



Mountains Community Resource Network

Strategic Plan

2020-2023

Vision Statement

MCRN's Vision is a socially just, empowered, inclusive, connected and resilient community in the Blue Mountains.

Our Role

MCRN will lead and support a sustainable community sector in the Blue Mountains. We will do this by: sector and community capacity-building; bringing organisations together; and by resourcing, representing and advocating on behalf of the community and the sector at all levels.



MCRN is the local peak body for the community sector in the Blue Mountains.

At MCRN, community and connection is key to everything we do: we live and work in the Mountains; and we firmly believe in the capacity and strength of our residents.

Ensuring that our community is an integral part of the conversation is central to retaining the unique character of the Blue Mountains; and to the sustainability, social capital and economic future of our community.

MCRN is a voice for our community, and for all those in the sector who are working with the challenges facing our residents; advocating for equity and social justice; and building social cohesion, capacity and inclusiveness.

Blue Mountains residents are telling us clearly that they highly value living in our unique settlements (27 villages and towns) along the 100km 'ribbon development' that is the Blue Mountains LGA. They value safety; they want a sense of belonging and are keen to connect with their neighbours; and they are concerned about the vulnerable in our community and building the best possible future for our children and young people. They value the amenity of living within a World Heritage National Park, and are keen to interact more with the natural environment.

Our community want us, the community services sector, to do the best we can to ensure these aspirations are met. They view the community sector as locally-based and - managed organisations they can trust to put the community's interests first.

Our community also appreciates that the Mountains' environment poses risks of natural hazards (damaging winds, snow, hail and fire). The Blue Mountains is the most bushfire-prone populated part of the planet; the best climate science predications are that extreme weather events will only become more frequent and more severe in coming years, as a consequence of climate change. Our community looks to the community services sector to lead the way in helping them build awareness and the capacity to be more prepared for such events, to help in their recovery following such an emergency, and to build resilience to bounce-back after an emergency or other life challenge.

Blue Mountains Community Issues

[NOTE: This section will be updated from the work Marco is currently undertaking on the Issues Fact Sheets. See p13 for proposed changes to actual Strategic Plan]

An ageing population

The Mountains has an ageing population - between 2011-2036, the increase in the local population over **70+ will be 30% greater** than the NSW State average. This means the Blue Mountains population will age, and not grow (by natural means). The number of working aged adults will decrease, the number of children and young people will decrease, and the aged population will steadily increase. By 2020, 1 in every 5 residents of the Blue Mountains will be over 65.

The ageing of the population continues to place increased pressure on health, housing (nursing homes, retirement villages etc.) and community services and facilities. Ensuring the Blue Mountains have a balance of people of different age groups is important, in terms of retaining age-based facilities (e.g. pre-schools,) and having a healthy diverse community where different age groups can enrich and support each other. In general terms, people age and live until they die in their communities, in their homes. This means that infrastructure, services and planning need to be adjusted to reflect and support the local demographic of older residents to support them to age with resilience, remain connected within their community and maintain an acceptable quality of life.

There is a significant volunteer workforce supporting service delivery to those in need e.g. BMFS's Meals on Wheels. This volunteer workforce itself is ageing, and many volunteers are likely to move from being service providers to service recipients in 10-15 years.

The potential for increased social isolation for our older population as they age is real across our ribbon geography; we need to review how we live in communities, and how housing options are developed into the future to accommodate our ageing populations, living longer and living locally.

The goals of the community sector are to:

- Engage in strategic community conversation around the possibilities for a vibrant older Blue Mountains; consulting widely with the target group around their specific and perceived needs and issues.
- Develop a resilient and inclusive community environment for the older residents of the Blue Mountains, now and into the future.
- Target priority areas for planning and development, ensuring that they are in step with the emerging older demographic for this region e.g. local access to services, improved and sensitive transport options, affordable housing, health.
- Ensure input from the BM Community Sector regarding planning and development; and identify innovative options for service delivery across and within services and the service sector.
- Work with key stakeholders across all levels of Government to ensure that the needs of this vulnerable population are accounted for when services are planned, implemented, or restructured; and that local funding priorities are adjusted to reflect the growing need.
- Build capacity within the broader Blue Mountains Community, by engaging key stakeholders to assist in reorientating services and funding distribution.

Children and Young People and their Families

- 25% (2011 Census) of the BM population are children and young people (aged 0-19 years) (from a population of 76,530);
- 32% of all households are couples with dependents (20,386 families);
- 10% of all households are one-parent families (3,000 households);
- The average BM household size is 2.47 persons; average number of children per family is 1.9.

Neurobiological evidence shows that most brain development occurs during pregnancy and in the first three years of life and that children's brain development is driven more by experience than biology. Children's most formative experiences are their relationships with significant others. Therefore, the earlier families are offered support, and the more this support meets all the child's and family's needs, the more effective the outcomes for the child. (*Child & Family Plan*: <http://www.strongerfamilies.co/child-and-family-plan.html>).

