



Commissioner's Listening Tour Mid West (Geraldton)

4-5 April & 16 May 2022

In April and May 2022, the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, visited Geraldton to meet with and hear from young people about what matters to them. During the conversations, young people consistently raised concerns about the environment; safety at school and in the community; the increasing cost of community sport; and a desire for more recreational activities in the area.

Many of the concerns raised by young people throughout the visit align with the themes highlighted through the Commissioner's *Speaking Out Survey* in 2021 which demonstrates there is a need for a cohesive, holistic approach to service delivery in order to support children and young people to access appropriate supports at the right time.

The Commissioner is grateful to everyone in the Mid West who took time to share their experiences and insights with her.

Who did the Commissioner meet with?

During the visit the Commissioner visited:

- Rangeway Primary School
- Waggrakine Primary School
- Beachlands Primary School
- Geraldton Primary School
- Geraldton Senior High School
- Nagle Catholic College
- Geraldton PCYC
- LGBTQIA+SB (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, questioning/queer, intersex, asexual/aromantic, otherwise diverse, sistergirl, brotherboy) young people from Out Midwest
- Various youth service providers including representatives from
 - headspace
 - WA Country Health Service
 - Out Midwest
 - STAY
 - City of Greater Geraldton
 - WAAC (formerly: Western Australia AIDS Council)
 - Western Australian Centre for Rural Health (WACRH)
 - Geraldton Streetwork Aboriginal Corporation.

What the Commissioner heard from children and young people

Rangeway Primary School – Years 5 and 6



Rangeway Primary School is an Independent Public School for children in Kindergarten to Year 6. It currently has 217 students. The Commissioner met with six students in Years 5 and 6 and talk to students during a tour of the school classrooms.

Students told the Commissioner that living in Geraldton is good because they:

- Enjoy time outdoors including beaches, parks and out in the bush
- Have access to good recreation facilities including the waterpark and skatepark
- Are able to spend lots of time with friends, both at school and outside of school
- Can go crabbing and fishing with their families
- Can play sport including football, soccer and basketball
- Enjoy going to the movies
- Are able to go on camping on holidays.

The students also shared some of their concerns about the community, along with their ideas about improvements that could be made:

- Many students don't like the amount of rubbish around town and at the beach and suggested that Geraldton needs more bins
- Bullying was raised as an issue with some students saying it has a significant impact on some of their peers
- Concerns were raised about fighting in the community, especially near their homes
- Students want more recreational activities in town like more skateparks and a trampoline park
- Some students spoke about the issue of dogs roaming the streets and being scared that they would get attacked.

Waggrakine Primary School – Year 6



Waggrakine Primary School has 456 students in Kindergarten to Year 6. The Commissioner met with a group of six students in Year 6 who are involved in the school's BUZ rangers leadership and peer-mediation program.

Students told the Commissioner that they liked the following things about Geraldton:

- At school they feel safe and well supported to learn, be creative and use their imagination
- The school is full of nice kids and teachers and they feel like they have a say and can make positive changes – “We convinced the teachers to put in a bird bath because the birds were getting too hot”
- The students loved being part of BUZ rangers and having the opportunity help other kids
- They like the buddy benches at school, which “help us to relax”
- There are lots of fun activities outside of school including cubs, dancing and sport
- All students enjoy water activities including swimming in the pool and the ocean, and going to the waterpark.

The students also shared some of their concerns about the community, along with their ideas about improvements that could be made:

- Litter was highlighted as an issue and students suggested they could have a school excursion and go to a beach and do a clean up
- Some students raised the issue of homelessness and said that some students don't always have enough food

- The transition to high school was raised with some students feeling worried about being bullied
- Social media is an issue that they feel impacts older kids – “I don’t have social media and I don’t want it”
- They would like to see more recreational activities in town like bowling and a trampoline centre
- Safety was a concern when they aren’t with their parents.

Beachlands Primary School – Years 5 and 6



Beachlands Primary School is the smallest government school in the City of Geraldton, with 120 students in Years 1 to 6, along with 40 Kindergarten and pre-primary students in their purpose-built centre. The Commissioner met with nine students in Years 5 and 6.

