



# Coober Pedy Housing and Homelessness Roundtable Report

*Comfort Inn, Coober Pedy*



## Regional Engagement Strategy and Roundtable Method

Shelter SA is the peak body for housing in South Australia and conducts housing policy and advocacy across the State. In providing advice to our members, stakeholders and governments, it is important to include information about housing issues facing individuals, families and communities in regional and rural areas of South Australia. As part of our Regional Engagement Strategy, and commitment to visit at least two regional and rural areas per year, Shelter SA planned and held a housing and homelessness roundtable with service providers and locals in Coober Pedy. The aim of the roundtable was to hear about housing issues unique to the region and develop new ideas and solutions that could be actioned by individuals, local organisations and governments.

Participants were asked to take part in small group discussions and then summarise their conversations to the larger group. The first half of the roundtable focussed on identifying housing affordability and availability issues in Coober Pedy, as well as the extent of homelessness in the area. Participants were then asked to identify the causes of the issues and discuss any past attempts by the community to solve them. There is a severe lack of social housing in Coober Pedy and the housing needs of people living on low incomes have not been adequately met.

The second half of the roundtable focussed on identifying the actions needed to help resolve housing and homelessness issues in Coober Pedy. Shelter SA's approach to regional engagement is to look at policy and government funding issues as well as to urge local communities to think of self-funded, innovative ideas to improve housing outcomes in their region.



The Shelter SA team discusses housing issues in Coober Pedy with local human services workers.

## Demographic Background and Housing Context

The National Rental Affordability Index is an interactive map that shows rental affordability across Australia for varying household incomes. Information within the index confirms that affordability is an issue in the Coober Pedy private rental market.<sup>1</sup> For a household with an income of \$30,000 per annum or less, there would not be any affordable private rental properties in Coober Pedy. A person living on a Newstart allowance receives less than \$15,000 per year, deeming the entire private rental market severely unaffordable for that household profile.



A screenshot of the National Rental Affordability Index.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up 18.1% of the population in Coober Pedy, as opposed to 2% of the general South Australian population.<sup>2</sup> The most common ancestries in Coober Pedy in the 2016 Census were Australian, English, German, Irish and Greek.

The median age of people in Coober Pedy (urban centres and localities) is 45 years. Children aged 0-14 years make up 16.1% of the population and people aged 65 years and over make up 22.1% of the population.

The unemployment rate in Coober Pedy (9.2%) is well above National (6.9%) and State (7.5%) averages.

The most common occupations in Coober Pedy include Community and Personal Service Workers (19.1% of the population), Managers (14.0%), Professionals (14.0%), Labourers (11.4%), and Clerical and Administrative Workers (10.9%).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sgsep.com.au/maps/thirdspace/australia-rental-affordability-index/>

