

Tweed Shire Council Submission to
NSW Legislative Council
Inquiry into Strategies to Reduce Alcohol Abuse among Young People

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Capacity: This submission is made on behalf of Tweed Shire Council.

Confidentiality: The submission may be made public.

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Executive Summary

Tweed Shire Council has commissioned a Youth Strategy, the draft of which includes a desired outcome that 'Young People feel safe and protected from drugs, alcohol and violence'. A number of local alcohol issues in recent years have made this Strategy outcome necessary. Young people are often the victims of alcohol abuse by others. The economy of Tweed depends heavily on tourism, which exposes young people to adverse influences of alcohol, particularly secondary supply to younger teenagers. The Council and community have addressed these issues by adopting preventive and diversionary programmes for youth, engaging them in community events, providing facilities and trying to improve transport services. Ultimately, however, innovative social policies and legislation are required to effect a correction in our use of alcohol generally.

Local Drug and Alcohol Issues

A survey of the substance abuse issues currently manifest in the growing Tweed Shire would include the following issues:

- Amongst the highest rates of drink driving offences in NSW.
- Teenage binge drinking at night in foreshore locations that has given rise to a volunteer grant-funded mobile protective and diversionary service called Cool Heads, costing \$300,000 over two years.
- Late night public transport and taxi schemes to help get revellers home from Coolangatta/Tweed Heads in the early hours, costing \$85,000pa.
- High rates of domestic violence.
- Incidents of alcohol related drowning from beaches and boating accidents.
- Frequent reports of street violence outside hotels and clubs late at night.
- Clear statements in youth consultations that young people do not feel safe in many of the public places that they rely on as venues for relaxation and socialising.
- Examples of drug and alcohol use by younger teenagers in parks, frequent costly vandalism to Council and other property, and widespread graffiti.
- Very high local rates of homelessness and welfare dependency.

While it would be a mistake to attribute the major proportion of these issues to young people, who may often be victims rather than perpetrators, it is nevertheless regrettable that their youth in this renowned environmental location is sullied by such a barrage of poor behaviour by society as a whole.

The issues which do originate with young people, perhaps imitating their elders, are teenage binge drinking, under-age drinking in parks, and only some of the vandalism and violence.

A large percentage of these failures of social temperance may be attributed to the issues set out in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, particularly the very widespread availability of alcohol and illegal drugs to young people of legal drinking age, and too often to younger teenagers; the heavy promotion of alcohol as an adjunct to social activity; ever-present advertising in the urban landscape; and the toll on health and health costs as a result.

The Local Scene

On 25 February the ABC Four Corners programme featured the story of 18 year old Sam Ford, who, with his girlfriend, was attacked by a drunken person in Coolangatta (within one block of the boundary with Tweed Heads) in 2009. As a result, he suffered brain damage and is severely disabled. His slow process of rehabilitation places heavy stress and financial pressure on his parents and two brothers. Although not typical, this is an extreme example of what may happen to young people going out for the evening in Tweed.

The programme also illustrated the excessive amount of police time, court resources, and hospital emergency resources required in Sydney to manage the effects of alcohol abuse. Senior police officers, magistrates and Medical Association officers all advocated for effective controls, such as the Newcastle trial which limited access to alcohol and effectively reduced the effects of this abuse on society.

Tweed Shire depends heavily on tourism. It has 33 motels, 19 caravan parks, around a dozen pubs, many bottle shops, hundreds of restaurants and cafes, and a dozen commercial clubs, some of which are major tourist attractions. Most of these venues are licensed, and dispense food and drink to thousands of visitors every day.

Fear of violence on the streets can discourage many people from visiting entertainment venues, and may be part of the reason why the Night Link bus service was sometimes not

well utilised. There is an urgent need for change to enable responsible businesses and the Tweed community to prosper.

There are Liquor Accords for Tweed Heads/Coast and for Tweed Valley, which are designed to manage the local liquor industry efficiently and effectively, and to mitigate the issues mentioned above. They do this by providing information on current best practices, coordinating regulatory activities, discussing issues when they arise and liaising with the Police and Council. Admittedly, they have limited resources, and they are not responsible for the wider scope of the law unrelated to alcohol. They focus on conducting licensed venues to the best of their ability, but they do not control advertising, for instance.

One of their most notable areas of difficulty relates to secondary sources of alcohol supply to young people below drinking age, which could fairly be described as the result of legislation that is very easy to abuse and almost impossible to carry out as intended.

It is very difficult to argue for a reduction in the number of liquor outlets in a tourist economy; perhaps a better strategy would be to encourage on-premises consumption of alcohol rather than carry-out facilities, and to provide adequate transport services. On-premises consumption ensures young people drink under supervision, and under-age persons cannot be supplied so easily.

Equally, the designation of some public places to allow drinking, and some not, is a nightmare for enforcement officers. To achieve such a situation, however, may require new legislation to include effective prevention of drinking in public places.

Tweed Shire Council Response

As part of its community development role, Tweed Shire Council (TSC) has commissioned, from consultants, a draft Tweed Shire Youth Strategy for Council approval. The Strategy when adopted will inform Council's engagement with and response to young people from 2013-2017. After studying a range of population, workplace, crime, health, traffic, and other social data, the consultants and officers have identified six major strategies that they believe encompass all the relevant issues for contemporary youth in the Shire. These include:

Strategic Outcome 5: 'Young People Feel Safe and Protected from Drugs, Alcohol and Violence'.