Students told the Commissioner that they like the following things about living in Geraldton:

- Students feel safe and supported at school and enjoy spending time with their friends
- They enjoy going to the movies with their family
- Being able to do water activities like swimming or surfing at the beach and the waterpark
- Learning Aboriginal languages at school
- If students are finding things difficult and need help, they feel like they have people at home or at school that they can talk to.

The students also shared some of their concerns about the community, along with their ideas about improvements that could be made:

- Some students don't feel safe outside of school and many spoke about getting bullied
- There are not enough events and too many events have been cancelled because of COVID-19
- While students enjoy going to the skatepark they don't always feel safe there – "other kids will try and steal your things"
- Homelessness was raised as an issue and it was suggested that a refuge could be built to help people
- Students felt that rubbish is a significant problem and more bins were needed and more efforts should be put towards recycling.

Geraldton Primary School – Years 4 to 6



Geraldton Primary School is the oldest continuously operating primary school in Western Australia, with students first attending in 1878. The school currently has 368 students from Kindergarten to Year 6. The Commissioner met with a group of eight students from Years 4 to 6, as well as a group session with twenty-four Year 6 students.

Students told the Commissioner about their suggestions to improve the school:

- They would like a calm/sensory room so that children who find school overwhelming can go there to relax
- Homework should be optional
- Some videogames that involve maths could be used in lessons

- Sport lessons should be longer in duration, but they should change sports more often – “We change [sport] every five weeks and it gets kinda boring... it should change more like every two weeks”
- “We should get to vote on the sports that we all wanna do”
- “I think young Indigenous kids should learn about their culture”
- They also suggested that learning disorder screenings should take place at an earlier age – “I only got diagnosed a little while ago and now I’m in Year 5!”

Students told the Commissioner that they like the following things about living in Geraldton:

- There are many sporting events and different sports to play in each season – “I like winter cos there’s really good surfing”
- It is a small place that is easy to get around
- There is always someone close by to help you
- One student thought it was great that there are radio advertisements about using reusables instead of plastic.

The students also shared some of their concerns about the community, along with their ideas about improvements that could be made:

- They would like a skate park in the middle of town so that it is easy to access
- Many students thought that not enough people care about the environment
- The bus doesn’t always feel safe – “Some kids don’t like taking the bus cos they don’t feel safe of other kids”
- Many people in the community are homeless and some areas make the children feel unsafe – “There’s a building where lots of homeless people live... I get scared skating past and it should be nicer.”

After meeting with this group of students, the Commissioner went to a Year 6 class. The class were asked to create a DigiMe avatar of themselves and to answer the question on the Commissioner’s website: What things help you to feel good?

While the students were completing this activity, the Commissioner asked them what could make life better in Geraldton. Students told the Commissioner:

- “[I wish] people are not rude and drugs are illegal”
- “More trees are planted and less cut down”
- “There aren’t opportunities [in Geraldton]. I have to drive all the way to Perth to get better [football] coaches”
- “No Liberal or Labour signs – they’re so annoying”
- “I think we should be able to learn more about those things we like most”.

Nagle Catholic College – Leadership Group



Nagle Catholic College is a co-educational secondary school established in 1994 and has 1093 students in Years 7 to 12. The Commissioner met with a group of ten students from various year groups.

Students told the Commissioner that they like the following things about Geraldton:

- The school environment is safe and provides them with excellent opportunities to learn with a diversity of subjects on offer
- They have many excellent teachers who support their learning and are friendly and approachable – “school is more enjoyable when you can chat to an adult”
- The social aspect of life is good both inside and outside of school and they enjoy being able to see their friends every day.

Some of the issues raised about school were:

- A timetable that doesn’t allow them enough regular breaks throughout the day
- The school sometimes feels too big which makes it challenging to get to know everyone
- Some students felt they are discouraged from seeking help from different teachers if they are struggling with a particular subject
- It could prove challenging if students want to change pathways and options are limited for some students.