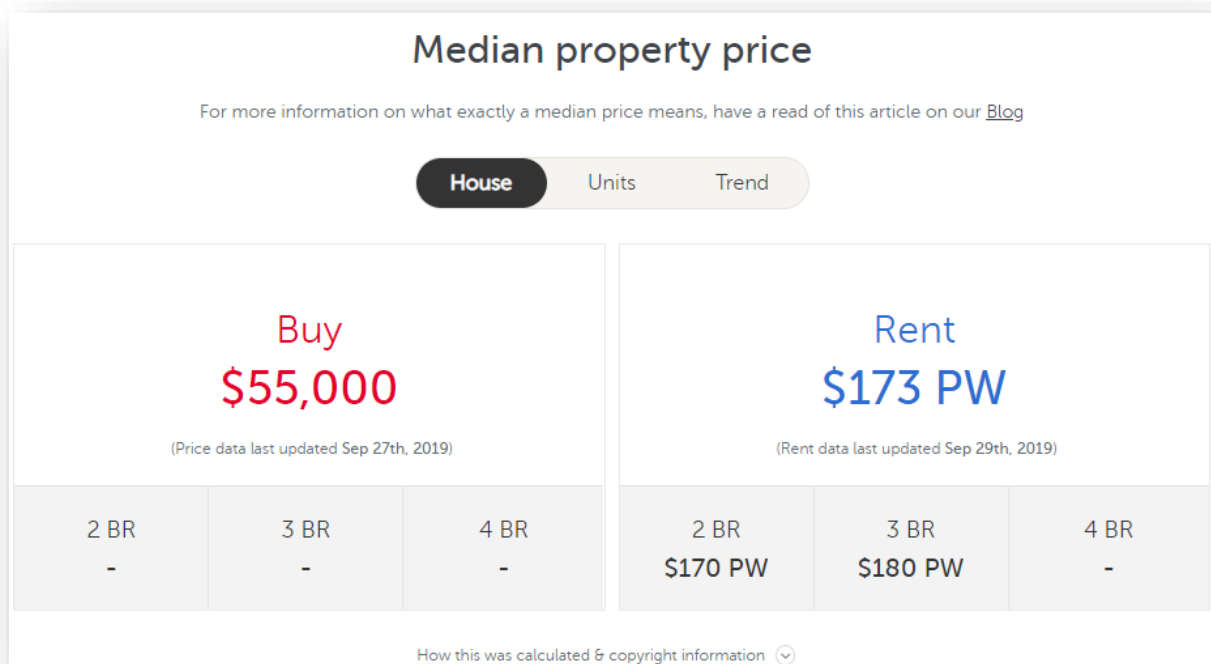
<sup>2</sup> [https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/SSC40293](https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/SSC40293)

Tenure <i>Occupied private dwellings</i>	Coober Pedy	%	South Australia	%	Australia	%
Owned outright	234	36.5	205,531	32.2	2,565,695	31.0
Owned with a mortgage	111	17.3	225,670	35.3	2,855,222	34.5
Rented	238	37.1	182,180	28.5	2,561,302	30.9
Other tenure type	12	1.9	9,847	1.5	78,994	1.0
Tenure type not stated	46	7.2	15,566	2.4	224,869	2.7

A screenshot of the 2016 Census data for Coober Pedy.

Coober Pedy has a high number of people living on low incomes with 38.9% of the population living on less than a \$650 gross weekly income compared to 23.8% for the overall South Australian population.

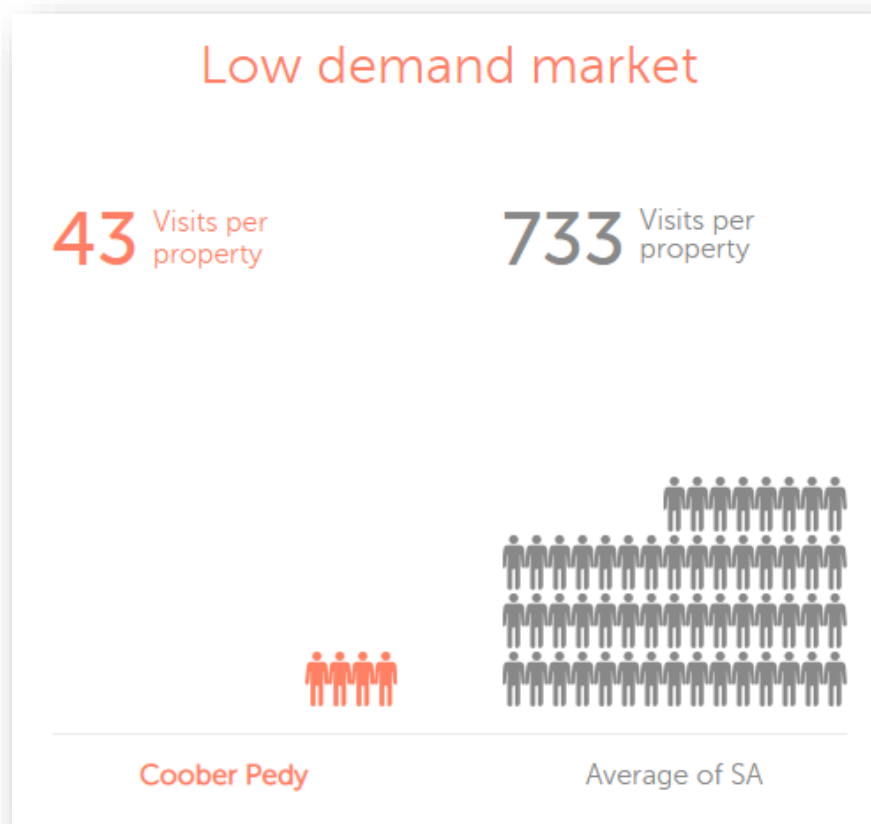
Rent is below State and National medians according to the 2016 Census data as the median rent is \$150 per week. However, this is coupled with a high number of people living on low incomes and fails to factor in other essential accommodation costs such as bonds for electricity and water. It should also be noted that the quality of accommodation available at the median price is very poor.