Major brain development also occurs in adolescence, and older children and young people also need support, particularly when there are vulnerabilities that impact on children such as domestic violence, mental health issues, or bullying.

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is used in schools (kindergarten) nationally to assess children's development. While it is still too early to be definitive, we are heartened by the reduction in vulnerabilities from 2009 to 2012 surveys: the 2009 AEDI indicated that 14% of BM kindergarten children were vulnerable in one developmental area (11.5% in 2012) and 5.3% were vulnerable in two or more developmental areas (4.3% in 2012). The different development areas include physical, emotional, social, cognitive and language. To be rated 'vulnerable', children need to score in the bottom 10% of the AEDI test compared to other children.

The goals of the community sector are:

- Happy, healthy children, young people and families who are the centre of our communities. A community which focusses on the wellbeing of its children and young people from their earliest days will be a happy and healthy community. However, many families face significant vulnerabilities and challenges, and it is critical to intervene as early as possible (in the life of the child, or the life of the child) to prevent damaged wellbeing.
- The Blue Mountains' 'ribbon development' means that it is challenging to provide all families with the services they need locally. There are many small non-government community services providing effective support to families in the Mountains. However, in the changing competitive funding environment, larger charities are often being awarded government funding - which threatens the sustainability of small BM NGOs which provide these place-based services. Some of the larger agencies being awarded tenders do not have established relationships and networks 'on the ground', or the engagement with the local community. They are often funded to provide broader regional services, with BM families and children often missing out on the quality programs they should be receiving.
- Services are also working with children and families with more complex needs than previously seen, or than they have been funded to support.
- Many partnerships have been formed over time to address this gap in resourcing, so services can try and address community needs. This is possible because these services have worked together for many years and have detailed local knowledge and have developed mutual respect - for example, the outstanding model of the Stronger Families Alliance collective impact initiative (which operates on the principle that 'It takes a village to raise a child').

Disability

Blue Mountains City's disability statistics relate directly to need for assistance (Disability Support Pension) due to a severe or profound disability - this data helps in understanding the prevalence of people who need significant support in the community. 4.5% of the population of the Blue Mountains reported (2011 Census) needing assistance with core daily activities, compared with 4.4% for Greater Sydney. Elizabeth Evatt Legal Centre reports that 25% of their advices are given to people who identify as having a disability.

According to a PwC report into disability in Australia released in 2011, Australians with a disability are some of the most disadvantaged people in our community, with 45% of those with a disability living in or near a state of poverty - this is more than 2.5 times the rate of poverty experienced in the general population.

The 2012 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers estimated that 4.2 million Australians, or 18.5% of the population, had a disability. The survey also found that 2.7 million Australians provided informal care to an older person or person with a disability, with 29% identifying themselves as the primary carer.

Every week, five Australians sustain a spinal cord injury; every 7 hours, a child is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder; and every 15 hours, a child is born with cerebral palsy.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is a Commonwealth scheme, being rolled out across Australia, to give people living with disability access to the support they need. The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) is the agency responsible for coordinating the NDIS, registering service providers, conducting planning meetings for clients and implementing the scheme on a national scale. Under the NDIS clients are able to choose the providers they want to work with. This is different to the way many programs have been funded previously - block funding allocated to agencies will be replaced by client-managed individualised packages/services.

The goals of the community sector are:

- Implement a new community model to better connect people with a disability and their families and carers to opportunities to participate in their local community.
- Provide people with a disability and their carers with person-centred services and professional development and individualised funding and service agreements.
- Support people with a disability and their carers to transition to the NDIS by contributing to sector capacity building, promoting community education and engagement about the NDIS, and ensuring all people with a disability have equal access to support and information to inform their choices.
- Provide support for adolescents with a disability and their families through a range of targeted services and opportunities to improve social engagement and inclusion.
- Support transitioning of people with a disability from school to further education and /or employment and ongoing disability awareness for schools, education institutions and employers.
- Promotion of accessible public transport infrastructure and amenities for people with a disability, their carers and families - given the topography of the Mountains' settlements.
- Given the significant differences in socio-economic and health status between the Upper and Lower Mountains, ensure services and activities for people with a disability and their families are accessible across the Mountains.
- Ensure activities are affordable given we know that people with a disability are more likely to have a low income/live below the poverty line.
- As the sector changes, ensure we meet the needs of people with a disability who will not qualify for services under the NDIS.

Environmental Sustainability

Australia is the second highest producer of waste per person in the world (approx. 650 kilograms per person); this is second only to the USA, (approx. 715 kilograms per person) ([www.transpacific.com.au/asset/cms/Documents/Australian Waste - The Facts.pdf](http://www.transpacific.com.au/asset/cms/Documents/Australian_Waste_-_The_Facts.pdf)).