Other issues and challenges they raised about Geraldton included:

- Not enough for young people to do – they would love to have bowling and ice-skating facilities since most facilities are for younger children
- Safety was raised by many as a concern with students indicating they wouldn’t feel safe walking around night

- Issues with aggressive behaviour at community sport was raised – some students witnessed parents being aggressive towards other young people who were umpiring community sport
- The cost of community sport was raised as a barrier for some to be able to participate and students want it to be more affordable
- Mental health is a concern and some students felt that they didn't know where to get help. Others felt that the help available isn't adequate – "I've been to a counsellor and I sit there and talk but nothing changes."

COVID-19 has impacted life at school and stopped them from taking part in some extracurricular activities and some students are also worried about the potential impact of COVID-19 on their elderly family members.

Geraldton Senior High School – Years 7 to 12



Geraldton Senior High School has 953 students in Years 7 to 12 and offers a number of specialised programs including literacy and numeracy support, and engagement programs.

The Commissioner had a face-to-face meeting with ten students in Years 7 to 12.

Students told the Commissioner that they enjoy living in Geraldton because:

- School provides them with good opportunities and a safe learning environment
- They enjoy the social aspect of school and seeing friends every day – "As tough as school can be some days, friends get you through"
- Students highlighted both the Stars and Clontarf programs as being very positive
- Many teachers are supportive and approachable and are having a positive impact on their ability to learn
- They enjoy living near the ocean and being able to swim and surf – "Going to the beach is the best – I go there to clear my head"
- Students felt that the school had created a safe space for LGBTQIA+SB students.

Some of the issues and challenges raised about school and life in Geraldton included:

- Public transport isn't safe – "People who catch the town bus are looking for trouble"
- Body image is a challenge, particularly for females and some students spoke about the way body image is stopping females from wanting to participate in team sports
- The cost of sport was also raised as an issue that is impacting many families
- Students felt that having more activities on offer for young people in town, that aren't sport, would make a big difference – "I used to go the PCYC but I'm too old for that now"
- Many students spoke about witnessing teachers being subjected to challenges and aggressive behaviour by students
- Grouping students into different classes based on their ability was considered good to help more committed students learn but students felt that it is also impacting on some of the less focused students who found it more challenging to learn – "Lots of students just don't want to learn"
- COVID-19 has prevented opportunities to go to open days at TAFEs and Universities, which would have been helpful in making decisions about future pathways
- Safety is sometimes an issue, with some students only feeling safe in the community if they are with their parents
- Violence at school is an issue but is caused by a small group of students.

Geraldton PCYC – students in Years 4-6

The Commissioner met a small group of children and young people at Geraldton PCYC.

Children and young people told the Commissioner that living in Geraldton is good because:

- They feel safe at school and in the community
- Lots of people recycle and there are good recycling programs at school
- The Clontarf Academy at school is excellent and makes school more enjoyable
- They enjoy spending time at the beach and swimming in the ocean
- The PCYC is a great place to spend time with friends.

The students also shared some of their concerns about the community, along with their ideas about improvements that could be made:

- Some were concerned about the drinking and drug-taking happening in town
- The foreshore is considered dangerous, especially the toilets
- Some children were concerned about stray dogs and are worried about being bitten
- A few of the girls highlighted that they felt the boys aren't respectful to them
- More opportunity to play sports would be welcomed.

LGBTQIA+SB young people from Out Midwest



Out Midwest is a community group working towards building visible community supports for sexuality and gender diverse individuals and their allies in the Mid West region of WA. They have recently launched 'The Space', a social group and safe space for LGBTQIA+SB young people in and around Geraldton.

The Commissioner met with four young people, aged 13 to 16, associated with this group.

They shared some of their concerns about Geraldton, along with their ideas about improvements that can be made:

- There is a lack of activities to do in Geraldton besides sports – “if you’re not into sports, there’s nothing to do”
- Young people felt that most activities available are aimed at younger children and there are few activities available for older young people – “There used to be a gaming café but that’s closed down now”
- Public transport is not satisfactory for those that live in the rural Mid West region.