A screenshot of Realestate.com.au's suburb profile.

The suburb profile of Coober Pedy from Realestate.com.au above shows that house prices and rents are significantly cheaper than Metropolitan Adelaide and it is a low demand rental market (see

below).<sup>3</sup> The data on rent collected by Realestate.com.au is slightly different from the amount shown in the 2016 Census data.



Realestate.com.au classifies the housing market in Coober Pedy as being in “low demand”.

In the District Council of Coober Pedy’s most recent Strategic Plan, it is stated that Coober Pedy is experiencing a declining population, changing demographics, a lack of opportunities for young people, social issues caused by alcohol abuse and gambling addictions, a reduction in TAFE services and a lack of suitable housing for professional workers.<sup>4</sup>

Umoona is the Aboriginal community land at Coober Pedy that belongs to the Antakirinja Matu-Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal Corporation. Umoona Aged Care (Tjilpi Tjuta Kanyini) and the Umoona Tjutagku Health Service Aboriginal Corporation operate in Umoona. There are 15 residential properties in Umoona and the community was declared a dry zone by the Elders to try to encourage non-drinkers to come back to Country.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.realestate.com.au/neighbourhoods/coober-pedy-5723-sa>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cooberpedy.sa.gov.au/home>





A Google Maps satellite image of the town of Coober Pedy.



A Google Maps satellite image of Umoona.



Shelter SA staff were taken on a tour of Coober Pedy by local human services workers.

## Housing Issues Identified by Roundtable Participants

Roundtable participants identified a wide range of housing issues in Coober Pedy and surrounding areas, as described in the following sections.

### Private Rental Accommodation

Participants described the private rental market in Coober Pedy as competitive. The median price of private rental accommodation is quite low but participants said that it is necessary to pay between \$250-\$300 for a property of reasonable quality. Properties available at \$120 or less per week are of poor quality and are very difficult to adequately cool in summer. One participant showed a Shelter SA team member a photo of a sub-standard property that had a shed built over it rather than repairing damage to the roof (see overleaf).

There is a high proportion of people living on low incomes in Coober Pedy. Participants said that their clients, especially single people living on Newstart allowance, find it impossible to afford private rental properties. Participants also raised the issue of discrimination against Centrelink customers and Aboriginal peoples by real estate agents, with only two real estate agents servicing Cooper Pedy.

Participants discussed the fact that traditional Coober Pedy “dugouts” are significantly more expensive than above-ground houses, but utilities costs in dugouts are much lower as a result of better temperature control.



A screenshot of a property advertised on Realestate.com.au.