The price we pay for electricity and gas has increased by 120% in the last decade, and 26% recent years

- the Energy and Water Ombudsman NSW (EWON) reported a 23% increase in complaints from March to September 2012; and high electricity bills continue to dominate customer complaints;
- increasing energy prices are regressive and impact disproportionately on people in receipt of fixed and low incomes and vulnerable population groups, who may forgo a significant and rising amount of their incomes on energy;
- as a consequence, many households in NSW are struggling to pay high electricity bills.

Lack of suitable and affordable public transport can be a significant barrier to participation - the impact of a lack of transport services on disadvantaged groups, that is transport disadvantage - is highly concentrated in Western Sydney - almost 2 out of 3 (58.2%) of the people living in transport disadvantaged areas were located in Western Sydney (some 700,000 people).

BM residents, particularly in the Lower Mountains, are also concerned about the potential environmental effects of the second Sydney airport at Badgery's Creek. There are significant potential benefits (eg transport infrastructure, more job opportunities and increased apprenticeships/traineeships, increased housing affordability) if the airport and associated business precinct is undertaken with a plan for the strategic development of Greater Western Sydney in mind. However, there are concerns that governments will not be

willing to undertake the significant investment in GWS that this would require; and strong concerns around potential environmental impacts (eg noise pollution from the current projected flight-paths - especially in the Lower Mountains); and potential environmental pollutants (eg jet fuel) in our World Heritage National Park.

In October 2013, the Blue Mountains witnessed the devastating fall-out from three major fires burning in the region; overall, 196 homes were destroyed and 185 damaged. The ramifications of that emergency continue to this day. Respected scientific bodies (nationally and internationally) predict the incidence and severity of extreme weather events (and hence, family tragedy and displacement) will rise in the coming decades. We look to government for policies which will mitigate climate change effects and help families and communities adapt; as well as the enactment, for any future emergencies, of the very effective Recovery process initiated by Ministry of Police & Emergency Services (MPES) in the wake of the 2013 disaster.

The goals of the community sector are:

- Environmental sustainability is made a state and local priority: including effective waste, land, invasive pest, biodiversity, and water management.
- Safe, affordable, nutritious food for everyone; and a Kitchen Garden in every home/school/community for those who wish to be involved in growing their own food.
- Reliable, regular, safe and affordable public transport; and genuine incentives to ride/walk/share/take public transport.
- Rejection of Coal Seam Gas mining in the BM National Park, or adjacent to sensitive ecosystems or water catchments.
- Utilising energy policy to actively encourage renewable, non-polluting energy production, including equity in treatment of the clean energy supplement (in NSW the clean energy supplement is being regarded as assessable income for the purpose of determining social housing rents, despite Centrelink written notification that it is “a tax-free payment and does not count as income for social security or family assistance purposes”).
- Energy markets which are affordable; with consumer protections and improved consumer information about the energy market & sustainable energy options.
- A climate change policy where the polluters pay for reducing carbon pollution.

Financial Stress

Financial stress is defined as the difficulty that an individual or household may have in meeting basic financial commitments due to a shortage of money.

Financial stress can impact on anyone – there is no formula to determine who may need to access practical support from a community organisation. Unexpected events - a large bill, family & domestic violence, or a major natural disaster - can trigger financial stress.

Families in ongoing financial stress often live from week to week with no chance of saving for a large bill or emergencies. The cost of living is an issue of growing public concern (eg electricity prices), but it is people on low incomes who have been hardest hit by recent price increases. Targeted assistance is needed to ensure people on low incomes can continue to make ends meet - individuals, couples & families from all age groups may need to seek support from services for a range of services such as financial emergency relief, food, clothing, furniture, energy vouchers, firewood and hot meals. *One symptom used by some services and agencies when determining financial stress is when a household is unable to raise a moderate sum of money to deal with an emergency of the kind created to pay an unexpected bill.*

SEIFA - the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage - shows that Katoomba Township is the most disadvantaged Area (934.3) sitting below the standardised mean score of 1000 with the highest proportion of low income households in Blue Mountains City (low income households refer to those receiving less than \$600 per week before tax) (2011 Census). The City of Blue Mountains in general is more advantaged than WESROC's area (998.8), & NSW (1015.36). Our socio-economic pattern is that Areas are progressively worse off - on a range of indicators - on a continuum from Lower to Upper Mountains. However, there are significant numbers of 'hidden' households in every Blue Mountains settlement struggling to make it through each week.

The goals of the community sector are:

- Provision of a coordinated response of services delivering practical support to those vulnerable in our community, thus reducing the necessity for people to repeat their stories, or experience inappropriate referral to other services.
- Provision of nutritious food options or community meals to individuals and families unable to access food (either food parcels or a warm meal).
- Partnerships with businesses and other organisations to educate & collaborate on responses to financial stresses, thus encouraging a caring and proactive community.
- Educating & informing the community to promote effective referral pathways to service programs supporting those experiencing financial disadvantage.
- Advocating, and influencing funding opportunities for support services - thus ensuring sustainability of local services rather than larger charity organisations which don't have Blue Mountains knowledge and networks already established.
- Provision of an overall community response to financially stressed families by providing, where possible, financial or other assistance. This would in turn reduce immediate financial pressures, so support for families around parenting and other issues is then undertaken (aimed at reducing children's vulnerabilities).

