

Youth Focus Groups Report

Consultation - Knox City (and Council) Plan 2017-2021

Prepared by 'The Workshop'

www.theworkshop.id.au

September, 2016

1.	Overview	3
1.1	Community Engagement	3
1.2	Key Findings	3
2.	Guiding Principles	5
3.	Focus Groups Categories	5
4.	Focus Groups	6
4.1	Voices Absent from the Consultation Process:	6
4.2	Overview of Activities conducted with Youth Focus Groups	7
5.	What We Learnt from Youth Participants	8
5.1	Least Important Issues:	8
5.2	Most Important Issues	8
6.	Discussion Outcomes	9
6.1	Least Important - Discussion Outcomes	9
6.1.1	Arts & Culture	9
6.1.2	Sense of Community	9
6.1.3	Sports & Recreation	10
6.2	Most Important - Discussion Outcomes	11
6.2.1	Safety	11
6.2.2	Education	12
7.	'Other' category:	13
8.	Recommendations/ideas from young people around Issues of Most Importance	14
8.1	SAFETY	14
8.2	EDUCATION	15
9.	Acknowledgements	16
10.	Appendices	17
8.1	Appendix A	17

1. Overview

The City of Knox Youth Focus Group Report has been created to inform and support the update of Council's 2017 – 2021 Knox City (and Council) Plan by providing perspectives of young people throughout the municipality.

1.1 Community Engagement

The consultation process with young people ran over four weeks and aimed to engage a diverse cross section of young people from a range of schools, community groups, backgrounds and identities. Focus groups were held at local primary and secondary schools, an alternative education setting, a Scout hall, Young Leaders training, Interchange Saturday Youth Group, the Youth Information Centre (YIC) and at the inaugural Knox Youth Voice Day.

A total of thirteen focus groups were held with 218 young people aged 11 to 25 years old, on average focus groups were conducted for 60 – 70 minutes. The main area of enquiry in focus groups was to determine which issues relevant to the City Plan young people thought were most important and explore their ideas around what strategies/services they already considered most effective, as well as areas they would like to see change or improvement.

1.2 Key Findings

Generally, young people living or attending school in the City of Knox felt positive about the area as a whole and saw it as safe, with good sports and recreational facilities and generally easy (if time consuming) to negotiate by public transport. The aspects of the municipality they liked best were the parks and reserves, the fact that it felt generally quiet and safe and that most people are friendly.

Based on categories taken from the City Plan Municipal Survey, the issues they considered least important were *Arts & Culture*, *Sense of Community* and *Sports and Recreation*. Many participants were keen to point out that this did not mean they considered *Arts & Culture* as completely unimportant, but that they saw it as less important compared to other categories such as safety and education. Focus group participants generally dismissed the idea of ‘community’ out of hand and did not relate this to the idea of Knox, but more with the individual friends and family they spent time with, as well as their online life. Finally, the general consensus regarding *Sports and Recreation* as a lesser priority was that most young people felt the current situation in Knox was already adequate and provided lots of choices and facilities for participation in this area.

When focus group participants were asked to choose the issues that were of most importance to them, *Safety* and *Education* were their clear priorities and young people chose these issues as most important 56% of the time. Safety was not chosen because participants felt unsafe, but more often because they placed it of greater importance relative to other categories. Many young people felt Knox was generally a safe place and wanted Council to maintain this, with some minor additions (more street lighting, personal safety education, etc.). Public transport and young women travelling alone in the evening or at night were the exceptions to young people’s sense of security and all young women who participated in focus groups said they did not or would not feel safe walking or catching public transport alone at night. Young people’s reasons for choosing education as a priority issue were mixed and many young people felt that there were already many good options when it came to schools, subject choices, etc. Nonetheless, numerous participants also expressed a desire for consistency across schools when it came to teaching styles, technology and facilities as well as more education around cyber issues and sexual health and relationships.

2. Guiding Principles:

Consultation with focus groups was grounded in a Youth Engagement best practice and based on the following Guiding Principles:

- Young people are active participants in the life of their community who have unique skills, expertise and knowledge. Communities are enriched and more effective decisions are made when young people can participate in decisions that affect their lives.
- Young people who are marginalised or have difficulty accessing civic processes are valuable and often have distinct experiences within the community which can shed light on the gaps and strengths of local service provision. It is essential that all efforts are made to engage these groups in the consultation process.
- Consultation should be engaging and reciprocal. All participants in the consultation process should feel as though their time and input is valued and that the experience has been worthwhile and positive.

