

Alcohol and Other Drug Consumer & Community Coalition (AODCCC) response to the Government of Western Australia Department of Communities WA Youth Action Plan.

The AODCCC welcomes the opportunity to provide focused and current membership feedback on the WA Youth Action Plan Consultation Paper - Your views, your future. The AODCCC acknowledges and agrees with the Government of WA, Department of Communities that young people and “their views and ideas are critical to shaping the Action Plan” [1]. The AODCCC is committed to listening to young people about what impacts their lives and what is needed to support them. We provided all members aged 16-24 the opportunity to participate in a consultation workshop. Participants were paid for their time in accordance with the WA Mental Health Commission's Paid Participation Policy.

This submission reflects the voices of AODCCC members aged 16-24, providing a lens that considers and prioritises alcohol and other drug lived and/or living experiences and expertise. The submission focuses on integration, collaboration and inclusion of the drug and alcohol specific lived and/or living experience youth lens, and provides fresh and relevant perspectives from young people to help the WA government achieve improved outcomes for young people in Western Australia over the next three years.

About AODCCC

The Alcohol and Other Drug Consumer & Community Coalition (AODCCC) is a membership-based organisation established in 2018 as a state peak body in Western Australia. The AODCCC's vision is community understanding shaped by the voice of people and families with lived and or living experience of alcohol and other drugs and our purpose is to promote the interests, education, and welfare of those affected by alcohol and other drug use.

We play a vital advocacy, representational and capacity building role for the Western Australian community. We engage our members, amplifying their voices and draw on their lived and/or living experience and expertise. Through systemic advocacy we strive to achieve our vision and mission for the betterment of those impacted by the prevalent alcohol and other drug use within our society. 3.9 million people or 1 in 5 people in Australia have used an illicit drug in the previous 12 months [2]. Our aim is to empower the voices of consumers, their families and supports ensuring health and wellbeing of the whole community.

The AODCCC currently has **608** individual members and **42** associate members as of 28/03/2024.

Our *Values* are:

Inclusion, we acknowledge the legitimacy of everyone's experience and provide a safe space for diverse views to be shared.

Collaboration, we look for opportunities to bring consumers, family, community, policy makers and providers together for real change.

Accountability, we consult broadly and are open about our intent, activities, and outcomes.

Leadership, we share bold visions and take courageous steps towards what is needed in the community.

Integrity, we respect and value the different perspectives and experiences of alcohol and other drug use.

Celebrating young people

The AODCCC and its members support the WA Action Plan and its suggested priority focus areas; to celebrate young people reaching their potential, providing them with a voice, considering climate change, wellbeing, connection, and inclusion. However, throughout the consultation workshop process, members strongly advocated that there are specific lenses that should be further considered, included, and acknowledged within the plan. These are alcohol and other drug lived experience, suicide, and equitable access for identified priority populations. Also missing are details of other important areas including stigma and discrimination, illicit and prescription drugs prevalence, loneliness, and isolation.

The AODCCC members indicated that youth week needs to be more present and celebrated within all schools and should reflect the realities of modern Australian society to include:

“More acknowledgement and celebration of young people who have recovered from suicidal ideation and problematic substance use”. (AODCCC Member)

This acknowledgement, open discourse and recognition would contribute to reducing the evident societal stigma around both substance use and suicide.

A voice for young people

Our members believe it is essential that young people are given the opportunity to be consulted and respond to issues impacting their lives. It is evident that alcohol and illicit and prescription drug use is prevalent across all strata of Australian society. Therefore, involving young people who use alcohol and other drugs is essential to ensure they have a voice in relation to matters that impact them and their families and communities.

“Have young people with lived experience on boards and include lived experience representatives in planning, design, implementation and delivery for all services and programs relating to young people.” (AODCCC Member)

Wellbeing, connection, and inclusion

Wellbeing, connection, and inclusion were passionately discussed during the consultation process. Increased investments towards non-sport based free community activities was seen as a priority. Suggestions included, art, graffiti and sculpture projects, social media projects, wilderness camps and safe local locations to “just hang out with friends”.

Members reported a very rapid and noticeable ‘violent gang culture’ emerging within Perth suburbs. Many of these gang’s recruit and initiate new members by encouraging or forcing drug and alcohol use, with many young people expected to sell drugs in their local communities and to carry weapons such as knives. The AODCCC recommends the Western Australian government consider trialling a Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), a model originating in Scotland which gained international renown for treating violence as a public health crisis [3].

This approach has been credited with dramatically reducing deaths in Scotland and has now been implemented in England and Wales where it has been successful in enhancing multi-agency collaboration in local areas and has made concerted efforts to listen to young people and communities. This has included adopting approaches that value and actively engage with the lived experiences of communities, families, and young people. This ensures services are genuinely tailored to meet local needs and create and promote effective policies, practices and learning opportunities, underpinned by evidence and a commitment to ethical standards around equality, diversity, anti-racism, stigma, and discrimination.

The AODCCC believes Western Australia needs initiatives in communities that prevent at-risk, lonely, and isolated youth aligning with gang culture. We support the implementation of evidence-based interventions that address specific risk and protective factors associated with youth violence and youth gangs in communities where these issues exist or are an identified, evidenced emerging trend.

