From Fragmented to Coordinated

Building stronger systems for young people through Youth Hubs

November 2025

YOUTH ACTION

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and understands that sovereignty was never ceded. Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people, and we recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Youth Action is the peak body representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups. Our vision is for a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged and valued, and their rights are realised. We represent over 150 Member organisations and regularly engage with young people and youth workers from all over the State and have done so for 30 years.

Principles that underpin our work:

- We give a particular focus to regional young people, First Nations young people, those experiencing systemic disadvantage, those with disability, LGBTQIA+, and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees.
- We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches and are informed by data and evidence.
- We are an ally to self-determination of First Nations communities and are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector to be a trusted partner and collaborator.

From Fragmented to Coordinated

Contents

This document reflects the collective voice of young people across NSW, shaped by their diverse backgrounds and life experiences, and is enriched by the knowledge and insights of the Youth Action Hubs Working Group. The organisations who are members of the group and who endorse this document are listed below.

A sincere thank you to all who contributed to the development of this document.

Executive summary

Belonging and connection are at the core of what we need as human beings to survive. Our young people need this as much as any other group in our community, if not more. Building strong, safe foundations for our young people to rely on as they navigate the tumultuous journey into adulthood is fundamental to a thriving, prosperous and cohesive society.

As a society, we have an obligation to build communities where young people are safe, included and are set up to thrive. In the post-pandemic era of rising inequity and weakening social cohesion, these opportunities appear to be increasingly complex to leverage. The systems our young people must navigate have contributed to growing rates of mental health issues, disconnection from education, housing insecurity, economic inequities and exposure to the justice system.

Existing youth services are fragmented, over capacity and under resourced. There is a clear and urgent need for a coordinated, comprehensive and community-based solution that upholds the rights and wellbeing of young people and gives them the foundations to thrive.

Young people have told Youth Action directly that they need dedicated, safe spaces outside of the home. They need places where they can safely spend time socialising and building meaningful relationships, and access to vital services such as healthcare, employment skills and opportunities, and professional youth specific support.

Listening to our young people, recognising their strengths and the importance they carry in a cohesive society, is crucial. Investments in early interventions delivered during this critical transition stage are proven to create immediate and long-term positive outcomes in young people. When we strengthen cross-generational dialogue and youth engagement, we cultivate a deeper sense of support and belonging that can greatly contribute to preventing polarisation, extremism and social isolation throughout our communities. Over time these interventions deliver a stronger and more prosperous economy and numerous social spillover benefits for the entire community.

Youth hubs are a locally-based, integrated support service that provide young people with access to the resources they need to develop essential skills, tailored to their individual needs. They provide a central third place* where young people can spend time with trusted, professionally qualified youth workers and build connections with their peers. Youth hubs offer access to a diverse range of supports and services in non-threatening, relational settings that are truly inclusive. They are agile and respond to the changing needs of the young people who access them. When co-designed, prioritising the centring of young people's needs and voices, they present a best practice model that aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and builds the strong, stable, cohesive communities that help young people flourish.

* A 'third place', a term introduced by Ray Oldenburg in 1989, is a public place that hosts the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond home and work.

This position paper intends to regalvanise momentum and provides a clear rationale as well as insights and actionable recommendations for the establishment and operation of the youth hub model throughout NSW.

It makes the case for strategic investment by showing that youth hubs do more than deliver services; they provide safe, trusted spaces where young people can access support early, preventing issues from escalating into crises. It presents an opportunity to disrupt intergenerational patterns driven by systemic disadvantage and create new pathways of hope and opportunity.

Without such intervention, the alternative is stark: young people risk exposure to preventable harm and trauma that can shape the course of their lives, limit their potential, and perpetuate disadvantage across generations. In contrast, youth hubs enable early engagement, strengthen protective factors, and reduce the long-term social, psychological, health and economic costs associated with homelessness, justice involvement, unemployment, and poor mental health.

By positioning youth hubs as both a preventive and transformative social infrastructure, this paper demonstrates their value as a smart investment that shifts the trajectory for young people and their families, from cycles of harm to pathways of opportunity.

The accompanying document, *The Youth Hubs Appendix*, details the specific puzzle pieces and resources necessary to bring these spaces alive.