3. Focus Groups Categories:

The Issue Categories presented to young people during the consultation process were taken from the City Plan Municipal Survey conducted throughout Knox prior to the commencement of focus groups. These were:

- *Arts & Culture*
- *Education*
- *Employment*
- *Housing*
- *Multiculturalism*
- *Physical Environment*
- *Safety*
- *Sense of Community ("Feeling part of Knox")*
- *Sport & Rec*
- *Sustainability & the Environment*
- *Transport*
- *Wellbeing (and Services)*
- *Youth Voice*

An additional "Other?" category was also presented to youth participants to provide an opportunity for them to raise issues of importance or concerns not otherwise identified.

4. Focus Groups

Thirteen focus groups were conducted with young people throughout Knox between the 23rd of August 2016 and the 19th of September 2016. The largest focus group had forty-two participants (Young Leaders) and the smallest focus group had three participants (Wantirna Secondary College Koori Education Group). A total of 218 young people aged between 11 and 25 years old participated in the focus groups.

The majority of focus groups ran for 60 – 70 minutes, with the shortest running for 45 minutes (Interchange Saturday Youth Group) and the longest running for 100 minutes (Knox Youth Services LGBTIQ Group). The length of focus groups was determined primarily by the school or organisations ability to fit a group into already existing schedules as well as participant engagement levels. For a full breakdown of Focus Groups, length and participants numbers please refer to Appendix A.

4.1 Voices Absent from the Consultation Process:

Focus groups were conducted with a broad and diverse range of young people, however due to time constraints and difficulties engaging with some groups it should be noted that there are some perspectives that are not captured in this report. The facilitator was unable to conduct a focus group with young people of faith, despite approaching the local mosque, the closest Islamic school and two church-based youth groups. One focus group was conducted at a local Christian school; however young people within a faith community are overall underrepresented in this report. One focus group was conducted with Koori youth and another with English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, however numbers for both of these groups were small and cannot be considered representative.

4.2 Overview of Activities conducted with Youth Focus Groups

Activity	Details
Introductory Activity	<p>An interactive ball game which gets participants to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is 'Knox' – geographic boundaries, the way they spend time in the municipality (i.e. education, recreation ,etc.) and services provided by Council • What they like most about where they live/attend school
Preliminary Sorting Activity	<p>Participants receive a set of fourteen 'Issue' cards – each one displaying a category of interest (as listed in section 3) and relevant picture. After a brief explanation of each card by the facilitator, participants form small groups and sort cards into three piles:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Most important issues for us b) Fairly important issues for us c) Not very important issues for us <p>Each small group then selects which card they consider the 'least important' issue and briefly explain their reason(s)</p>
Prioritising Activity	<p>From their top pile each group chooses an issue they all agree is very important or most important to them. Once chosen each group works with the facilitator to brainstorm the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you think about this issue – what do you think is already working well? What do we [Knox Council] need to keep doing that is currently working? • When you think about this issue – what concerns do you have? What do you think can be done better or needs to be fixed? • If you were going to tell Council only ONE thing about this issue from your perspective as a young person – what would it be? <p>**NOTE: Language for these questions may be simplified or altered in order to be at an appropriate age/English level for each group</p>
Prioritising Activity II (if time)	<p>Where time permits, small groups will pick a second important issue and repeat the process outlined above.</p>
Summing Up	<p>The facilitator sums up the feedback from participants and clarifies what will happen with the information and opinions shared by young people from the focus group</p>

5. What We Learnt from Youth Participants

5.1 Least Important Issues:

Of the thirteen Issue Categories presented to participants (the “Other?” card was not relevant to this section of the consultation) the four categories *never* selected as **Least Important** were: *Safety, Education, Wellbeing & Services* and *Sustainability & the Environment*. Of the remaining nine issues, participants responded as follows:

Table 1: Areas of Least Importance as Chosen in Youth Focus Groups (rounded to the nearest whole number)