### Crisis Accommodation

There is a severe lack of crisis accommodation in Coober Pedy. Community organisations do not own any crisis accommodation for people experiencing homelessness and currently rely on the Housing Authority to house their clients. There are five properties, currently tenanted, that will become available for the homelessness services provider as tenants leave. There are only two domestic violence properties available which are also fully tenanted with 18-month leases. The properties have multiple bedrooms but are usually occupied by a single person. Participants confirmed that more appropriate, purpose-built domestic violence accommodation must be offered. One workshop participant said that hotels and motels refuse to accommodate clients.

During Code Red and Code Blue, workers in the area give out blankets and other necessities as there is not any emergency accommodation available.

### High Utilities Costs

Electricity is very expensive in Coober Pedy and one participant said that as a result of a decreasing population, the cost of living (including utilities) is steadily rising and becoming more unaffordable for those already living with rental or mortgage stress.

### Public Housing

There are currently 49 South Australian Housing Authority properties in Coober Pedy with 47 specifically for Aboriginal peoples. There are currently seven Category 1 applicants on the waiting list.



Due to allocation policies for public housing there are single people living in large homes while large families remain on the waiting list. For example, a single male is living in a three-bedroom property despite a family waiting for a home. The allocation policy is an issue as it means some public housing properties are underutilised in the area.

While the Housing Authority will provide a bond and one (and in some circumstances, two) week's rent, a bond of \$335 for electricity and \$110 for water must also be paid before a lease will be issued for public housing or private rental. If the applicant has a debt of more than \$1000 with the Housing Authority, they cannot obtain a bond.

Some participants felt that people who require housing have not been asked what they need, and that nobody has thought strategically about housing stock suitability. Other participants felt that tenure for people living in public housing needed to be reassessed regularly so that public housing could more effectively target need; e.g. couples whose children have grown up and moved out are still living in large family homes, or single people living in large homes.

Some participants said that most public housing in Coober Pedy was built in the 1980s and has since deteriorated, leading to increased utilities cost due to the lack of insulation and cooling. The harsh climate in Coober Pedy also contributes to the rapid deterioration of housing. Participants said that there is only one contractor to provide maintenance to public housing properties and they cover Oodnadatta as well, which is costly and slow.

### Overcrowding

Overcrowding was identified as an issue facing many Aboriginal families, due to people from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands staying with relatives in Coober Pedy while they travel down to Adelaide or Port Augusta. This arrangement can put significant financial pressure on the homeowner/tenant in terms of utilities and other living costs, and wear and tear on the home.

Participants said that another contributor to overcrowding is that children of public housing tenants are now raising their children in the same property as their parents as there is no public housing or affordable rentals.

### Homelessness

Roundtable participants discussed the types of homelessness that is experienced by people in Coober Pedy, to give Shelter SA staff a better understanding of the area. Older Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness are most likely to be rough sleepers, while younger people experiencing homelessness are more likely to couch-surf with friends or family. Older Aboriginal people camp near the hospital where they can easily access health care. Workers told us that they were aware of around 10 people

sleeping out at a place called “Double Tanks”. For rough sleepers who drink alcohol, many sleep out in a place called “Wolf Creek” which is more out of sight from police view. Fines for drinking in a dry zone are \$360 and exacerbate financial and poverty issues for people living on low incomes.

While the homelessness service (run by Uniting Country SA) can accept young people as clients, there is no dedicated service to help young people experiencing homelessness in Coober Pedy or the surrounding areas. There used to be a youth shed that operated for young people run by the Council, but because of the Council’s demise this has not been continued and young people fail to find support and activities to keep them empowered and safe.

### [Dry Zone in Neighbouring Aboriginal Community \(Umoona\)](#)

The Aboriginal community wanted a dry zone for Umoona and this has had an impact on homelessness as people who drink alcohol are moved off the lands. Then the only housing option in Coober Pedy is in the private rental market and if a person cannot manage their tenancy, they will end up being evicted or blacklisted by real estate agents.