Together, they affirm that the youth hubs model is more than just a service. It is a holistic, flexible, community-led early intervention that changes life trajectories. It offers government a financially sustainable, cost-effective investment, with the power to prevent unnecessary harm occurring, break cycles of poverty and trauma, and deliver high impact where it is needed most.

The context

Adolescence represents the second critical window of opportunity in brain development. This is a period when social, cognitive, and emotional systems are rapidly reorganised, making early intervention especially impactful (Fuhrmann, Knoll, & Blakemore, 2015). When a young person feels safe and nurtured by a trusted network during adolescence, they build the confidence and resilience to navigate these transitions.

Research tells us that a connection with just one caring, mentor-like adult outside of the home can have significant impacts on a young person, particularly for those at risk of experiencing social or psychological complexities. Young people with these relationships are more likely to show resilience during challenges, volunteer in the community, be engaged with school and have a reduce likelihood of negative outcomes (Murphy, Bandy, Schmitz, & Moore, 2013).

When a young person experiences major disturbances or disadvantage in this period, they may develop symptoms of trauma without support. Collectively recognising the immense opportunity that targeting interventions and services to young people at this stage presents will grow their resilience, skills and strengthens the whole community.
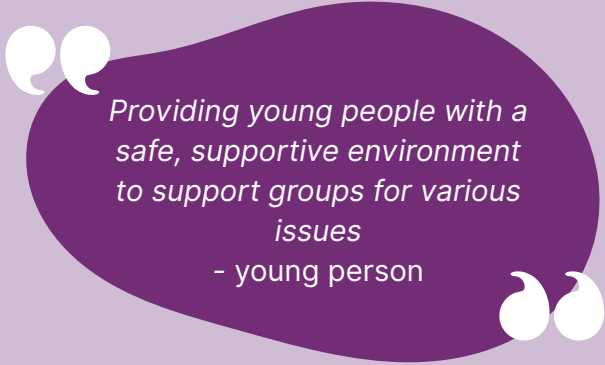
For young people who are experiencing harm in their relationships, early interventions are widely recognised as critical. When harm occurs in relationships, research from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) indicates that the likelihood of health risk behaviours and mental disorders are notably increased (Haslam et al. 2023). When we consider that more than 60% of Australia's total population had experienced at least one type of child maltreatment in 2023, and 40% of young people had experienced multi-type maltreatment (Haslam et al. 2023), it is imperative that early interventions are implemented.

The opportunity to experience healthy, positive, supportive relationships is directly linked to healing. Youth workers are uniquely skilled in delivering interventions and connecting with young people in non-threatening and youth-centred ways, leading to reduced barriers to help-seeking and greater engagement with supports. They are highly adept at developing relationships with young people that encourage the healing and rebuilding of relational schemas. When professional youth workers and access to multiple services are available in a welcoming, safe space, we create opportunities for growth and a sense of stability for young people, and positive ripple effects across the whole community.

Young people and the youth sector have consistently and unequivocally called for safe, inclusive "third places" beyond home and school.

In Youth Action's consultations on social cohesion (Youth Action, 2025), youth justice (Youth Action, 2024), and the key tenets of youth work(Youth Action 2024), these spaces emerge as a recurring priority: environments that foster belonging, connection, and access to trusted support. This is not an isolated view. Across the NSW youth sector, organisations repeatedly report the same message from young people themselves. The consistent demand underscores that safe third places are not optional extras but essential infrastructure for promoting health and wellbeing, preventing disengagement, and providing guidance and support at critical points in young people's lives.

Providing young people with a safe, supportive environment to support groups for various issues
- young person

Having the opportunity to do things, where you can connect with other young people – join local sport clubs, music, bands, anything allows you to connect with young people in community. Get to know other young people helps to feel a sense of belonging
- young person

Caleb's* Story

Caleb* was aged 14 when he first arrived on the Central Coast with his mum. Caleb was a survivor of family violence and throughout childhood had experienced housing insecurity and homelessness. These experiences left him carrying symptoms of trauma, including significant mental health impacts. Life for Caleb often felt uncertain and unsafe.

This sense of the world being unsafe spilled over into his classroom, impacting his ability to learn and connect with others. His adaptive response of hypervigilance to the world around him made it hard for him to focus on learning, leaving him far behind his peers and intensifying his mental health symptoms.

Caleb sought belonging and safety. He connected with a local gang, which reinforced what he had learned in his family, that using violence was a way to stay safe.