Housing Affordability & Housing Stress

There is a national crisis in housing and homelessness – it remains the area of highest need in our community, and the Blue Mountains LGA is no exception. Australia in 2013 (*Demographia International Housing Affordability*) had the worst housing affordability of any national market outside of Hong Kong. In 2011, the survey revealed that Australia had no affordable markets, with Sydney classified as 'severely unaffordable' (median price x 9.2 median income). The August 2012 ACOSS national report identified that 81% of community services reported that they simply cannot meet housing demand, and are forced to turn people away.

Housing NSW estimate of homeless households by LGA indicate that the Blue Mountains LGA had the third highest number of homeless households in the Greater Western Sydney region (after Parramatta & Blacktown). However, this figure does not include those without regular income living in caravan parks, nor those living in shared dwellings ('couch surfers'). This situation was exacerbated by the lack of affordable housing following the 2013 bushfires.

Blue Mountains (2011 Census) had a high rate of home ownership compared to NSW as a whole: 37.4% were owned outright, 40.6% were owned with a mortgage, 19.2% were rented. However, of those paying off a mortgage, more than 10% were paying more than 30% of their income on their mortgage (i.e. in mortgage stress). Also, of those renting, the median rent was \$280 per week but nearly 9% of renters were paying more than 30% of their income in rent (rental stress).

The link between housing stress and social disadvantage has been well documented - a lack of suitable, affordable and quality housing determines the level of housing stress and social disadvantage.

Elizabeth Evatt Legal Centre reports that 10% of advices are given to people who identify as being homeless or risk of homelessness; but 50% of casework relates to tenancy (i.e. they are unable to act on their own behalf to resolve issues with their landlord).

The 2013 NSW Auditor-General's report *Making the Best Use of Public Housing* estimates that "all social housing only meets 44% of need in NSW".

Nationally, 3/4 of all adults experiencing chronic homelessness were homeless as children or young people – and the younger the homeless person is, the more likely they are to face chronic homelessness as an adult. Domestic and family violence (DFV) is one of the typical pathways into homelessness (primarily for women and children - 48%).

Recent research has demonstrated that 97% of chronic homeless have undiagnosed and untreated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The goals of the community sector are to:

- Improve access to housing and support for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, by:
- Intervene earlier to help prevent homelessness where possible.
- Ensure adequate financial support & assistance for people experiencing housing stress/instability.
- Improve housing affordability through increasing housing supply (especially social and affordable housing; and supply to specialist housing & homeless services)¹:
 - provide incentives for private sector and institutional investment in affordable housing; and
 - link the proposed Blue Mountains projects to increase housing affordability under the responsibility of one housing officer (working independently of government and business). The Housing Officer's role would be to:
 - carry out an audit of potential/underused housing and blockages to its development;
 - explore the development of studio accommodation in appropriate sites for single accommodation;
 - facilitate shared housing (eg develop pilots of localized databases, perhaps with Neighbourhood Centres as the hubs?; to allow those with accommodation and those seeking it to safely connect);
 - work with local real estate agents to free up underutilized housing; (eg develop a Holiday Let Landlords Register);
 - support a collaborative approach - between real estate agents, the community sector, and Specialist Housing & Homelessness Services - to homelessness prevention and early intervention.

Inclusive Blue Mountains

59,234 BM residents were born in Australia (2011 Census); 12,570 people who were living in Blue Mountains City in 2011 were born overseas, and 7% arrived in Australia within 5 years prior to 2011

8.4% of our residents have come from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) population; and 3,863 (5%) of residents speak languages other than English at home (compared to 20 % nationally).

51.3% of people in the Blue Mountains were in a registered marriage, and 9.5% were in a de facto marriage (the 2011 Census for the first time identified numbers of same-sex couples (33,714 nationally).

In 2011, the age group with the highest net migration to Blue Mountains City was persons aged 35 to 44 years.

In 2011 in the Blue Mountains:

- 9,220 families identified as 'blended' families
- 45.2% were couple families with children (compared with 44.6% nationally)
- 38.3% were couple families without children (37.8% nationally); and
- 15.6% were one parent families (15.9% nationally); with a slightly higher proportion of single female families (83.6%; 82.4% nationally).