To illustrate the scope of this desired Outcome, Actions under this Strategy are set out below:

1. Develop an MOU with Tweed/Byron LAC to undertake a Community Safety Audit targeting known hotspots across the Tweed Shire, including Knox Park and Tweed Coast.
2. Develop a Shire-wide Community Safety Plan informed by findings of the Community Safety Audit.
3. Implement the Shire-wide Community Safety Plan.
4. Advocate for improved education programs in primary and secondary schools to reduce the incidence of alcohol and drug use.
5. Develop a Graffiti Management Policy and related documents.
6. Implement the Graffiti Management Policy.
7. Activate Council-owned facilities for creative arts, social, educational and recreational activities.
8. Support 'Cool Heads' after hours binge drinking program in areas where young people are engaged in anti-social activities at night, including Knox Park, Cabarita Headland and other identified hot spots.

This outline is no doubt typical of other local government youth strategies, but emphasises the consequences and significance of the effects of drug and alcohol on the average local community.

The Terms of Reference

a) Effect of Alcohol Advertising and Promotions on Young People.

The strongest influence of advertising on young people is through television, rather than through locally-controlled advertising signs. Locally, promotions such as of surf competitions and other sports probably have the greatest effect on young people, but these also have the beneficial effect of supporting sporting events. The benefits could still be obtained by communities, however, even if there were stronger restrictions on the form and scale of advertising.

b) Effectiveness of Alcohol Harm Minimisation Strategies.

Cool Heads is a local program whereby mobile volunteers visit known teenage haunts after dark to reduce risks to young people, or provide diversionary evening entertainment in safe public spaces. After two years of FACS grant-supported operation, it is continuing at reduced capacity. Council is endeavouring to increase youth activities and events, in conjunction with Nortec and St. Joseph's youth services, with improved community centres and recreation facilities; however, it was unsuccessful in a bid to fund a new PCYC development.

Council's new Youth Strategy is attempting to increase both facilities and staff to activate them, since both are essential for success. There is a particular emphasis on community events to include young people, of which around 150 per annum are now scheduled. The Strategy focuses on developing Youth Precincts, where there is sufficient diverse activity to ensure public safety and minimise risks to participants.

c) Measures to Minimise Impact of Alcohol in the Workplace.

Tweed Council maintains strict protocols with workers around alcohol. This relates not only to bans on alcohol during working hours, but also at other times when Council workers are identifiable, or when using Council vehicles or equipment.

d) Effectiveness of Measures to Reduce Drink Driving.

Council's Road Safety Officer participates in the RRISK programme of youth education established by North Coast Area Health Service and the Dept. Education & Training, which has proved both effective and popular.

Other young driver initiatives implemented out-side of the school environment include:

- Helping Learner Drivers Become Safer Drivers – Transport for NSW; and
- P Drivers Project

To maximise effectiveness of these programs, recurrent funding is required to include them in high school curriculums so young people's on-road experiences are informed by best safety practices.

Courtesy Bus promotion:

In the absence of funding for late night bus services for entertainment areas, Tweed Council and the Liquor Accords initiated a unified promotion of existing courtesy bus services run by clubs and pubs. This comprises a brochure listing available courtesy buses, their contact details, times and areas covered, to encourage use by visitors and locals alike, which is

distributed through venues, tourist information offices and Council facilities. Currently there are ten such services, generally serving the clubs' main market areas.

It is hoped to expand this initiative so that most venues can be reached without the need to drive after drinking. The initiative could be easily replicated elsewhere, and further encouraged by OLGR.

e) Measures to Reduce Alcohol Related Violence, including in and around Licensed Venues.

Night Link/ Taxi Link:

In 2010 Gold Coast City Council identified a need to remove late night revellers from the Coolangatta entertainment precinct more efficiently, due to the large numbers congregating, limited availability of taxis, and frequent violence. There were existing late services northwards to Gold Coast, but none southwards into Tweed where many of the revellers lived. It therefore initiated an hourly service with security on Friday and Saturday nights from Coolangatta to Kingscliff. Subsequently, Tweed Council added a connecting taxi service from Kingscliff to Pottsville.

The bus service started promisingly in the Christmas holidays and through the summer, but patronage faded in the winter months, and on review after 12 months it was abandoned due to financial constraints. Other problems included limited promotion of the service and inability to pick up on the NSW side of the border.

Currently, the precinct is served by taxis only, but with the introduction of taxi marshals to control activity. Attempts to introduce NSW as well as Queensland taxis were unsuccessful, with NSW taxis operating from nearby ranks in NSW.

Border issues tend to bedevil attempts to provide transport in the twin towns of Coolangatta and Tweed Heads, but a stronger NSW presence would be beneficial to NSW tourism. This could be facilitated by subsidies for evening scheduled bus services, which in recent years have been almost eliminated by the commercial operators.

f) Measures to address the Impact of Alcohol Abuse on the Health System

This issue was well illustrated in the Four Corners programme previously referred to, and needs further attention, but is not the focus of this Council.

Conclusion

Council is able to advocate for improvement of many alcohol issues and behaviour change by community action, and can work in partnership with the State authorities when significant resources are required, such as for major youth facilities and for improved transport services. There are some issues, however, where only innovative social policies and improved legislation on a state wide basis can change and correct behaviours, to restore balance in our use of alcohol as a society.

References

Tweed Youth Strategy, Cred Community Planning, 2013:

1. Community Engagement Report
2. Youth Profile
3. Youth Facilities Plan
4. Case Studies

5. Tweed Youth Strategy

6. Building New Ways, Tweed Youth AOD Working Party, Johnston, S. and Prakalathanan, N. 2008.

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