When Caleb moved to the Central Coast, he once again found himself feeling scared, alone and in a place that was unfamiliar. He began carrying a knife and one day came to the attention of police after making threats to use it. This resulted in Caleb being referred to a program delivered at the local youth hub.

Caleb walked into the centre that first day all swagger and bravado, but the skilled youth workers saw past the pretence to the funny, thoughtful and frightened young person that the mask hid. They got to know him and built trust with him, role modelling that relationships can be safe. The team reinforced to him what they saw –his courage, quick wit and willingness to show up. They got to know what would best help him grow – a smaller school, mentoring, workshops to learn about expressing emotions, and a part time job. His confidence in himself and connection to his community grew.

Today Caleb is thriving. He's doing well at school, has started an apprenticeship, and has not had any police incidents since completing the programs at the hub. These days, Caleb still drops into the hub to say hello, showing how connected and safe he feels there; how important this place is to his sense of belonging.

His mum says, "I'm beyond grateful that, for the first time, my son can see his own potential."

Caleb's experience demonstrates how the support of a hub has long-lasting positive impacts on young people and their community.

* Name has been changed

Young people's experience in NSW

Young people between ages 10–24 are in a critical developmental period during which they navigate complex social, emotional and cognitive transitions where they benefit from additional support

Source: Emerging Minds, 2020

The housing crisis is seriously impacting young people

1 in 3

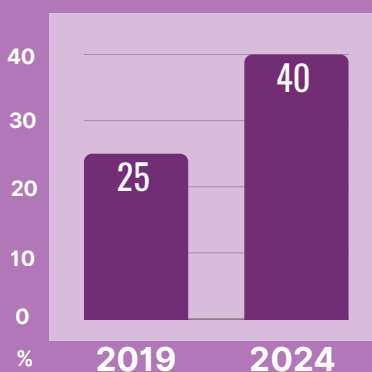1 in 3 people accessing specialist homelessness services are between 12-17 years old

Source: AIHW, 2025

Of all states, NSW has the highest number of unaccompanied 12-17 year olds seeking specialist housing assistance

Source: AIHW, 2025

Engagement with education is still recovering post-COVID

40		40
30		
20	25	
10		
0		
%	2019	2024

The proportion of students attending less than 90% of school days has increased substantially since 2019
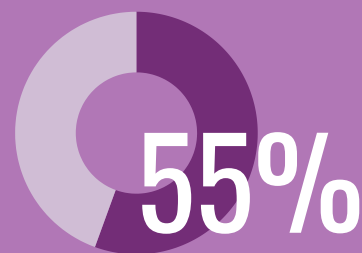
Source: NSW Education, 2025

Economic disadvantage and insecurity is widespread

1 in 5

1 in 5 people aged 14-19 reported experiencing financial hardship in 2022-23

Source: Mission Australia & Orygen, 2023

55%

55% of those young people were concerned about financial security

Source: Mission Australia & Orygen, 2023

Employment pathways are uncertain for young people

The rate of youth unemployment is more than double the overall state figure

Source: Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025

4%

NSW total unemployment

9%

NSW youth unemployment

Early age exposure to the youth justice system is proven to increase the likelihood of further exposure later in life

Young people under youth justice supervision are more likely to have experienced maltreatment and neglect, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, parental incarceration and trouble at school
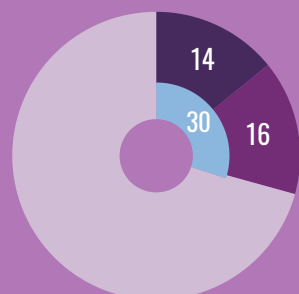
Source: AIHW, 2022

34%
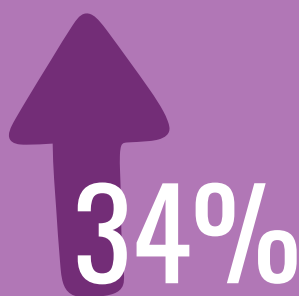
34% more young people are being held in custody in June 2025 compared to June 2023

Source: BOCSAR, 2025

Family and domestic violence (FDV) is often underreported

Fear of retaliation, feelings such as shame and embarrassment, and cultural barriers often play a role