The goals of the community sector are to:

- Coordinate and communicate a welcoming and inclusive community that recognises the diversity of the Blue Mountains community.
- Recognising sexual orientation and gender identity as one of many cultural characteristics (along with age, disability, gender, language and ethnicity, etc.), to provide an inclusive environment where GLBTI people feel physically, spiritually and emotionally safe.
- Gain recurrent funding to support the CALD community specifically for the Blue Mountains (not regional – ie the Nepean generally).
- Foster community ownership of, and pride in, the diversity we enjoy in the Blue Mountains.
- Create a forum, and opportunities to engage the community, around specific groups and challenges they experience.
- Include government agencies, community organisations, commercial enterprise to encourage innovation, partnerships and sharing of knowledge and experiences.

¹ *Defaulting on the Australian Dream – Towards a Housing Strategy for the Blue Mountains:*
http://www.mcrn.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=124&Itemid=76

Indigenous Communities

There is still a higher level of disadvantage experienced by the Aboriginal and Islander communities than the non-Aboriginal community. On average, Indigenous people have: lower incomes, higher unemployment, greater housing disadvantage and poorer health and social outcomes. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up 19% of housing & homelessness services. In the Blue Mountains – as right across the country – our indigenous peoples suffer extreme disadvantage, and ‘Closing the Gap’ initiatives are an absolute priority.

The Blue Mountains Aboriginal Community has a strong diversity, being made up of Darug and Gundungurra peoples as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from many language/community groups all over Australia.

In 2011, Katoomba Township had the highest proportion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander population in the City (2.9%).

At the 2011 ABS Census, 1,317 BM residents identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander: (1,277; 24); or 1.7% of the total population of the Blue Mountains (1.3% in Greater Sydney). Of these, there were 660 males (50.0%) and 659 females (50.0%). The median age was 21 years.

The BM Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population profile is extremely youthful. The percentage of ATSI aged 65 years+ is small, sadly reflecting the short life expectancy of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people:

Age Group	ATSI %	Non-ATSI %
0-4	11.1	6.1
5-14	22.4	13.1
15-24	21.1	11.3
25-44	21.7	23.0
45-64	19.5	30.7
65+	4.3	15.8

The goals of the community sector are to:

- Challenge the stereotypes about indigenous people which often lead to discrimination and racial actions that impair relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.
- Address the needs of indigenous people, most particularly:
 - improved health (particularly a reduction in chronic illnesses amongst our indigenous peoples);
 - increased access to economic opportunities;
 - local indigenous culture and heritage more visible, celebrated and preserved.
- Engage disadvantaged, vulnerable and minority sections of the community in planning of the City – including our indigenous communities – to ensure decisions meet future needs.
- Develop respectful relationships with Traditional Owners; and develop good relationships with Aboriginal services and organisations.
- Engage in Reconciliation projects.
- Ensure mainstream services are accessible and culturally appropriate to indigenous people.
- Assist indigenous communities and organisations advocate to Government at all levels to address issues concerning their communities.

Transport

The Blue Mountains faces key challenges because of its location and unique geography.

Transport presents difficulties for residents of the 27 settlements of the Blue Mountains when it comes to accessing health services, education and employment. Physically isolated residents and young people are two of the groups that are at risk of experiencing the most transport disadvantage in the region. With rising petrol costs and concerns about climate change, a transport system that is safe, accessible, affordable and environmentally sustainable is an important priority.

Residents’ dependence on personal motor vehicles is evident when examining 2011 census data. The number of Blue Mountains households without vehicles was only 8.1%. Households which owned one vehicle: 38.8%;

households with two or more vehicles: 36%; and three or more vehicles: 14.8%. These figures reflect a higher level of car ownership, and fewer households without a car, when compared with the NSW state average (*ABS 2011 Census Data*). The preferred mode of transport is primarily car-based (134,000 being drivers; 51,000 being passengers). Walking for transport (54,000) was the third most utilised transport mode.

The Great Western Highway upgrade is now almost complete (apart from the section west of Mt Victoria) and is a major transport corridor to the Central West and beyond for usage by freight-bearing trucks, residents and tourists. Residents remained concerned about the safety of these heavy vehicle movements over the Blue Mountains. The Mountains is a World Heritage area and thus protection of the natural environment is a key.

The goals of the community sector are to:

- Provide information about local transport options.
- Increasing sustainable transport options for Blue Mountains residents, including development of physical infrastructure. The quality of rail services to and from the Blue Mountains, for example, has implications not only for those commuting for employment or professional development purposes, but also has economic implications for tourism to the region.
- Given the recent announcement that Badgery's Creek is to be developed as Sydney's second airport, we look to the new airport and its related infrastructure to be established as part of a broader strategic plan for Greater Western Sydney (GWS) – including:
 - rationalising and upgrading public and road transport infrastructure linking the airport, the CBD and GWS; as well as GWS town 'hubs' via link-roads and rail;
 - opportunities for long-term job creation as part of a comprehensive economic strategy and employment plan;
 - increasing housing affordability for GWS;
 - environmental sustainability best practice.
- Making local transport options accessible, convenient, safe and affordable for all residents, including:
 - ensuring local transport options for residents who are 'transport disadvantaged' or physically isolated, young people, people with physical and social health issues, or those without access to a car; and
 - transport options for people who fall 'between the gaps' of current community transport services, such as GREAT Community Transport (i.e. social transport).