Areas of least importance:	
Arts & Culture	36%
Sense of Community	31%
Sport & Rec	11%
Physical Environment	6%
Transport	6%
Safety	3%
Housing	3%
Multiculturalism	3%
Youth Voice	3%

5.2 Most Important Issues

Of the fourteen Issue categories presented to participants the only categories *never* chosen as **Most Important** were: *Arts & Culture, Sense of Community* and *Physical Environment*. Of the remaining eleven categories, participants prioritised them as follows:

Table 2: Areas of Most Importance as Chosen in Youth Focus Groups (rounded to the nearest whole number)

Areas of most importance:	
Safety	38%
Education	18%
Housing	9%
Sustainability & the Environment	9%
Transport	8%
Sport & Rec	5%
Employment	4%
Wellbeing	4%
Youth Voice	4%
Multiculturalism	2%
Other?	2%

6. Discussion Outcomes

6.1 Least Important - Discussion Outcomes

The three areas identified by focus group participants as being of Least Importance were *Arts and Culture* (36%), *Community: Feeling a part of Knox* (31%) and *Sports & Recreation* (11%).

6.1.1 *Arts & Culture*

Discussion with participants as to why they selected *Arts & Culture* as a low priority identified three common themes:

- **Importance relative to other categories:** Many participants indicated that they thought that *Arts and Culture* were not entirely unimportant, but when compared to life issues such as safety, education, housing, etc. *Arts and Culture* was a lower priority. In the words of one young participant “You can live without a play or a concert, but you can’t live without a house”.
- **Current access/levels:** Many participants indicated they felt there was already enough access to arts and cultural events and the situation did not need improving. When pushed on this issue the majority of young people had only participated in or attended arts/cultural events through their school, with a small handful participating in local arts/cultural events in the broader community of Knox. The main Knox cultural event participants had participated in were local festivals (i.e. Stringybark and/or Knox Festival)
- **Lack of personal value:** A small group of respondents did not see the *Arts or Cultural* events as being of intrinsic value to them or see any benefit to Council directing funding or resources to this area

6.1.2 *Sense of Community*

Reasons why participants chose *Community: Feeling a part of Knox* as a low priority were multi-faceted and varied between focus groups. Nonetheless, common themes emerging from discussions were:

- **Differing concepts of ‘community’:** A large number of respondents rejected the idea of community as a geographic location (i.e. the city of Knox) and referred instead to their personal communities as being online, friendship groups from a range of locations or primarily immediate family and friendship groups. Discussions around the places they spend time in the community of Knox (i.e. sporting clubs, Scouts, youth groups, etc.) were generally rejected by participants as not relevant to a sense of community pertaining to Knox.
- **Difficulties conceptualising the idea of ‘Knox’:** Despite explanations of the geographic boundaries of Knox and services provided by the Council to young people by the facilitator at each session, many young people had difficulties with the idea of ‘Knox’ as a place of community. Many associated the word ‘Knox’ with Council or the main shopping centre (Westfield Knox) and struggled to get past these associations to the more abstract idea of Knox as a community (or place of many communities).
- **Rejection of the term ‘community’:** Some youth participants rejected the idea of ‘community’ out of hand as something ‘out there’ and irrelevant to them, their relationships or the way they spent their time. Some young people associated the idea of community more largely with the ‘public’ and expressed feelings of being disengaged or even hostile towards ‘other people’ who were not in their immediate friendship/family groups. This was especially true for young people in some secondary schools and the alternative education group.

6.1.3 Sport & Recreation

Discussion with participants as to why they selected *Sport & Recreation* as a low priority category identified two themes:

- **Already happy:** The majority of participants were currently, or had previously been engaged in sport and/or recreation activities through school and in the community. These participants felt the facilities in their area were already of a good quality and provided sufficient options for local young people
- **Sport as already overfunded:** Some participants felt there was already too much emphasis on sport in the community (participants spoke specifically about sport rather than other recreation options) and that young people who are not sports-orientated can feel left out or their interests under-represented.

6.2 Most Important - Discussion Outcomes

The two areas identified by participants as Most Important were *Safety* (38%) and *Education* (18%).

