

Voice of Warrawong (VOW)

Research conducted by Warrawong Residents Forum

INTRODUCTION

Warrawong is a suburb of Wollongong, in the Illawarra region of NSW, located between Wollongong Central Business District (CBD) and Shellharbour. The Warrawong community experiences significant disadvantage, with a Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) of 2%. Warrawong Residents Forum (WRF), a not-for-profit organisation that provides a range of support to the community from early intervention – through to – emergency relief; Including: information, referrals, links, assessment, and advocacy. 30 years after WRF's establishment, the Voice of Warrawong (VOW) research project was designed to gauge community and stakeholder feedback on the Warrawong community and WRF's operations. The VOW involved questionnaires comprising questions about strengths and areas for development focused on community needs, service requirements and resource demands. Participants included 150 community members and responses were gained between March 2023 to June 2023 at various locations including WRF, Warrawong Plaza, along Cowper Street and at community events. Overall, the findings show a community that is informed and strives for positive changes. The VOW has empowered the Warrawong community and given members a voice with the potential to influence these changes. The following report outlines findings for each question according to key themes that emerged from participants' responses. The report then concludes with a set of recommendations.

How would you describe Warrawong to a new community member, the good and not so good things?

Evident from responses to this question is the perceived stigma that surrounds Warrawong, with negativity often attributed to the high concentration of public housing estates and associated antisocial behaviour. Australian Bureau of Statistics housing data shows that there are 515 public housing tenancies in Warrawong, housing 966 individuals, almost one quarter of Warrawong's population of 4,659 (abs.gov.au).

Whilst 30% of participants felt Warrawong was a neglected suburb of low socioeconomic status, 47% described Warrawong as a great place to live, quiet, with good people that are friendly. Participants also acknowledged the geographical attractiveness of Warrawong such as its proximity to Lake Illawarra and Port Kembla beaches, as well as its easy access to shops, services such as WRF, and its unique cultural diversity including a vibrant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and other culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

What worries do you have in the community and how would you like to see it improved?

72% of respondents expressed safety as a concern in the Warrawong community. Drug use was a prominent theme from participant responses (25%) and coincided with concerns about unsupported mental health issues that lead to this drug use. Comments were made about the effect of drug use on antisocial behaviour, self-care and needle contamination in public places. Other sub-themes that emerged were safety at night time and the lack of youth activities which were perceived to compound antisocial behaviours. Participants also reported antisocial behaviour in public housing estates such as burning bins, stealing clothes from clotheslines, dumping rubbish, breaking and entering, stealing, and defecating in hallways. These behaviours appeared concentrated in Illawong Gardens with some participants expressing the need to demolish the site due to entrenched aggressive behaviours. Public housing residents who responded to the questionnaire felt as though police had lost a sense of care to attend to matters, often taking hours to attend a call.

Respondents felt frustrated and let down by NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) Housing when calling to report maintenance issues, often waiting months with minimal or no follow-up. Subsequently, some participants suggested a long term plan for public housing as a way to avoid concentrated geographical areas of disadvantage.

The need for improved public transport was also expressed by participants (8%), including suggestions to increase services on weekends and public holidays. Participants also suggested establishing a free bus service, as exists in Wollongong CBD, as public transport is the sole mode of transport for many Warrawong residents.

Lastly, 7% of participants felt Warrawong was in dire need of investment into infrastructure to improve its green and shared public spaces. Suggested places for improvement included Lake Illawarra, the streetscape and minimising empty shop fronts, all perceived by some participants to reduce the stigma associated with Warrawong.

Could you or someone you know benefit from having access to specialist services? What sort of services would you like to see?

75% of participants agreed to the benefits of having increased, consistent and long-term service access and only 9% felt this need was being adequately met. As part of these responses, participants suggested improved and consistent long term mental health support services, drug and alcohol supports, and youth activities and programs to positively engage youths. The need for free bulk billed medical and or health promotion, preventative health, free dental and life skills education was also a reported gap. Participants deemed the loss of the local Centrelink office some time ago a huge barrier for vulnerable members of the community in terms of access and equity, having to commute to Wollongong. Participants also felt Warrawong warranted greater representation of government departments including DCJ Housing. Other suggestions included the need for additional services in childcare, as well as women's, CALD and aged care specific services, with participants expressing the importance of consistent staff members rather than constant changes, which has meant they have to repeat information about their circumstances.

Could you or someone you know benefit from having access to social opportunities? What type of social opportunities / activities would you like to see?

63% of participants agreed that social activities are an important inclusion of the Warrawong community and at WRF. The most popular (38%) suggestions were delivering youth activities such as sports through the PCYC, building a local skate park or recreation centre, and facilitating music experiences, woodwork and street murals. Activities for adults focussed on health were also suggested (35%) such as cooking classes, exercise classes, free mental health services and classes on preventative health. Men and women specific groups were reported as being important (11%), which could support self-development, self-help and self-expression. Groups were singles were also seen as important with data reflecting single people make up 66% of Warrawong residents in public housing (HOMES/EDW, 2023), making social isolation and loneliness a concern.