Mental Health & Wellbeing

Nearly half (45%) of the population nationally will experience a mental health issue at some stage in their lives.

Poor mental health sees no barriers; it occurs across all nationalities, genders and socio-economic backgrounds; but the incidence of issues is increased with social factors such as unemployment, homelessness, poverty, physical disability and incarceration. There is also a 4-5 times higher rate in Indigenous populations.

One in five Australians experience mental health issues in any given year (with the highest percentage being experienced in the 16-24 age group); and of those, one in four experience more than one condition: 22% of women and 17% of men reported having a mental health issue in the previous 12 months (2007 National Survey of Mental Health & Wellbeing). People with severe mental health issues, on average, live for 25 years less than other Australians because they have increased likelihood of heart-related conditions, diabetes and obesity. The National Mental Health Report Card notes that physical & mental health are woven intricately together", and should be treated holistically.

Due to the lower housing costs in the Mountains, many people with mental health issues make the move here – often to the Upper Mountains, as it is generally cheaper. However, the lack of employment opportunities, high transport costs, and isolation from services, can exacerbate the situation for many.

Mental health issues can describe a diverse range of behavioural and psychological conditions – the most common being anxiety, mood, and substance use disorders - 1 in 10 people with mental health issues have co-existing substance abuse problems (2013 National Report Card on Mental Health & Suicide Prevention); Dianella Cottage is the only service in the Mountains specialising in this field (currently only for women).

Sadly, suicide accounts for one in four deaths amongst young people.

Personality disorders affect 5-13% of the adult population, and an estimated 40-50% of psychiatric patients.

Isolation and trauma are at the core of most mental health issues. Dealing with trauma (eg violence or abuse) can lead to a range of related issues such as:

- Addictions (including substance abuse and gambling);
- Workplace issues (including bullying or being bullied);
- Housing stress/homelessness
- 97% of those who are chronically homeless suffer from undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder;
- for 48% of those entering homelessness the cause is family & domestic violence).
- Financial Stress (holding down a regular job can be difficult).

The goals of the community sector are to:

- Decrease stigma surrounding mental health by educating individuals & the community at large - by advocacy, raising public awareness, and by building bridges and networks within the treatment and support systems.
- Support investment in healthy individuals, families and communities to increase resilience; eg by promoting access to support and assistance early before serious issues develop.
- Advocate for, and support a Blue Mountains trial of, the Open Dialogue approach to serious mental health issues.
- Promote wellbeing and resilience by, for example:
 - encouraging and providing opportunities for physical exercise
 - decreasing social isolation,
 - encouraging a sense of belonging, and
 - reconnecting individuals with community (such as via social support groups).
 - promoting ways in which people can look after themselves.
- Help individuals to gain insight into achieving and maintaining healthy relationships, and living fulfilling and meaningful lives.
- Reduce self-harm and suicide
- Support individuals via timely local responses.

Youth

“Youth” refers to young people aged between 12 and 24 years of age. In the Mountains we have high numbers of school aged young people, and low numbers of over 18s:

- 9% of BM population are 12 - 17 year olds (higher than the Sydney average of 7.9%);
- 7.9% of BM population are 18 - 24 year olds (Sydney average 9.9%).

This is largely due to there being very few higher education or employment options for school leavers.

Young people in Australia are faced with the prospect of taking on three times more debt than their parents to buy their first home. Nationally, 30% of young people in the labour force are unemployed or underemployed. Faulconbridge had the highest proportion of youth unemployment in Blue Mountains City (20%), followed closely by Katoomba at (19.1%). (2011 Census).

Adolescence is recognised as a unique period of life. When we talk about, or make decisions that affect, young people it is important to recognise that we are talking about a distinct group of people in our community. They are not children and they are not adults. Measures of most abilities indicate adolescence is the healthiest and most resilient period of lifespan, and yet overall morbidity and mortality rates increase 200-300% from childhood to late adolescence. Primary causes of death/disability are related to problems with control of behaviour and emotion.

Psychological stress: 16.2% young people in Blue mountains aged 16-24 have high to very high levels of psychological distress – higher than the NSW average (especially for young men, where it is considerably higher than the rest of NSW).

Across the BM population:

- alcohol is consumed at risk and high risk levels equal to NSW averages - however 66% of young men aged 16-24 years consume alcohol at risky levels, and 51% at high risk levels, which are significantly higher than NSW averages and of considerable concern (NSW Population Health Profile 2009)
- possession and/or use of cannabis had a 20% increase over the 2005-2009 period (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics & Research 2005–2009).

