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To whom it may concern

Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements – NTG-HB3-604

Thank you for providing the opportunity to provide more information to the Royal Commission about the Eurobodalla Youth in Recovery forum.

In late January, when our community was still struggling with the bush fires it became increasingly evident that there was going to be a need for youth service providers and young people to be provided with an opportunity to talk about how the fires had impacted both the service sector and young people themselves. The evidence that demonstrated the need were from our lived experiences, discussions with other people in the community, observing the trauma at the evacuation centres, feedback from people working in the recovery centres. We also had parents contacting council looking for support to assist with the development of activities for young people in the shire. One event that got off the ground which captures the mood of our youth at the time, was an all ages music event titled – ‘Worst Holiday Ever!’.

The fire event for our shire was unprecedented and it was evident that our community would be under pressure and indeed traumatised. We hoped that by hosting a forum, initially just for youth service providers, we would be able to ascertain the initial impact to services on types of presentations and staffing impact given the workers homes, families and communities were affected as well. We would then be in a better position to then address the needs of the community and start to develop a cohesive community plan that would determine what outreach recovery services were available and target them to areas of identified need. We ended up holding three separate forums.

Eurobodalla Shire Council community development services had a history of running and hosting community forums. Some of these include ‘The Obesity Time Bomb’ which led to a council motion which banned the sale of sugar sweetened carbonated drinks at council owned facilities; ‘Youthforia’ and youth committee meetings to develop youth policies and a ‘Bullying, no way’ world-café style interactive workshops.

Eurobodalla Shire Council youth services team were responsible for organising and facilitating the forum. We sent out forum invitations through our networks, did press releases and had radio interviews to let the community what was going on. We already had the Workers with Youth Network established which had over 120 people on the mailing list. We had a meeting planned for later in the term but we bought it forward and used the network to spread the invitation through word of mouth.

Our communication methods were successful, and we attracted services from the following industries -

- Aboriginal services - National Indigenous Australian Agency, The Family Place, Karralika.
- Health services - Coordinare South East NSW, One Door Mental Health, Headspace, Local Health District Children and Adult Mental Health Services.
- Education and training - Moruya High School, TAFE, SRBEC - Links to Learning, South Coast Colleges, NSW Department of Education, Batemans Bay High School, Carroll College.
- Employment - Campbell Page, Mission Australia Transition to Work, ESC youth employment project.
- Council - Bega Valley Shire Council, Eurobodalla Shire Council recreation and youth services
- Police - PCYC Far South Coast, Far south coast area command.
- Disability services - Muddy Puddles
- Housing – Wellways
- State services - Save the Children

Every high school in the Eurobodalla sent representatives from their school to the youth forum with a total of 55 young people attending.

The forum was funded entirely from Eurobodalla Shire Councils youth services budget.

There were a total of three forums presented – the first was for youth service agencies, this was held on 13 February. A youth specific forum was held on 27 February 2020 as the sector was adamant that any solutions going forward needed to include the input of young people but also ensure co-design principles were at the heart of actions going forward. The third forum on 12 March 2020 was reporting back to the youth services sector, with an invitation to young people as well, to combine priorities sourced from the previous two workshops, with a view to starting an action plan. It is agreed by all that we will need to present further workshops to fully develop all identified priorities. All participants enjoyed the style of workshop and agree to further participation if it stays at a 2 hour timeslot in a venue with the similar central location, amenities for space, refreshments and parking.

To assist the development of the first Youth in Recovery Forum we engaged David Newell, who was working in our area with the Office of Emergency Management. Together we developed a framework for the meetings using the art of hosting methodology. This method is an interactive approach with a participatory ‘world-café’ meeting style. To begin with, we defined the vision and purpose of the gathering. This formed the foundation and then a meeting flow was created. The flow style enables the meeting to be a lot more flexible and responsive to items raised rather than using a formal agenda.

During the first forum David Newell modelled the art of hosting philosophy and demonstrated processes used to engage participants. The style involves getting all to participate in the wider group as well as small group discussions and reporting on specific questions given. Each group reports back on the top priorities and then the group discusses and prioritises all the feedback gained on the day. The data gleaned on the day is our ‘harvest’. The challenge going forward is to then respect the harvest as the foundation for planning.