How can WRF staff ensure that you make the decisions and are in control of the type of assistance you get?

47% of respondents expressed WRF doing well in supporting their decision making and control over supports they access. Participants voiced the importance of WRF staff and clients being open, and for further feedback to be sought from community members. Some suggested using anonymous surveys to gauge community feedback. Some respondents felt WRF should encourage self-determination and autonomy by supporting people to build up capacity to support themselves. 15% of participants felt that

being shown respect and being treated as equals was important. Only 5% felt there was a lack of awareness of services available at WRF and encouraged improved communication, noting they were unaware of types of support available but these respondents also pointed out that some people try to cope without asking for help.

In your view, what do you like about Warrawong Residents Forum Inc? What are we doing well?

96% of participants provided positive responses about services at WRF. Participants indicated that they find the staff and volunteers helpful, friendly, caring, consistent, supportive, proactive, efficient as well as non-judgemental and genuine. Respondants claimed they felt WRF was like family, and offered a sense of community and means to meet other people and socialise.

51% of respondents commented on WRF’s Food Hub and community lunch program and saw the importance of access to no cost fresh food, as well as hot lunch. Cost of living pressures and food insecurities were viewed as increasing the importance of the program. Table 1 provides data from the use of the United Nations (UN) Food Insecurity Scale as a tool (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2023).

Table 1. Responses to UN Food Insecurity Scale

<i>During the last 12 months, was there a time when, because of lack of money or other resources:</i>	Yes	No
<i>1. You were worried you would not have enough food to eat?</i>	73%	24%
<i>2. You were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food?</i>	66%	34%
<i>3. You ate only a few kinds of foods?</i>	77%	23%
<i>4. You had to skip a meal?</i>	71%	29%
<i>5. You ate less than you thought you should?</i>	77%	23%
<i>6. Your household ran out of food?</i>	67%	33%
<i>7. You were hungry but did not eat</i>	69%	31%
<i>8. You went without eating for a whole day</i>	67%	33%

Table 1 highlights the significant need for food support as 73% of participants had run out of food in the past 12 months and were not able to purchase more. Indeed, for each of the eight food insecurity questions at least 66% of those interviewed responded ‘yes’. Some community members stated in their responses that they would ensure their families or pets had food before they would feed themselves, with some sharing that at times they had lived on two-minute noodles or pasta with the high costs of fresh food prohibitive. Some participants voiced shame in accessing food assistance and suggested the need for private access to services.

THE VOW STATEMENT

The VOW statement was birthed from the questionnaires and has become a 'petition' that has got just over 200 signatures.

Warrawong Residents Forum Inc (WRF) provides essential services and support to me and my community.

WRF's food programs such as the Food Hubs and Community Lunch help me, my family and people I know every week not to go hungry. At WRF, I can connect with my community and get help when needed.

I see the amount of work that the volunteers and staff here do day-to-day and can see that they need help. I am worried that without the right amount of resources that there could be a risk to this support not being available or burning out.

I support WRF's request for additional funding to employ skilled staff and maintain essential services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

WRF has been serving as the Warrawong Community Centre since 1992 and is committed to ensuring Warrawong's needs are supported and voices are heard. Since listening to the stories, experiences and hopes of Warrawong through the VOW, we aim to be able to work towards the following recommendations:

Meet the needs in the community with additional resources and services.

- Increase the lunch program from three to five days per week
- Increase access to food in the evenings from two to three nights per week
- Increase WRF's operations from four to five days per week
- Secure funding and employ two additional part time staff members to work with the community and coordinate existing and new initiatives that respond to growing needs in the Warrawong community
- Develop resources and mechanisms for Warrawong voices to be heard and for WRF to be able to respond, pivot, and evolve to meet identified needs.

2. Host specialist services hub that meets the needs of the community:

- Increased access to services on rotation e.g. RSPCA, Community Nurse, Dentist, etc, alongside permanent full time service providers
- Securing funding to maintain a weekly morning tea and BBQ
- Inviting Elders, Members of Parliament, community leaders and advocates to visit Service Hub.

3. Develop supports our community's young people :

- A drop in service and secure base at WRF and Bundaleer Community Centre (Bundy).
- Activities and programs in collaboration with the community, local schools and early childhood education and care centres.
- Development of one way access into referral, resource and advocacy.

4. Increase access to mental health resources and support:

- The introduction to peer support initiatives such as support groups (face-to-face and online)
- Access to mental health services at WRF
- Consist, one way access into mental health and health services such as NDIS, drug and alcohol, dental. etc.