The vast majority of young people in the Mountains will successfully negotiate adolescence to become positive members of society, thanks to supportive families and communities. Unfortunately a small, but sometimes highly visible, percentage of young people will face a great number of barriers to becoming healthy & happy adults. *Young people today are not getting worse.*

During adolescence there is a mismatch in brain development - the part of the brain that regulates and controls behaviour and emotion remains underdeveloped until the mid-20's. Typically young people have difficulty understanding the future consequences of their actions, have poor risk perception, and are highly susceptible to peer pressure. The good news is that by about age 25 all this changes.

Shakespeare: *"I would that there were no age between ten and twenty three are heated by nature as drunken men by wine"*.

Aristotle: *"Youth... for there is nothing in between but getting wench with child, wronging the anciently, stealing, fighting..."*.

However, adolescents today are typically dealing with increasingly more difficult decisions and challenges to self-control.

The goals of the community sector are to prioritise the following issues:

- **Binge Drinking:** NSW Population Health Survey 2005-2007 states that 51% of males ages 16-24 in the Blue Mountains report are engaging in 'high risk alcohol consumption' – the state average for the same group is 24%.
- **Isolation:** Over 20% of households in Katoomba report having no car (this is nearly double that of the state average). For young people living in the Upper Mountains with limited or no access to employment or higher education, the inability to travel outside the Mountains is highly isolating.
- **Homelessness:** The Platform (youth accommodation service) has in excess of 200 active clients (young people who are homeless and are receiving case management support), at any one time. The number of homeless youth not accessing support is unknown.
- **Boredom:** Young people want somewhere safe to meet and talk with friends. As a community we tend to frown upon young people 'hanging-out' in public places. With no roller skating rink, bowling alley or similar business in the Mountains, young people are left feeling bored.
- **Hopelessness:** The biggest factor impacting on the lives of our most vulnerable young people is hopelessness brought about through generational poverty. Young people coming from families with no history of employment, where drug & alcohol abuse is common and where parent or older sibling might be in prison, have little reason to be optimistic about the future. Our goal is to break the cycle of generational poverty & disadvantage through supporting young people to complete education and enter meaningful employment

Within available resources, MCRN will undertake:

Aims	Strategies	Objectives (desired outcomes)
Advocacy and representation		
1.1 Contribute to public and social policy development	1.1.1 Raise issues 1.1.2 Facilitate responses to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emerging community issues ○ Issues identified by members ○ Issues identified by government bodies 1.1.3 Develop policies 1.1.4 Write submissions 1.1.5 Collate and summarise community sector responses to support advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stakeholder feedback indicates they feel better equipped to address identified issues ● Policies and submissions developed and presented to relevant bodies
1.2 Represent the Blue Mountains community organisations on local, regional, statewide and national bodies (both government and non-government)	1.2.1 Represent the community sector through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Active membership of forums and other peak groups ○ Speaking on behalf of the Blue Mountains community sector at these forums ○ Maintaining and developing MCRN membership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Active membership of forums and other peak bodies ● Community sector reports via feedback mechanism that they received support in raising issues, and felt confident that MCRN had been responsive
1.3 Support change to improve social justice outcomes and empower groups and organisations working with vulnerable populations to have a voice	1.3.1 Advocate on behalf of the Blue Mountains community sector <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Generate public input to, and awareness of, surveys, submissions, etc ○ Facilitate opportunities for the community sector to raise public awareness through letters/articles to public media ○ Submit to various enquiries on behalf of the community sector ○ Advocate directly to politicians and senior bureaucrats on behalf of the community sector, particularly around reform processes currently impacting the sector ○ Auspice appropriate community organisations or groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Members report that MCRN's work has improved their ability to advocate on behalf of their community

Aims	Strategies	Objectives (desired outcomes)
1.4 Provide a leadership role to the Blue Mountains community sector in advocating for social justice	1.4.1 Provide tools such as resources and data to assist the Blue Mountains community sector to advocate for social justice and equity 1.4.2 Initiate and model leadership in advocacy by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Encouraging participation by community groups ○ Consulting with community groups re social justice issues ○ Collaborating with community groups in advocating on social justice issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members report that MCRN’s work has improved their ability to advocate for their community
<i>Community sector capacity building</i>		
2.1 Initiate projects which address social justice and respond to community aspirations in line with MCRN priorities (and informed by point 4.1, below)	2.1.1 Assess proposed projects against the specific criteria in order to decide whether to take on the project or support another organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New projects have been identified, assessed and developed
2.2 Support and resource projects which address social justice, and community resilience, particularly if there is an immediate need or an identified gap.	2.2.1 Facilitate discussions and productive relationships within the sector to improve outcomes for vulnerable populations 2.2.2 Assist organisations to determine their capacity and capability to take on a specific project 2.2.3 Auspice relevant groups and organisations 2.2.4 Facilitate professional development 2.2.5 Assist with access to relevant resources and data 2.2.6 Assist with funding submissions, where appropriate 2.2.7 Help with strategic planning and evaluation of the project where appropriate and requested <i>(see also Section 3 - Networking & Partnership Development)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New projects have been assessed, supported and resourced

