



**Recommendations regarding
the Department of Communities'
Strategic Plan 2006 - 2010**

**from the
Youth Affairs Network of Queensland**

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Introduction

YANQ welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Communities' 2006-2010 Strategic Plan (the Plan) and thanks the Department of Communities for making this opportunity available.

Overall YANQ commends the Department for articulating a Plan which articulates the Department's strategic direction, outlines future priorities and restates the Department's commitment to Queensland's children, young people, families and communities and the non-government services that provide invaluable support to them.

We look forward to working with the Department to achieve the vision of having strong communities where all people are safe, valued and empowered, wherever they live, whatever their circumstances.

About YANQ

YANQ is the peak community youth affairs body in Queensland that promotes the wellbeing and interests of young people. YANQ represents youth organisations and young people from across Queensland. We do this by working with our members (individuals and organisations) and with more than 40 Youth Interagencies based in each region in Queensland.

We promote the interests and well being of young people across the state by:

- disseminating information to members, the youth sector, and the broader community
- undertaking campaigns and lobbying
- making representations to government and other influential bodies
- resourcing regional and issues-based networks
- consulting and liaising with members and the field
- linking with key state and national bodies
- initiating projects
- hosting forums and conferences
- input into policy development
- enhancing the professional development of the youth sector

Introductory Sections

Strengthening Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)

In the second paragraph the Plan neglects to mention the most common and widespread challenge facing non-government organisations – i.e. obtaining adequate funding.

In our regular contact with the youth sector, lack of sufficient funding and resources is the most commonly expressed concern¹. In addition to discussing the general concerns around levels of funding Youth Interagencies from Brisbane Central, Zillmere, Hervey Bay, Bundaberg, Inala, Goodna, Redlands and Cairns have also expressed concerns to YANQ regarding the difficulties that

¹ See for instance YANQ's Survey of Members 2005 (and results from the 1st three quarters of the Youth Consultative Network (<http://www.yanq.org.au/ycn>).

non-government organisations have in recruiting the staff they need. These two issues are inextricably linked. Without adequate funding the non-government sector is unable to attract qualified staff.

Lack of funding also impacts on the challenges discussed within the Plan. For example:

- Increased client needs can often only be met by investing in staff (either recruiting extra staff or developing the skills of existing staff), contracting out or (for instance) investing in IT solutions to improve the administrative efficiency of organisations – all of which require funds.
- The challenges of inconsistent standards and increased accountability requirements are similarly the product of non-government organisations struggling to obtain sufficient funds from many providers in order to meet client demand.
- As mentioned above, the challenge of recruiting and maintaining a well-trained workforce is closely linked to insufficient funding. NGOs are often unable to provide well-paid (i.e. close to or above the national average wage), permanent and full-time positions that well qualified people reasonably expect.

It is YANQ's view therefor that the failure to acknowledge this most significant challenge facing NGOs is a major flaw in the plan. We recommend that this challenge be explicitly recognised and that more strategies under 'Strategic Objective 1' be devoted to addressing it.

The strategy to “[i]ncrease the investment in ... prevention and early intervention services” (p.9) may go some way to addressing these concerns, and YANQ acknowledges and supports this aspect of the Plan.

Prevention and Early Intervention

YANQ commends the Department's intentions to “continue to invest in prevention and early intervention services.” However YANQ recommends that the Department adopt a definition of early intervention and prevention (EIP) that does not focus solely on families with children aged up to eight years.

As the document intimates on page 5 families and communities can experience times of vulnerability at different times in their life cycle, not all of which are related to having young children in the family (e.g. loss of employment, illness, moving to a new home etc). Non-stigmatising, easily accessible services that can help families and individuals at times of vulnerability *throughout* their life cycles, not just while they have young children, are an excellent investment. Therefor YANQ recommends reframing the concept (p.3 of the Plan) such that EIP is defined in terms of challenges that emerge over individuals and family's lifetimes, rather than just in regard to the early years of children's lives.

The need for a broader focus including children older than eight years has been identified by many regions in Queensland. Youth interagencies from inner Brisbane, Zillmere, Goodna, Inala, Redcliffe, Hervey Bay, Bundaberg and Gladstone have all expressed to YANQ the need for services (e.g. education, housing, family support etc) for young people between the ages of 12 and 15. It is YANQ's view that many young people of this age would benefit from EIP services that could complement the YSC program and address their broader needs outside of school. The YACCA program is an example of an EIP program that could be expanded to meet this need.