6.2.1 Safety

Discussions regarding the overwhelming choice of *Safety* as a high priority identified five common themes:

- **Safety as a category relative to other choices:** For many young people the choice of safety was one made relative to other categories presented to them within the Focus Group. Many young people felt that all the categories presented were important; however the choice of safety as most important seemed an obvious choice as without safety everything else would be negatively affected
- **Happy with the status quo:** Amongst the young people who chose *Safety* as the Most Important issue many reported feeling quite safe when they spent time in Knox, whether at school, home or in the broader community (Public Transport being the exception). These young people recognised that they lived in fairly safe community, but felt maintaining this safety was vital which they articulated during brainstorming.
- **Safety and public transport:** The main area where young people felt safety could be improved was on public transport, particularly in the evening/at night. The increase of Protective Service Officers (PSO's) on trains was seen as a good step; however many felt further steps could be taken, including more PSO's on varied public transport means, and at bus interchanges as well as increased information about safety cameras on all forms of public transport.
- **Lack of Safety from Peers:** A smaller group identified that they felt the biggest threat to their safety was from other young people. These threats expressed themselves in three clear ways: 1) cyber bullying, 2) harassment from peers at school or other young people coming onto school grounds and 3) harassment (mainly verbal) from peers in public places (primarily parks and public transport)
- **Young Women:** All young women in the focus groups reported that they do not travel on public transport or to walk around by themselves in the evening or at night. Young women consistently reported feeling that it is unsafe for them to travel alone at these times and that they do not feel safe when they have to do so
- **Response to perceived local threats/unsafety:** A small group of respondents perceived Knox as being relatively unsafe compared to other areas of Melbourne. When questioned about this perception most accepted they did not have personal experiences but commonly referred to events they had heard about in the media – including events that were several years old (i.e. the disappearance of Siriyakorn Siriboon) as well as more recent incidents (discovery of a body in Upper Ferntree Gully).
- **Response to larger world events:** Some groups of young people referred to world events in brainstorming, mentioning issues such as the armed forces and global terrorism. When questioned about this in regards to Knox all respondents agreed that this was not an issue they felt was of specific, local concern but was nonetheless central to their ideas of safety and security.

6.2.2 Education

Feedback provided to the facilitator about participants' choice of *Education* as one of the most important categories focused on the following:

- **Positive opportunities associated with education:** Participants had a range of experiences with formal education. For the most part these were positive and young people identified a range of aspects they thought were working well including choice of schools and subjects, education in living skills and the additional opportunities schools presented such as interstate trips, school excursions, etc.
- **Inconsistencies between schools and/or teachers:** A large number of young people expressed concern that there were significant inconsistencies between schools and also teachers. Students pointed to the difference in facilities between state and private schools and also differences between state schools which have received upgrades and those which have not. A major complaint by participants was inconsistency between teaching styles/abilities and the effect this has on student performance, choices and general school experience.
- **Life skills and career/job preparation:** Opportunities to participate in excursions, etc. were cited by many young people as positive ways to expand their experiences and develop skills such as communication and self-confidence. Despite this, feedback pointed to a desire to increase activities within schools which provided life skills as well as social and emotional learning (i.e. drug education, improved sexual health education, etc.). Some students also felt schools could do more to provide preparation for the workplace, including more assistance finding work experience that related to their field of interest.
- **Technology and cyber education:** Focus group participants invariably felt the technology at their schools was sub-standard and considered this a significant issue in attaining the best possible education. In addition a number of participants discussed cyber bullying and the role of social media on wellbeing, self-esteem and mental health as a concern amongst themselves and their peers. Participants who expressed these concerns felt more should be done in schools at every level to equip students to better handle these issues.

7. 'Other' category:

Two groups chose the 'other' card when choosing an issue of importance within their focus group. The issues they raised were:

- **More time with older people/respect and care for older people.** This issue was raised by students in the English as an Additional Language (EAL) group at Fairhills Secondary College. Students in this group felt that older people in Australian society were often neglected or could be better cared for by their families and the community
- **Domestic/Family Violence.** This issue was initiated by young people who attended the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (LGBTQI) group at the Youth Information Centre. Young people felt that this was a broader social issue that should be addressed locally and at a young age through education.