### [Home Ownership](#)

Many participants said home ownership is not an option for the majority of Coober Pedy residents. Participants did not discuss home ownership for long, even though land is very cheap in Coober Pedy, and could improve housing options, availability and accessibility.

### [Anti-Social Behaviour Policy](#)

According to some workers at the roundtable, the Housing Authority’s Anti-Social Behaviour Policy has recently been implemented in Coober Pedy and has resulted in increased evictions and rates of homelessness. Participants were unable to provide the number of evictions that had resulted from the newly introduced policy.

### [Culturally Appropriate Accommodation](#)

Some participants commented that the current thinking around culturally appropriate housing for Aboriginal people has changed since the majority of public housing was built and would now be considered outdated. There are couples and singles living in larger homes and overcrowded families living in unsuitably small homes.

Most Aboriginal peoples will not live in dugouts due to cultural traditions. As roughly 60% of housing in Coober Pedy is underground, more than half of Coober Pedy’s housing options are not appropriate for Aboriginal peoples.

### Council Maladministration

The District Council of Coober Pedy is currently suspended for maladministration, and some participants said that there are many unfinished and vacant public buildings, a proportion of these being due to Council's mismanagement of funds. A lack of local leadership means that residents feel reliant on State or Federal Government to implement change and may feel disempowered to implement innovative solutions without Government support. The response we received from participants when trying to discuss innovative ideas supports this sentiment.

### Past Attempts to Solve Housing Issues

Participants told Shelter SA staff that a transitional housing facility in Coober Pedy was proposed in 2014 to help alleviate homelessness. The Council of Coober Pedy formally opposed the establishment of the facility, in part due to a large majority of the community not supporting it.<sup>5</sup>

The former State Housing Minister, Zoe Bettison, said that the Government identified homelessness and rough sleeping in Coober Pedy as an issue of concern. It appears that the housing and homelessness issues in Coober Pedy have significantly increased since the time of the proposed facility.

Participants were not opposed to the establishment of the facility but said that a lack of education surrounding homelessness in the community contributed to the rejection of the proposal, and many people feared that the facility would attract more people to Coober Pedy experiencing substance abuse issues.

### Solutions from Roundtable Participants

Participants found it difficult to focus on solutions and innovative ideas. However, participants recommended a variety of solutions that would help to ease the housing affordability and homelessness crises in Coober Pedy.

- Coober Pedy needs a domestic violence service that specifically caters to Aboriginal men (perpetrators and victims).
- Due to a lack of crisis accommodation, participants wanted a purpose-built multi-function shelter with at least five bedrooms to cater for singles, couples and families.
- Housing affordability for young people is a major issue; public housing is needed for young people along with tenancy skills education.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-23/coober-pedy-council-says-no-to-homeless-facility/5406158>

- Participants wanted a localised ability to transfer public housing tenants to better match housing to number of occupants and to look at allocation policies to avoid singles being placed in three-bedroom homes.
- While there is a declining and ageing population in Coober Pedy, there is no dedicated aged care facility for non-Aboriginal people in Coober Pedy. Anecdotally, Aboriginal aged care is consistently full and overcrowded. Coober Pedy should have accommodation that better caters for its demographics.
- New smaller housing for ten older Aboriginal people and older couples is needed to free up larger homes and stop rough sleeping and overcrowding within families.
- Five single person's accommodation for people exiting prison is needed to help reduce rates of recidivism and offer safe and secure housing.
- At least 25 more public housing properties should be built to alleviate the existing high overcrowding rate that may include small clusters of Government owned flats to accommodate a range of people.

Vacant buildings and land owned privately and by State Government in Coober Pedy must be utilised more effectively and offer a range of different housing options for the community. Shelter SA staff were given a tour of Coober Pedy and one of the many vacant buildings were a set of eighty self-contained miners' units, which are apparently empty most of the time. There was also an empty and partially constructed gym built on Umoona community land that is unused.





Miners' units in Coober Pedy that are usually vacant.