YANQ suggests that while the focus of the commitment to EIP should be broadened, it would be reasonable to focus actions in the initial 1-2 years of the plan on children aged zero to eight, then expand EIP programs to older age groups and families in the latter half of the Plan.

Finally YANQ recommends that this commitment be more closely monitored than the Plan suggests (“We will monitor our progress by” - p. 9). Success on this commitment could be measured by benchmarking levels of expenditure on 'crisis' services (such as youth detention, homelessness support etc) against expenditure on prevention and early intervention services. Increases in expenditure on the latter would indicate success.

Strengthening Community Engagement and Capacity Building

Under this heading (p. 4) YANQ recommends that the Plan explicitly acknowledge the role of Peaks in:

- disseminating information about Government priorities;
- communicating complex policy issues to their respective sectors and the public more generally; and
- supporting NGOs and the public to become involved in the decision-making and policy formulation processes of Government.

YANQ sees itself as a partner with the Government in the challenge of maintaining a vibrant and inclusive democracy, and argues it would be beneficial if our role, and that of other Peaks was explicitly acknowledged.

Focusing on the Most Vulnerable – The Challenge for Young People

Regarding youth services, page 5 of the Plan argues that the “challenge is to prevent young peoples' involvement in crime...”. YANQ argues that this focus is too negative. Instead the focus should be on increasing young peoples' opportunities to develop their full potential.

According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, in 2003/2004 just over 6% of 15-19 year olds and 1.4% of 20-24 years olds are processed by police for the commission of a crime¹. These figures actually just reflect the numbers of young people *accused* by police of committing a crime, not actually the numbers of young people found guilty of committing a crime within a court of law. So at the very worst, this means that for 94% and 99% of young people in those age brackets the challenge is not staying out of trouble. For most young people, staying out of trouble runs a distant last to such things as coping with education and work commitments, maintaining relationships with family and finding time to spend with friends².

Therefor YANQ recommends that the focus for youth services should be on providing opportunities for all young people “wherever they live, whatever their circumstances” to develop their full potential as members of the community in relationships, work and education. One way of addressing such a broader focus would be through investing in early intervention/prevention services for young people and families with children older than 8 years of age, as discussed above.

Having said this, YANQ does acknowledge the significant role the Department plays in providing Youth Justice services, but argues that this role needs to be placed within a context that affirms young people as developing and contributing members of society, rather than as a group that needs

1 See http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/facts/2005/04_selectedOffenderProfiles.html.

2 See for instance Mission Australia's “National Youth Survey 2005” - <http://www.mission.com.au/cm/resources/documents/2005YouthSurvey.pdf>.

to be prevented from committing crimes.

Strategic Objectives

Objective 1: Support and Monitor Service Provision

YANQ's comments regarding this objective have been made above under the heading '[Prevention and Early Intervention](#)'.

Objective 2: Support Young People

YANQ supports this objective and many of the underlying strategies. In particular YANQ commends the Department for its commitments to:

- continuing the implementation of the Youth Charter;
- examining options for young people at risk who cannot be supported through SAAP services;
- consolidating the Youth Support Coordinators initiative; and
- improving youth justice services.

Regarding the intension to “expand and improve ... youth justice services” YANQ recommends that such expansion must also involve increasing the capacity of the YACCA (youth crime prevention) program. This would improve YACCA programs ability to divert more young people at risk of committing crimes away from criminal activity and help the Department meet its laudable goal of increasing the investment in early intervention and prevention services. The expansion of the YACCA program would also complement the Youth Support Coordinator initiative and create additional avenues outside of school to assist young people to stay engaged or reengage in community activities, work and/or education.

Regarding the measures to track progress against this objective, YANQ recommends that:

- the Department sets targets for a reduction of young people in detention;
- the Department monitors and endeavours to reduce the rate of young people entering the youth justice statutory system for the first time; and
- implementation of the Queensland Youth Charter be measured by the number of government agencies reporting progress under it.

Objective 4: Quality Support Services

YANQ broadly supports this objective but recommends:

- acknowledging the link between adequate funding and quality;
- including specific strategies to develop skills within the NGO workforce;
- ensuring that the Government's responses to volatile substance misuse (VSM) and public intoxication are grounded within a social model of health¹; and

¹ “a conceptual framework within which improvements in health and well-being are achieved by directing effort towards addressing the social and environmental determinants of health...”. Source: Vic Dept. of Human Services cited in Ryan & Sarikoudis, 2003. [The Social Model of Health: Bridging the gap between the health and homelessness sectors](http://www.afho.org.au/conference/2003conference/Sarikoudis_Ryan.pdf). Online at http://www.afho.org.au/conference/2003conference/Sarikoudis_Ryan.pdf.

