a core component into all programs and as a tender specification in the procurement of services.
- The high turnover of staff in the town means programs must be designed and implemented so they are sustainable and are not dependent on individual staff members.
- There is a big gap in services and programs available for the early years. A greater focus on preventative services is needed.

Health

- There is a GP in town Monday to Friday however the community would like a permanent GP.
- Mental health is a significant issue for children and young people. Access to counsellors and other mental health supports are very limited. The counsellor who services the town only comes once a month, which is insufficient and makes it difficult for young people to build trust with the counsellor.
- There is a need to empower community members to provide mental health support to children and young people given the lack of available services. Mental Health First Aid training for community members has been suggested.
- The ASSIST program (a suicide prevention program) was offered in Laverton recently, however there was low uptake.

- There is a need for education and empowerment of young women in the community to say no to violence, as violence appears to have been normalised.

Community involvement

- Aboriginal community members feel strong action is needed to address the health and wellbeing of children and young people. They agree the change needs to be driven by Elders and community leaders, but they need more assistance and resources to do this effectively.
- Many residents feel it is the transient families who stay or come through the town who cause issues.
- There were suggestions to link the 'work for the dole' scheme to activities that support children and young people in the community. There have been examples of this in other regional towns that have had positive outcomes.



Photo: Commissioner Colin Pettit with students and staff from Laverton School.

What the Commissioner heard from service providers and community members in Leonora

Service provision

- There is frustration that services are delivered without collaboration or consultation with the community. As a result, services do not address the needs of the community and therefore positive change is limited.
- Improving the coordination of existing services in the community and greater collaboration between community members and service providers could achieve better outcomes for children and young people.

- Services need to incorporate strategies that understand and respond to the trauma experienced by children and young people in order to be effective.
- Some community members feel services are only available when an individual has reached crisis point. For example, only when a person has committed a crime will they be able to receive support for Alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues.
- There is concern around barriers to young people accessing AOD counselling – they require parental consent although some young people do not have an adult available who can provide consent or parents/guardians do not wish to provide consent as they are fearful this could lead to child protection involvement. As a result, young people miss out on the counselling they need.

Families

- Parents and families need to be supported and empowered to provide better support to their children and young people. Many of the parents of children in the town are aged in their late teens to late twenties and lack the skills and resources to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children.
- A Ranger program for adults in another town had real success – it focused on building the resilience and skills of adults, which had a positive flow on effect to their children.

School and education

- There is recognition of the importance of preparing children and families early for school. There is a new KindiLink program in Leonora and they are still actively working to attract families to it.
- Teachers need appropriate training to recognise and respond to students who may be experiencing family violence or living in dysfunctional home environments before they commence in their roles. Teachers at the local school are often young, new graduates and may not yet have the experience and skills to sufficiently address this. The school leadership recognises these training gaps and are working to address these.
- Teachers also need to have strong understanding of Aboriginal culture and language, especially teaching Aboriginal students for whom English is not a first language.
- The school has difficulty attracting staff as Leonora is not classified as a remote location, therefore staff do not receive the same benefits as if they were teaching in a remote school. It can also be a very challenging place to live and can be confronting for new teachers who have not worked in a regional town previously.
- A new student leadership group has been established at the school and this has been going very well.

Health

- Mental health is a significant issue in Leonora, and there have been several recent suicides by young people.
- In response to the suicides, a WA Primary Health Alliance officer was employed and located in Leonora in 2016 and a Community Action Group was formed.
- The Community Action Group has highlighted a lack of understanding about mental health issues and how to deal with them within the community as a significant issue. The group are continuing to meet and progress community-based strategies to address mental health issues.
- Members of the Leonora community also travelled to Alice Springs in May 2016 to attend the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference. The group exchanged learnings, share lived experiences and built knowledge on how to tackle suicide in the community.
- The ear health program for children has had positive success. New teachers need to receive training on how to recognise hearing issues in students and how to use the hearing systems for hearing-impaired students in the classroom.
- Some community stakeholders who have lived in Leonora for many decades feel a lot of the issues remain the same but have intensified in recent years because of increased drug use and the nature of the drugs being used.

Community involvement

- There have been positive outcomes from the Leonora Shire's employment of a community member who is well known and respected in the town. This has enabled members of the community to come together and collaborate further to address the issues facing children and young people.
- Some local community members would like to see the reintroduction of a youth patrol that operated about a decade ago in Leonora. The patrol was staffed by volunteer community members and picked up children and young people who were roaming in town. It was suggested parents could staff the youth patrol as part of their 'work for the dole' activity.
- More support and funding is needed to enable community-driven activities and ideas to flourish. A number of community members have initiated activities with children and young people, such as a football competitions and a fitness program, which are run entirely on a voluntarily basis. They would like to receive funding to help them continue to run these activities but have found this difficult to obtain. Local mechanisms are needed for those driving the community initiatives to work together with existing service providers.

Employment

- The lack of employment opportunities in Leonora is a significant challenge, particularly for people who must apply for jobs to meet their Centrelink

requirements. Children and young people are affected by this too as many do not see the value of attending school when there are limited local jobs available.

- There are opportunities to work in the mines but barriers for young people to gain these jobs include limited education and training, and problematic AOD use. It was suggested that the school and mining companies could forge a partnership to provide training opportunities for young people so they can obtain mining jobs.

Technology

- There were concerns around the increasing use of technology among service providers (e.g. online counselling and mental health apps), which presents a barrier for young people in the community, as many do not have access to computers or the internet, and may not be computer literate.
- A new building will open next month in Leonora and will have Wi-Fi and computers available for community use.

Facts about children and young people in Laverton and Leonora

In 2015, the estimated resident populations of Laverton and Leonora was 1,216 and 2,476, respectively.¹

The following statistics on children and young people in Laverton and Leonora are taken from the most recent Census data available (2011).

- Around 100 children and young people aged 0 to 19 years live in the Laverton Significant Urban Area, representing 24 per cent of the total population of Laverton.²
- There were 47 Aboriginal children and young people aged up to 19 years in the Laverton area, representing 47 per cent of all children and young people in that age group in the Laverton area of that age population.
- Around 223 children and young people aged 0 to 19 years live in the Leonora Significant Urban Area, representing 29 per cent of the total population of Leonora.³
- There were 83 Aboriginal children and young people aged up to 19 years in the Leonora area, representing 37 per cent of that age population.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Births Australia 2015, ABS, Available:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/F41B99AB234B2074CA25792F00161838?Opendocument>

² The Significant Urban Area category incorporates Laverton and the fringe areas served by that town, ABS Community Profile, Laverton, Significant Urban Area as at the 2011 Census, Available:

http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/UCL522036?opendocument&navpos=220

³ The Significant Urban Area category incorporates Leonora and the fringe areas served by that town, ABS Community Profile, Leonora, Significant Urban Area as at the 2011 Census, Available:

http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/UCL521035?opendocument&navpos=220