Shelter SA identified several vacant buildings either owned by State or Local Government that could be repurposed and could make a significant positive difference to the community of Coober Pedy.

### Miscellaneous

Shelter SA staff passed the former Aboriginal Housing Authority, Coober Pedy Office, which is currently vacant as all services are now mainstreamed within the Housing Authority. The building is currently for sale, with nine bedrooms, two bathrooms and four parking spaces, and is currently owned by State Government. There seems to be a common pattern of vacant, unused spaces in Coober Pedy but an obvious need for more social and affordable housing.



The plaque outside the old Aboriginal Housing Authority Coober Pedy Office.



The former office of the Aboriginal Housing Authority for sale.

## Shelter SA Policy Recommendations

### Home Ownership

Home ownership is out of reach for people living on low incomes. To improve housing affordability across the State and in Coober Pedy, Shelter SA recommends the following.

- The Affordable Homes Program is too small to make a difference (especially in regional and rural areas). It is marketed poorly and homes need to stay on the market longer than 30 days to allow time for people to seek finance. At the time of writing there were no properties available on the Program in Coober Pedy.
- The First Home Owner's Grant inflates house prices and should be discontinued.
- People living on low incomes do not qualify to borrow enough money to purchase a home, and deposits are too large to achieve, so alternative finance products are required to make home ownership and/or equity possible. The bottom quintile household income of \$23,712 per annum could borrow \$190,920 from Homestart but would need a deposit of \$23,885. Fortnightly repayments would be \$384, which at 42% of household income, are deemed unaffordable.
- South Australia has the highest stamp duty in Australia, and it should be replaced with a broad land tax to assist home purchases by people living on low incomes.

### Private Rental

To improve affordability in the private rental market across the State and in Coober Pedy and surrounding areas, Shelter SA recommends the following.

- Continue with the State Government private rental assistance program, to provide bond guarantees for people living on low incomes to assist them to attain private rental and address the debt that prevents people from obtaining a bond.
- State Government private rental liaison officer roles are critical to assist people living on low incomes to access private rental, through building relationships with real estate agents and property managers. There should be an increased number of private rental liaison officer roles across the State to assist people access the competitive private rental market. The Housing Authority in Coober Pedy is staffed with less than 2.0 FTE workers and there is no dedicated role for private rental liaison officers, but we understand that staff do work with real estate agents.
- There is no assistance for the bonds payable to connect electricity and water supply in Coober Pedy private rental market and State Government should consider assisting.

- Renting with pets must become standard practice, although this was not raised as an issue at the Coober Pedy roundtable.
- Real estate agents should undergo cultural training and be educated around discrimination in the private rental market and understand the importance of Equal Opportunity Legislation.
- South Australia is lagging behind when it comes to private renter advice and advocacy and Shelter SA advocates for increased resources.
- More work needs to be done on how to incentivise landlords to upgrade insulation, roofing, heating and cooling in Coober Pedy.

### Public Housing

The gap between the cost of rent for public housing properties (at 25% of household income) and private rental properties is widening. The demand for social housing is increasing while the stock is shrinking. State Government must cease the sell-off of public housing, invest in increasing the net supply and open empty properties to our most vulnerable members of society. With a severe lack of emergency accommodation options in regional and rural areas, offering long-term sustainable housing and aged care for people in need would improve housing outcomes in Coober Pedy. Shelter SA advocates for an increase in public housing stock and a review of the Housing Authority's allocation policy.