- explicitly allocate resources and work with the multicultural sector to implement the Cultural Diversity Statement and the Multicultural Action Plan.

As stated earlier, the significant challenge facing non-government services is obtaining adequate funding and resources. YANQ recommends that Objective 4 of the Plan can only be met if this challenge is met. Therefor YANQ recommends either:

- including the strategy (“undertake an analysis regarding the price of funded services ...” p. 16) under this objective also; or
- introducing an additional strategy under this objective which acknowledges the relationship between 'quality' services and adequate levels of funding and aims to bridge the gap that currently exists.

Achieving the objective of quality support services will also be assisted with specific strategies to develop the skills of youth workers. To this end YANQ recommends that the Department create a state-wide youth sector development plan to enhance youth worker qualifications and skill levels. As stated earlier however, such a strategy would need to acknowledge the link between attracting high quality staff and adequate levels of remuneration.

YANQ commends the Department for supporting the Government's response to public intoxication and VSM but urges it to tackle the problems from the social health models perspective. YANQ argues that reducing the incidence of VSM and public intoxication in our communities is best achieved by focusing on the social and environmental factors that are associated with the behaviours (e.g. unemployment, lack of education, availability of substances, recreational opportunities etc).

Finally, YANQ is concerned that without adequate resourcing, the Department may not be able to implement the Cultural Diversity Statement and the Multicultural Action Plan. Therefor YANQ recommends that the Department allocate funds to these strategies to ensure they have the best chances of success.

Objective 5: Participation of Queenslanders

YANQ commends the Department for this objective. Strategies to assist public officials to listen and work more responsively with stakeholders and the community generally will result in more effective Government policy. This objective requires a concerted effort to build this understanding and approach within the Department and across the Queensland public sector.

To assist with this YANQ recommends that the role of Peak bodies, as partners of the Department, be acknowledged in this section. As stated earlier, YANQ and other Peak bodies play an important role in educating the community about Government Policy and encouraging the community to take an active role in contributing to Government's policy development processes. YANQ therefor recommends including a strategy to support Peaks, for instance:

Continue to support Peak Bodies to facilitate the involvement of their constituencies and to advocate on their behalf to Government and the community.

YANQ also suggests that the success of the Ministerial Regional Community forums could be better measured by the number of people attending the forums, rather than just the number of forums held.

Objective 7: Partnerships

YANQ commends the Department's commitment to "undertake an analysis regarding the pricing of funded services and service capacity". Furthermore YANQ looks forward to working with the Department to support the involvement in this analysis of youth services that receive funding from the Department of Communities.

Conclusion & Summary of Recommendations

YANQ welcomes many aspects of this plan, in particular:

- the promise to undertake an analysis of the pricing of funded services and service capacity;
- the commitment to continue the implementation of the Youth Charter;
- the intention to increase investment in early intervention and prevention;
- the focus on addressing levels of disadvantage among Murri and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- the pledge to implement the Multicultural Action Plan; and
- the recognition of the importance of building partnerships with NGOs – service providers and peaks;

Nevertheless YANQ does recommend that the Plan be amended to ensure that the Department is well placed to address the myriad challenges facing young people, their families and the NGOs that provide services to them. In summary YANQ recommends that the Plan should:

- Specifically acknowledge that a major challenge facing NGOs is obtaining sufficient funding and resources and include strategies to address this;
- Adopt a definition of EIP that focuses on meeting the needs of individuals and families as they face challenges that emerge across the lifespan (i.e. a broader focus than just families with children aged zero to eight).
- Monitor progress against the commitment to increase investment in EIP by benchmarking spending against levels of expenditure on crisis services.
- Specifically acknowledge the role of Peak Bodies and include strategies that assist them to continue informing their sectors and the public about Government policy and encouraging participation in policy development.
- Focus, throughout, on supporting young people to develop to their full potential (i.e. instead of, as on p.5, on preventing young people's involvement in crime).
- Include specific strategies for developing the skills of the NGO workforce;
- respond to public intoxication and VSM from the basis of a social model of health;
- explicitly allocate resources and work with the multicultural sector to implement the Cultural Diversity Statement and the Multicultural Action Plan;