

Ovens Murray communities unite to highlight social issues in the region

LAST week's launch of the Ovens Murray Area Community Needs Assessment Report 2024 marked more than the release of a document - it signalled a turning point in how the region understands and responds to complex social issues across North East Victoria.

Supported by the Victorian Government, this report was commissioned by the Ovens Murray Child & Family Services Alliance (OMCFSA) and the Ovens Murray Mental Health, Alcohol and Drug Alliance (OMMHADA), in collaboration with the Ovens Murray Family Violence Partnership (OMFVP) and the Ovens Murray Homelessness Network (OMHN).

It provides the first comprehensive, locally grounded snapshot of the social challenges impacting children, young people and families in the region.

Developed by La Trobe University's Care Economy Research Institute, the research combines local data, frontline service insight, and community experience to explore four interconnected areas of need: mental health, family violence, alcohol and other drug use, and homelessness.

Jacki Eckert, chief strategy officer at Gateway Health and deputy chair of the OM-

MHADA, opened the launch by recognising the foundation of partnership.

"This report was built on collaboration," she said.

"It's not just a piece of research; it represents an opportunity for shared response.

"We can't keep doing things the same way.

"The complexity of these issues requires us to think differently, work together, and genuinely listen to what the data and our community are telling us."

Claire Anderson, transitional services manager of NESAY and chair of the Ovens Murray Homelessness Network, spoke about the opportunity this provides for collective action.

"We came together because we needed a shared foundation to move forward," she said.

"Now we have it.

"This report helps us shift from individual responses to collective impact.

"We're better placed than ever to plan, advocate and act with clarity and purpose."

Kath Kerin, executive director of child, family and community services at Upper Murray Family Care and executive chair of the OMCFSA, highlighted the strength of local partnerships.



JOINT SUPPORT: Claire Anderson, Jaime Chubb and Kath Kerin spoke at the Ovens Murray Area Community Needs Assessment Report 2024 launch last week. PHOTO: Kelly Timms

"This work is the result of a genuine commitment to collaboration across sectors," she said.

"We've built strong relationships, aligned our practice, and focused on how to better support children, young people and families across Ovens Murray.

"This report gives us a shared foundation to move forward - together."

Jaime Chubb, chief executive officer (CEO) of the Centre Against Violence and chair of the OMFVP, emphasised the report's practical value.

"This data is clear, local and needs-based - it's helping us move from anecdote to evidence," she said.

"We can now tailor our services and programs based on what our communities are telling us they need - especially around areas like mental health for young women.

"This is how we start doing better; together."

Key findings include:

- Benalla shows the highest rates of family violence and alcohol-related incidents, alongside entrenched socio-economic disadvantage.

- Wangaratta is experiencing a sharp rise in ambulance attendances related to alcohol and worsening mental health concerns - especially among young women.

- Wodonga reports the region's highest rate of homelessness, with rapid population growth placing further pressure on already stretched services.

- Wodonga also reported notably higher rates of mental health issues, particularly among young women.

"We were tasked with un-

derstanding some of the most complex issues facing this region - and what emerged was a deeply interconnected picture," La Trobe University researcher Kate Syme-Lamont said.

"These challenges don't exist in silos.

"The research shows that mental health, homelessness, alcohol and drug use, and family violence all intersect in profound ways.

"Place-based investment, integrated planning, and service systems that work together can help communities design strategic responses and create meaningful change."

Despite the challenges, the report also highlights local strengths: deep inter-agency collaboration, a commitment to evidence-based action, and a shared will to improve outcomes across the region.

The full report is now available online.

It is intended as a practical tool for service providers, policymakers, funders, and all community leaders committed to strengthening the health and wellbeing of the Ovens Murray region.

Read the full report here: <https://centreagainstviolence.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Oven-Murray-Area-Community-Needs-Assessment-2024-Report.pdf>