What We Heard Report
Youth Community Safety & Well-Being Strategy

March 18, 2025

Introduction

The Town of Cochrane, with funding support from the Building Safer Community Fund (BSCF), initiated an engagement process to gather input from community members about the future of their town. This process focused on youth voices, community well-being, and inclusive growth. This report summarizes the engagement process and what we heard, including key themes and priorities.

Purpose of the Engagement

The purpose of the engagement process was to inform the development of a Youth Community Safety and Well-Being Strategy for Cochrane, funded through the Building Safer Communities Fund (BSCF) from Public Safety Canada. The engagement aimed to identify current community strengths, gaps in services, and opportunities for enhancing youth well-being through prevention and intervention strategies. The engagement process placed a strong focus on amplifying youth voices, engaging diverse community groups, and gathering actionable insights to guide the creation of a sustainable and impactful strategy that addresses youth well-being, mental health, as well as youth crime and violence prevention strategies.

Engagement Methods

Key Informant Interviews

Key Informant Interviews were initially conducted with community leaders, service providers, and individuals with lived experience to gather insights on gaps in services, emerging social issues, and potential intervention strategies. These interviews provided valuable perspectives on the struggles faced by youth including those dealing with mental health issues and social isolation. Interviewees also highlighted the opportunity for stronger partnerships between service providers, the municipality, and schools to better support youth well-being.

Municipal Focus Group

A dedicated Municipal Focus Group was held with municipal staff and leaders to understand internal perspectives on community assets, needs, and challenges. Participants identified gaps in local programming, expressed concerns about marginalized groups feeling excluded, and emphasized the need for better integration of youth voices in community decision-making. This

focus group provided critical insights into how the Town of Cochrane can better align its resources and policies to meet emerging needs.

Youth Survey

A comprehensive Youth Survey was distributed widely, gathering insights from individuals aged 12–24. The survey explored themes such as youth experiences in Cochrane, mental health concerns, feelings of inclusion and exclusion, and suggestions for improving community well-being. In total, 134 youth respondents shared detailed insights about their experiences with bullying, the lack of safe spaces for teens, and their aspirations for Cochrane's future.

Community Focus Groups

Facilitated dialogues with community members and organization / agency youth-serving staff were hosted online and in-person to explore shared values, tensions, and community priorities. Participants expressed concerns about youth mental health, the gap of non-sports-related activities, and transportation challenges that limit access to resources and social opportunities.

Design Labs

To gather innovative ideas and engage participants more interactively with emerging themes, Design Labs were hosted. These community workshops allowed community members, including youth, as well as youth-service providers and stakeholders, to collaborate on visualizing their ideal Cochrane. Participants were encouraged to suggest creative solutions for social inclusion and identify opportunities to expand support services. These interactive sessions provided actionable ideas that informed key recommendations in this report.

Key Themes from Engagement

Youth safe spaces

Youth repeatedly identified a desire for more inclusive spaces where they can connect, socialize, and build community. Many felt there are limited options outside of organized sports or commercial spaces that require spending money or where they don't feel welcome to "hang out".

Transportation

This theme includes the transportation issues impacting youth in Cochrane, highlighting that if youth don't have their own car or parents to drive them, they face challenges with the local public transit (COLT), which isn't always available when they need it. The lack of reliable and affordable

public transit is a major barrier, particularly for youth seeking jobs, mental health services, and social connections, especially if they live in outlying neighbourhoods.

Mental Health

This theme discusses the pressing concerns, impacts, and barriers to mental health support for youth. Participants in engagement sessions noted specialized mental health programs available in nearby Calgary, with transportation, wait times, or cost being a barrier. Youth expressed concern over this limited access to mental health services. There is a shared desire for programs to support whole families and improve access to mental health resources.

Inclusion and Engagement

Ensuring that all youth feel included and have opportunities to contribute to community life is an essential theme. This includes better integration of diverse youth groups, such as 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, Indigenous youth, and those from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Enhancing engagement efforts to include these youth in planning and decision-making processes is seen as crucial for building a cohesive community where all youth feel included and engaged in Cochrane. A dedicated long-term strategy for trust and relationship building with Indigenous youth and nearby communities also emerged as a priority.
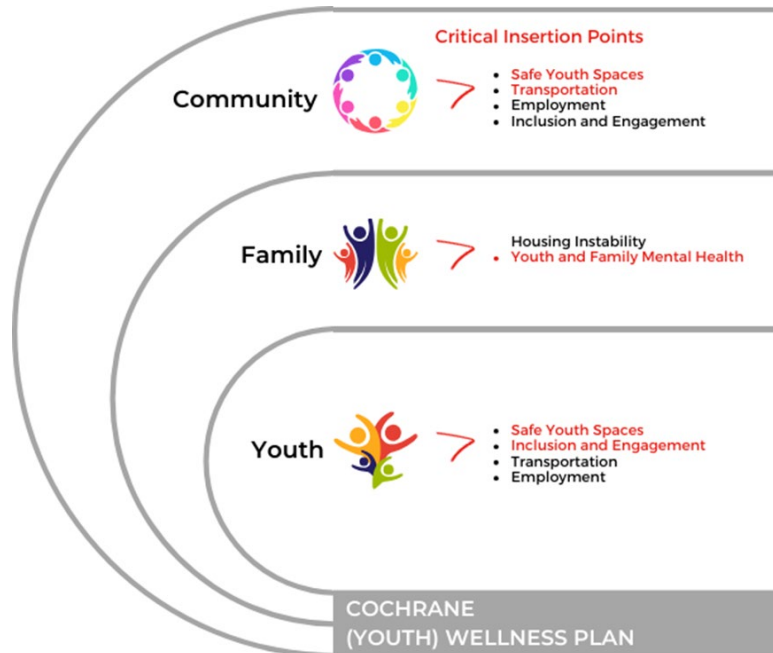
Youth Employment

Youth and others shared the existing challenge of finding suitable and accessible job opportunities for youth. Residents and youth shared feedback related to labor laws that restrict younger youth from certain jobs, certain jobs not hiring youth for the hours they can work, and the need for more initiatives that can facilitate youth employment. Youth employment is critical for developing valuable life skills. There's also mention of needing to expand opportunities beyond entry-level jobs to support older youth and young adults to stay in the community, and the importance of community connections in helping youth find meaningful employment.

Housing Instability

Housing instability is a felt experience for youth in the community of Cochrane in a variety of ways. Some youth shared that housing challenges affect their day to day as their families feel stretched financially, which limits their participation in activities. Older youth and young adults shared that the cost of housing can limit their opportunities to stay in the community, even when they want to. Although housing is not a primary focus of this project, housing related challenges have an impact on the well-being of Cochrane's youth.

Nested Model of Themes

An underlying theme across feedback was the importance and intersection of community and family dynamics on youth well-being. Issues such as family breakdown, economic challenges, and the social stigma associated with receiving support from community programs like the Boys and Girls Club were identified as barriers and issues of note. These dynamics contribute to the challenges youth face in finding employment, engaging in social activities, and accessing mental health support.

Overall, engagement participants determined that leverage points emerging would revolve around strengthening the community, family unit, and individual youth.

What's Next

Youth Community Safety and Well-Being Strategy will be finalized and sent to Public Safety Canada by March 31, 2025. Interested community members can expect to see the final report in April 2025, with a link posted to the letstalkcochrane.ca/youth webpage.