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2009

30% of victims who experienced FDV assault in the 12 months to June 2025 were under the age of 25, of which almost half were children
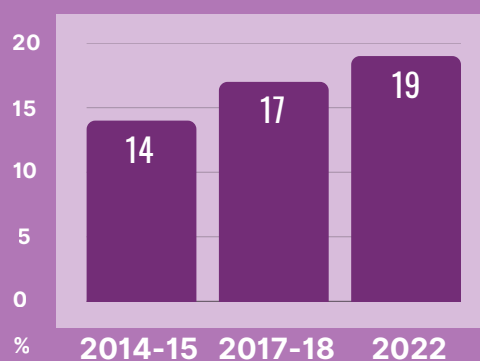
Source: BOSCAR, 2025

- 14
- 30
- 16

- Under 18
- 18 - 24
- Under 25

Mental health services are fragmented or limited

The prevalence of a mental or behavioural condition in those aged 0-24 years old has been increasing

Source: ABS National Health Survey, 2022

	2014-15	2017-18	2022
%	14	17	19

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are over represented in key areas
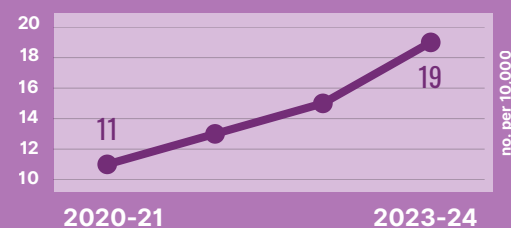
x10 Aboriginal young people are 10x more likely to be incarcerated than non-Aboriginal young people

Source: DCJ, 2025

The rate of Aboriginal young people in custody (X per 10,000) has been growing since 2020-21

Source: Productivity Commission, 2025

(no. per 10,000)
2020-21: 11
2023-24: 19

This data underscores what we already know. There are serious gaps in the services available to young people, and without additional early interventions, we risk further entrenching the systemic issues that increase vulnerabilities disturbing this critical developmental period. They are stark reminders that more is needed to support the positive trajectory of young people's lives in NSW. As laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), young people are entitled to learn, grow and thrive. We have a societal obligation to our young people to ensure they have the opportunities and support they need now, and to grow into the healthy, secure adults of our future community. Youth hubs are an evidenced-based, cost-effective and adaptable intervention capable of addressing these challenges and uplifting future outcomes for young people.
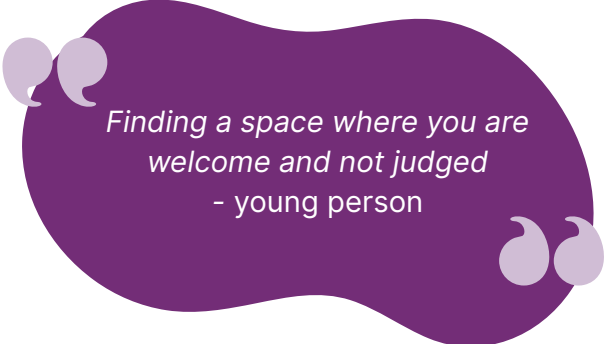
Youth hubs as best practice

Youth hubs are integrated, accessible spaces that foster young people's personal, social and professional development. They bring together the many services that are recognised as key to intervening early to reduce harm and build a young person's capacity to thrive.

This 'one-stop-shop' model amplifies and better coordinates holistic care for young people, smoothing the referral pathway through incidental contact with services that reduce anxiety and increase the likelihood of engagement. Using youth-led co-design to embed what is needed within each unique community, they provide the opportunities and targeted support that contribute to growing young people's overall wellbeing and future success. Importantly, they are staffed by specialist youth workers with the expertise to best cultivate this environment and leverage these networks.

Finding a space where you are welcome and not judged
- young person

More places that young people of different communities feel more welcomed and connected to their community
- young person