Aims	Strategies	Objectives (desired outcomes)
2.3 Support the sector to provide community education on issues of social justice, disadvantage and prejudice	2.3.1 Use <i>e-Bulletin</i> to inform the community sector re: professional development opportunities and issues 2.3.2 Use <i>BM4U</i> Facebook page (www.facebook.com.BlueMountains4U) to educate and inform the broader community about issues and events 2.3.3 Use existing networks to promote and inform on issues 2.3.4 Conduct professional development as required for the community sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members report that they received support from MCRN to provide community education
2.4 Support the sector with good practice in community management, community development, governance, sector funding and the acquisition of adequate resources	2.4.1 Act as a Clearing House for information, eg: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the weekly <i>e-Bulletin</i> to Members distribute reports and feedback from relevant conferences, publications, innovative programs, etc. 2.4.2 Facilitate information-sharing and collaboration on governance, community consultation and management issues (i.e. through convening Working Parties, submissions, etc) 2.4.3 Work in partnership with other peaks to encourage or facilitate appropriate professional development in these areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members report that, as necessary, support is provided by MCRN Numbers attending interagencies, networks, meetings, etc.
Networking, collaboration and partnership development		
3.1 Facilitate a range of interagencies and forums that enable Blue Mountains community organisations to work effectively together	3.1.1 Evaluate efficacy and intended outcomes of the Interagency and forums that MCRN convenes and/or facilitates, in line with their Terms of Reference 3.1.2 Take active responsibility for convening Interagencies, including Stronger Families Alliance, BMCI, Mental Health & Wellbeing, HOPE, Resilience & Preparedness, and MMI 3.1.3 If required, actively participate in any future Wellbeing Subcommittee/Recovery meetings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Records indicate MCRN's convening and facilitation of identified interagencies and peak organisations Records indicate membership and attendance at identified interagencies Outcomes of Annual Member Survey

Aims	Strategies	Objectives (desired outcomes)
3.2 Engage in and sustain partnerships with strategically selected networks	3.2.1 Develop partnerships and actively participate in meetings with other Interagencies and networks, eg Community Care Forum, CAVA, SFA and <i>Heading Home</i> 3.2.2 Provide information and referrals to community groups 3.2.3 Support and promote community organisations and partnerships for the wellbeing of individuals and the community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in selected networks • Members report that they have been effectively supported to strengthen their community
3.3 Assist the sector to develop collaborative relationships	3.3.1 Develop and maintain e-links and bulletins, and use as a platform for appropriate links to government and other parts of the sector 3.3.2 Encourage collaborative practice and networks 3.3.3 Assist in development of alliances and strategic partnerships 3.3.4 Develop surveys, letter templates etc to facilitate advocacy concerning social issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members report that collaborative relationships have been developed and fostered with assistance from MCRN (eg consortia, partnership grant applications, collaborations) • MCRN reports specific new partnerships developed
Research utilisation		
4.1 Facilitate access for the community sector to up-to-date research findings and evidence-informed practice	4.1.1 Seek resources for and undertake research on community needs and issues in the Blue Mountains 4.1.2 Gather, collate and make available to the sector relevant information to assist with advocacy, forward planning, good policy development and practice information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collated and made available • Members alerted to new information
4.2 Promote the use of knowledge gained from research for effective social planning	4.2.1 Alert members to new data as it is released 4.2.2 Facilitate the use of data for planning purposes 4.2.3 Demonstrate the value of prevention and early intervention to strengthen the Blue Mountains community sector's capacity to strengthen its community 4.2.4 Promote effective service delivery, community dialogue, social planning and community wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members indicate that data provided by MCRN has helped with their planning and evidence-informed practice

Aims	Strategies	Objectives (desired outcomes)
<i>Governance</i>		
5.1 Ensure that the organisation is managed in accordance with good practice principles	5.1.1 Conduct regular planning and evaluation processes 5.1.2 Work in line with work Health and Safety and other legislative requirements 5.1.3 Regularly review MCRN Constitution, policies and other governance documents and update as necessary 5.1.4 Ensure effective accountability and reporting structures are in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified strategies completed and reported
5.2 Model good practice in organisational management and governance for the community sector	5.2.1 As per strategies in 5.1, make policies and templates available for community members 5.2.2 Make skills of the Board available for mentoring/resourcing other community organisations 5.2.3 Ensure that the Board has access to feedback and information from the sector that's representative of sector needs (see 3.3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified strategies completed and reported

empower outcomes public
working leadership
improve
aspirations
groups education
vulnerable policy
justice
resilience
Contribute populations
disadvantage respond
voice
social Blue
development Represent
Mountains
community