The group spoke about their concerns with how the community responds and has responded to their LGBTQIA+SB identities.

All young people who had chosen a new name for themselves had had issues with teachers and other students calling them by their 'dead name' (name given at birth). This was because their dead names were still included in the class rolls and their chosen names were put into brackets. One young person said that once they asked their school's office

administration to change it, they did so. One young person said that they had asked teachers to use their chosen name and a few teachers have continued to use their dead name, so the young person refuses to respond to them.

Young people highlighted the need for more appropriate mental health services. One young person said that although headspace is a service that offers counselling, “you have to wait for ages”. One young person said that there is a lack of appropriate services in the area – “I have to go to Perth for any service”.

Bathrooms are a common issue for these young people. They all agreed that there should be non-gendered bathrooms available at school.

When young people were asked about sports, one young person said that they would like to stay in the girls’ class because they “got genuinely scared playing with the boys”. Another young person said that they would also like to stay in the girl’s class because “I don’t want to play against my brothers”.

Some of the young people have supportive parents and families but other young people are unsure if their families would be supportive or not – “I think the only problem talking to others about it is not knowing if they’ll be supportive or not”.

Bullying was a common issue for these young people. Many reported being bullied throughout their years at school. One young person spoke about how their bullies are homophobic and transphobic, even after the young person tries to correct them or educate them about the LBGQTQIA+SB community. Some young people had moved schools and prefer being at a larger school where “they can be friends with whoever they want”.

Young people would like to have more information about sexualities and genders. When asked if they knew where to access reliable information, they all said no.

What the Commissioner heard from service providers in Geraldton

The Commissioner met with staff at Geraldton Streetwork Aboriginal Corporation and had a meeting at Lester House with representations from headspace, WA Country Health Service, WAAC, Out Midwest, WACRH, STAY and the City of Greater Geraldton. The meeting at Lester House was an opportunity for the Commissioner to hear about the challenges for LBGQTQIA+SB young people in Geraldton and the support available to them, with a view to meeting with a group of young people.

For many service providers and NGOs, a lack of staff and funding continues to be a challenge. Many staff feel stretched in being able to meet the diverse needs of young people. Those needs are changing and require more specialist support.

Some spoke about the safety and violence continuing to impact young people in the community and raised the fact it is common for young people to feel unsafe at home.

A frustration for many is that there have been many reports and there is a lot of data available which highlights the challenges faced by young people in the region, but there is a lack of solutions or a commitment to implement those solutions.

When discussing the needs of LGTQIA+SB young people, a lack of appropriate support was highlighted. One of the key issues was that many young people need to travel to Perth metropolitan area to access specialist services. Many staff raised that specialist training should be provided to local services so that young people can access appropriate supports in Geraldton.

Geraldton Streetwork Aboriginal Corporation also reflected on staffing and funding challenges being an ongoing barrier to meaningful engagement with families that enables models of support to be tailored to individual families and be responsive to needs. Other issues highlighted included the need for a new vehicle to enable them to continue to the deliver their Night Outreach program and the challenges of staff turnover.

Facts about children and young people in Geraldton

- The Greater Geraldton local government area includes lands out to Mullewa and had 38,634 people in 2016. Geraldton town (Statistical Area 2 level) had 11,790 people.
- In Geraldton (town) there are approximately 2,672 children and young people (0 to 19 years). This represents around 23 per cent of the Geraldton population which is marginally lower than the state proportion (25%).
- Couple families with children make up 32 per cent of the population in families. Single parents represent 21 per cent of the population of families.
- Of the total population, 1,165 or 10 per cent of people in Geraldton report being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. This is higher than across the rest of WA. Of these, 476 were aged 0 to 19 years, which is 18 per cent of the children and young people population in Geraldton.
- Most people (73%) were born in Australia, which is higher than the proportion over WA (60%). Most people (81%) speak only English at home. The most spoken language other than English is Tagalog (1%).

Source:

2016 Census Community Profiles, ABS, retrieved 29 March 2022

2016 Census QuickStats: Geraldton (abs.gov.au)