Success! Reaching your potential

When asked about their future goals and how to achieve them, our members communicated hope and positivity. They wanted to have good health, safe housing and to master their emotional regulation and impulsive behaviours. They wanted to share their stories of recovery and obtain qualifications to ensure they were good role models for future generations.

“I want to be a peer-to-peer educator, talking to young people about issues/ life from a perspective that can relate and has shared lived experience – this is empowering and transformational.” (AODCCC Member)

Our cohort actively deliberated over what helped young people to thrive and achieve their goals: the importance and value of tailored support systems, strong school attendance, and positive role models and mentors were conveyed and agreed.

Barriers to achieving goals were robustly debated and listed during the consultation process. Some of the most typical barriers that young people can experience were identified as, intergenerational normalised drug use within families and community, the experience of stigma and discrimination in relation to substance use, lack of specialised trauma informed services, lack of available housing, too many barriers and exclusion criteria when accessing services, lack of acknowledgement of the prevalence of alcohol and drug use, long waitlists for services, low motivation and non-consequential thinking, inability to reflect on life experiences and have the confidence to dream, plan and execute realistic goals.

Have your say

The AODCCC values young people for who they are and celebrates the ongoing contributions they make in the community. The consulted members expressed a broad spectrum of suggestions and ideas when asked what the most positive outcome would be or what change the Action Plan could make for young people. An overwhelming focus on early intervention, education, and prevention in relation to alcohol and other drugs was passionately discussed, along with the need for diverse options and person-centred initiatives when investing in interventions. Members indicated that age-appropriate informative education under-pinned with biology, health and harm reduction guiding principles should begin with primary aged children and continue throughout their education journey. Mandatory training in schools for all staff, promoting harm reduction and challenging stigma and discrimination, especially where intergenerational drug use is known, is essential to build empathy, understanding and safety within the community.

The AODCCC believes that schools are an important environment for youth and encourage the West Australian government to consider implementing programs in schools that address and help prevent substance related harms among youth using a comprehensive school-based health approach. This approach has been recently implemented in Canada and is based on The Icelandic Prevention Model [4,5]. This model indicates that evidence-based substance use education is only one component of a comprehensive approach for preventing substance-related harms among youth and that the best prevention measures often have nothing do with substance use at all. Efforts to prevent substance-related harms among youth must reflect school communities' unique needs, values, preferences, and environments. The model recognises that traditional approaches to addressing youth substance use (for example, zero tolerance policies, abstinence-only education) have limited effectiveness and can produce unintended negative consequences.

“Connection between children and their families, peers, schools, communities, and adults by creating teams of adults who are invested in and working together to support the success of young people in the community. Schools are embraced as the natural hub of neighbourhood efforts to support child and adolescent health, learning, and life success”. (Planet Youth [5])

Members expressed frustration when presenting at hospital or attending doctor appointments, and shared experiences of stigma and discrimination when seeking health support. Members suggested that all general practitioners, emergency responders and health department staff should complete specific training that ensures substance use is treated empathetically and is seen as a health concern. The Alcohol and Drug Foundation have begun this narrative and created a specific resource for health care workers [6]. The

resource explores the impact of stigma on people who use alcohol and other drugs (AOD) and practical steps health care workers can take to create safe and welcoming environments in their workplace.

The AODCCC believes this is important because stigma has been found to be most prevalent in health care settings, where it can make people feel unwelcome, uncomfortable, unsafe and can prevent a person from seeking support and treatment. The AODCCC calls on the WA Government to ensure all government workers consider, reflect, and learn about stigma and discrimination in relation to alcohol and other drugs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the AODCCC youth member consultation has provided substantial evidence of the importance that young people in WA feel empowered and confident to paint a realistic and diverse picture of the people who use illicit drugs in Australia. This empowerment is an important step towards breaking down stigma and unhelpful stereotypes. Empowerment is essential for democracy and health. Empowered communities are healthy communities. The ability to have an understanding and control over various forces that impact one's life, including the ability to influence decisions of institutions, is central to empowerment.

The AODCCC advocates that we must empower more people to proactively seek support when needed; we must make that support more consistent, responsive, and flexible; and we must help services to stick with the people they are supporting. To do this, the WA state government, as a whole, must continue to include the voices and active participation of people with lived experience in all stages of the WA Youth Action Plan development and implementation. This empowered participation should adopt an intersectional lens that recognises the experiences of people who may belong to multiple identified priority populations.

Actions that target the reduction of stigma and discrimination, particularly towards people in priority populations, must be acknowledged and included in the WA Youth Action Plan. This could be achieved by adding guiding principles that are trauma-informed, that safeguard lived experience, and contribute towards reducing discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards people who use drugs, along with ending the harms associated with punitive drug policies.

The AODCCC believes it is crucial that findings from this consultation are disseminated widely and a cross-government, system-wide approach is taken to the implementation of recommendations developed, resulting in a boost of public support for drug policy reform and a much-needed increase of funding for drug treatment. The AODCCC encourages government to embrace the long vision and build a new story to move beyond stigma and beyond political cycles, ensuring effective collaboration between all interrelated sectors. Aiming to harness a whole of government approach while improving youth development, engagement and meeting the needs of all young people in Western Australia.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to this consultation. If you have any queries or require any further information in relation to this submission, please do not hesitate to contact us at info@aodccc.org

References

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