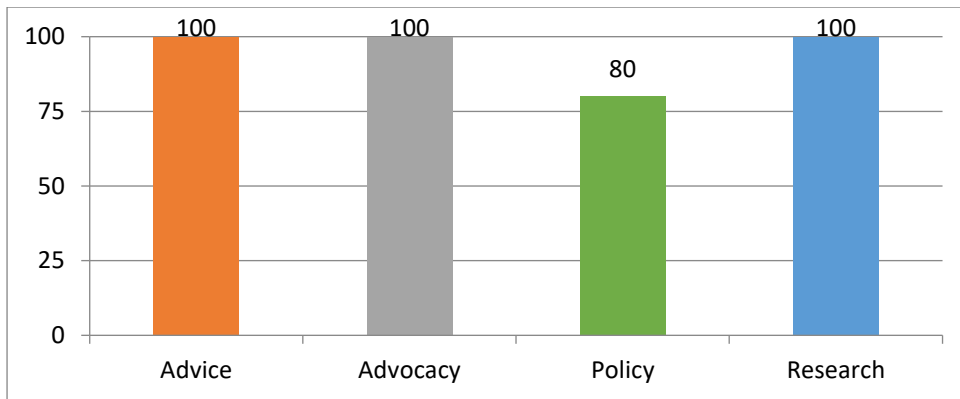
### Crisis Accommodation

Shelter SA urgently recommends the provision of appropriate crisis accommodation in Coober Pedy and more staff resources to work with young, older and Aboriginal peoples from the lands and rough sleepers who face significant barriers to seeking assistance.

### Evaluation

Shelter SA uses an AAPR (advice, advocacy, policy and research) method of evaluating events. Overall, participants were satisfied with the Roundtable and 100% of respondents would recommend it to others. The event received perfect scores across advice, advocacy and research, and policy at 80% satisfaction.





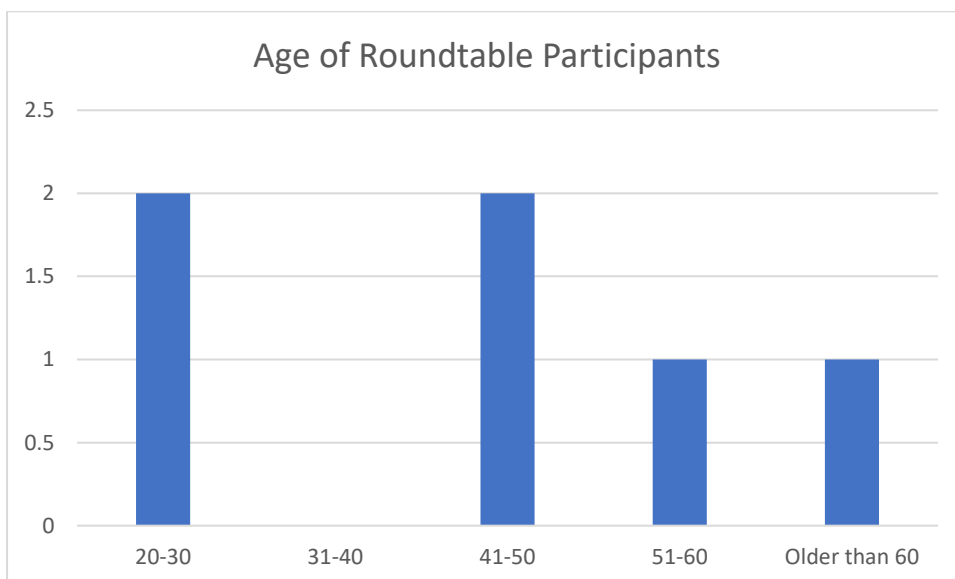
We also asked participants to rank how well they feel we did in 'sector development', in which 100% of respondents were either extremely satisfied or satisfied.

When asked what they most enjoyed, the following comments were made by participants.

I enjoyed being able to network and talk with other agencies and organisations about issues within Coober Pedy.

I liked having a chance to say what I believe are some of the issues in Coober Pedy.

The event was attended by individuals from a range of age groups, as shown below.



**If you wish to provide comments or feedback on this report, please contact us at [sheltersa@sheltersa.asn.au](mailto:sheltersa@sheltersa.asn.au) or (08) 8223 4077.**