Our youth services team then ran the following two forums implementing the participatory engagement forum style.

The information obtained from the forums clearly established where services should be prioritising activities for young people. The top 3 activities identified were:

1. To organise music or community events to help raise funds
2. To allow schools to connect and improve support for schools / students
3. To provide opportunities for young people to volunteer and assist in community rebuild.

Other areas were identified by young people to help communities recover were support for mental health (58% of comments related to this), support for schools (45%), more community and youth events (44%), providing opportunities to have a voice and contribute (41%) and being better prepared for future disasters (21%). This last point was further reiterated at a recent youth committee meeting where young people expressed that they would like to feel comfortable and confident to know that the bushfires will not be a threat in the future because communities are developing policies and strategies to make sure it does not happen again.

During the final forum, youth services and young people came together and identified four projects –

1. Organise youth driven community fundraising events
2. Ensure all young people have access to services and investment regardless of location or study/employment status
3. Help young people volunteer
4. Find out the most effective way to approach and engage young people

Since the forums, four working groups have been established but progress has been limited due to Covid-19 restrictions. The youth volunteering group has implemented a survey to identify youth volunteering desires and are in the process of developing a youth volunteer directory. They plan to run a volunteer expo at all schools when Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. The other groups are meeting with young people to follow through on progressing projects.

Feedback from youth participants who attended the forums has been positive. The immediate before and after participation responses demonstrate the benefits of the forum with 21 people expressing 'positive' responses and 18 expressing 'negative' responses at the start compared to 32 'positive' responses at the end of the forum. A recent survey shows 100% of those surveyed enjoyed the forum, and most responses mentioned that being given an opportunity to be heard and share experiences was highly valued.

A youth service providers survey conducted post forum identified the following outcomes – 86% services are more aware of what other services are doing, 43% made new connections with young people, 72% made new connections with other youth services, 43% felt like they were being listened to, 29% had started working on a project identified at the forum, 29% felt like youth services were working more collaboratively after the forum, 29% felt they were given the opportunity to share their experiences, 29% have tailored their service to incorporate the information provided by young people at the forum.

The forums also provided an opportunity to uncover talented youth leaders and created opportunities to further build their skills and leadership potential by referring to other agencies who request assistance with finding suitable young people to participate on reference groups such as Headspace. We have also developed our youth service network and have increased our contact data base for sharing information and opportunities for youth and youth services.

The youth survey indicates that 89% of responders feel more empowered to do more for their communities and 44% have been actively involved in their community post forum. Activities mentioned include providing Council with more information about desires for youth and helping neighbours and family with rebuilding and recovery projects.

Since the forums David Newell is developing a training program to help others with learning his hosting model and there are plans to run some 'Art of Hosting' training once Covid-19 restrictions are lifted via Council.

There will be further opportunities to use participant data to obtain consent from all participants to sign them up to our 'What's Buzzn' youth newsletter. This is a quarterly newsletter compiled by council which identifies activities, education and training opportunities for young people. Our mailing list for this newsletter is comparatively small to other newsletters and the forum provided the perfect opportunity to boost readership and help spread the information of activities and services available for young people in our area.

We have shared the forums and its outcomes priority areas with our colleagues and peers in many ways. It can be downloaded from our council website, it was discussed at the NSW South East Council Community Development Coordinators meeting, further expanded upon at the workers with youth network and youth committee meetings and shared when requested through direct phone calls and enquiries from neighbouring councils and interested community members. The data has also been shared with all participants and organisations at the forums which have also been used for the purposes of seeking grant funds to address our local youth issues.

Research and feedback from other natural disasters acknowledges that the recovery will be a long and challenging one. Eurobodalla Shire Council intends to use the youth in recovery forums as the foundation for the development of Councils youth strategy for the next four years. It is full of potential projects, priorities and strong voices from young people and services in the youth sector who are committed to working together to rebuild our community.

Should you require further information, please contact Council's Coordinator Community Development and Youth, Zoe Morgan on 4474 7470 or zoe.morgan@esc.nsw.gov.au

Yours sincerely

Zoe Morgan
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