8. Recommendations/ideas from young people around issues of Most Importance.

8.1 SAFETY

- More police/PSO/security guard/CCTV presence – especially around public transport hubs (stations, bus interchanges) at night
- Local government/authorities to should find out from young people about the places they feel are regularly unsafe and quickly address situations of public drunkenness or drug use. People using or affected by drugs or alcohol in public make young people feel very unsafe.
- Well-lit areas make young people feel safer – ensure current street lights are working and add extra lighting in suburban streets. A number of groups also suggested setting up lighting on bike tracks as these are often out of the way and can feel unsafe (especially in winter when young people ride home from sports practice after school at dusk)
- Teach young people (and young women particularly) how to be safe through courses in schools. (Some young people discussed self-defence courses, but many thought a generic course on personal safety would be good)
- Make sure there is accurate information being reported in the media and relayed on social media so that young people can learn the facts about how safe their suburb/area is without being alarmed by sensationalised media reports of local or other crimes
- Ensure there is a strong and visible public police and security presence (note: this point was debated during focus groups as young people felt seeing *too many* police would have the opposite effect and make them feel unsafe)
- Clean up areas with a lot of graffiti as this creates a perception that those areas are unsafe

8.2 EDUCATION

Some of the ideas and recommendations young people had about improving education are beyond the immediate reach of local government, but nonetheless valid and interesting, such as:

- Increasing the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) required to study teaching at universities.
- Increasing teacher's salaries – participants felt this would attract more people to the profession, including clever and creative people who might not currently consider teaching if they can make more money in the corporate world

Other ideas focus groups participants had were:

- Increase programs and lessons which teach 'life skills' and social and emotional learning (SEL). Participants recognised that there is already a good level of this in schools but felt there were significant gaps, particularly in the areas of cyber safety, social media and cyber bullying and sex education. Older students felt sex education should broaden to include discussion on relationships, relationship violence and a non hetero-normative approach to sexual attraction, identity and behaviours
- Improve technology and access to the internet so all students have the best possible opportunity to use high quality technology in their study and as preparation for their careers
- Ensure students in different schools do not experience significantly different facilities. Participants felt some schools have up-to-date buildings with specialist wings and excellent recreational facilities whilst others have outdated buildings and few modern facilities
- Reduce the stress students are under by creating more support in difficult times, offering relaxation or meditation activities and generally working with students and using language that reduces rather than increases the sense of pressure
- Maintain or expand alternative education options. Students in alternative education felt that if they had not had access to this there would have been no pathway by which they could remain in school and continue their education
- Create optimum learning conditions in classrooms through positive activities, different styles of teaching (for different styles of learning), appropriate and consistent discipline for disruptive students and allowing students to provide feedback and evaluations about teachers so schools can see which teachers students find the most effective
- Create a teacher mentor program so excellent teachers (as assessed by students) who are engaging and get good results can demonstrate how they teach to other teachers

9. Acknowledgements

The Project Worker would like to thank all members of the community who organised or participated in focus groups for sharing their values, concerns and ideas for the City of Knox. A special thank you is extended to the young people who sacrificed the first day of their school holiday break to attend the Youth Voice Day and contributed their ideas, thoughts and passions with so much honesty, humour and sincerity. Thank you also to Pip Smith from Knox Youth Services who worked both tirelessly and enthusiastically to make the Youth Voice Day happen!

10. Appendix A: Details of Youth Focus Groups conducted for the Knox City (and Council) Plan Update

Group	Date	Length of Group	No. Participants
Rowville Secondary College Year 9 Class	23/8/16	50 minutes	14
Knox Youth Services LGBTIQ Group	29/8/16	100 minutes	9
Karoo Primary School Grade 6 Class	5/9/16	60 minutes	27
Young Leaders	6/9/16	60 minutes	39
Bayswater Secondary College Year 9/10 Class	12/9/16	60 minutes	13
Bayswater Secondary College Year 8 Class	12/9/16	60 minutes	10
Fairhills Secondary College English as an Additional Language (EAL)	13/9/16	60 minutes	11
St. Andrew's Christian College	14/9/16	60 minutes	19
Mountain District Learning Centre	15/9/16	75 minutes	27
Rowville 1 st Scout Group	15/9/16	90 minutes	20
Wantirna College Koori Group	16/9/16	60 minutes	3
Interchange Saturday Youth Group	17/9/16	45 minutes	7
Youth Voice Day	19/9/16	60 minutes	19