While each youth hub is different, there are common elements that they share:
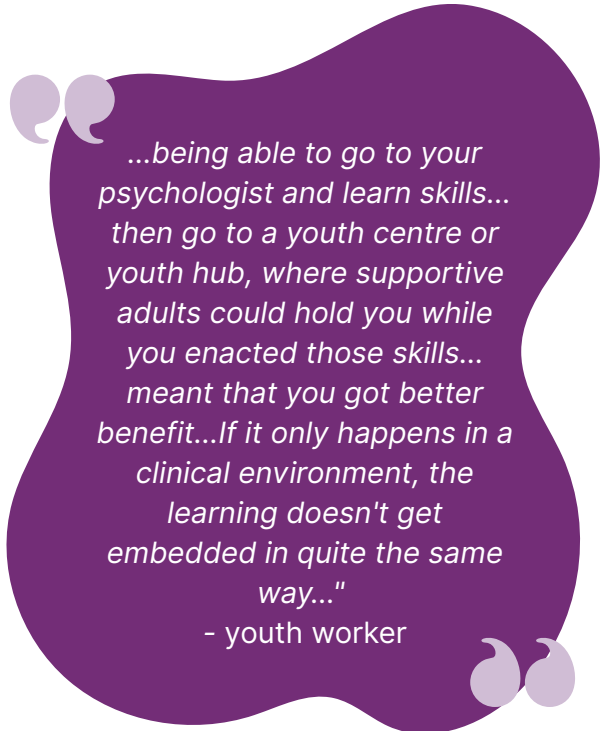
- Permanent full-time, highly trained staff, including intensive support youth workers
- A central and accessible location, ideally located near to public transportation
- Regular activities to promote socialisation, recreation and life skills building and development
- A youth friendly environment that is culturally capable, accessible, inclusive and co-designed with young people
- Support services and resources to access employment and education pathways, and accommodation supports
- Help to access government services, including onsite opportunities
- Partnerships with external service providers and stakeholders, such as community nurses, youth homelessness services, counselling support, to assist in the delivery of key services and supports, including outreach service delivery

The staff working in youth hubs are crucial to building positive outcomes for young people. Core staff are trusted leaders with a strong understanding of their local community, highly trained in trauma-informed and rights-based care, cultural capability and operate under child-safe principles and mandatory reporting obligations. Youth workers thoughtfully build relationships with young people that transform workers into a vital and informal source of education and supports separate to other traditional authority figures.

This unique relational approach of youth workers embodies the 'super shrink' notion explored by Scott Miller (Duncan & Miller, 2008), where youth workers create better client outcomes due to the strength of their therapeutic relationship. For young people who have experienced trauma, the ability to build a trusting relationship is vital, helping them form new and healthier relational patterns. Strong therapeutic relationships are the most powerful predictor of positive outcomes, contributing to about 30 percent of a young person's progress, more than any single technique or model (Asay & Lambert, 1992).
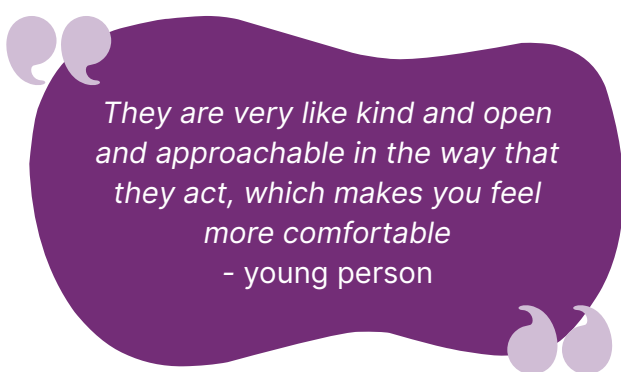
Youth hubs are community-led and function collaboratively, intentionally centralising multiple services through the leadership of hubs staff. The combination of the warm, relational practice that builds trust with young people and an intimate knowledge of their local community's services allows youth workers to provide soft referrals and meaningful, ongoing support. These dedicated professionals are the binding thread that effectively bring together both the ancillary services and the young people themselves. They cultivate a sense of welcoming and trust with young people that keeps them engaged with services, prevents disengagement and contact with the justice system, and enables them to develop the skills and experiences they need to thrive.

...being able to go to your psychologist and learn skills... then go to a youth centre or youth hub, where supportive adults could hold you while you enacted those skills... meant that you got better benefit...If it only happens in a clinical environment, the learning doesn't get embedded in quite the same way..."
- youth worker

They are very like kind and open and approachable in the way that they act, which makes you feel more comfortable
- young person

> *...we are locally embedded and relationship-based, we can pivot where the community needs to go and incubate programs that genuinely reflect local needs*
> *- youth worker*

communities respond to these systemic challenges, encouraging an environment that uplifts rather than stigmatises young people.

Youth hubs are deliberately culturally capable and inclusive environments which welcome diverse young people into their spaces and cultivate belonging. Youth hubs are inherently place-based and incorporate learnings of the varied communities they serve, including understandings about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and multicultural backgrounds. Young people thrive when they know they are an active and embraced member of their community. This is intentionally built into the way hubs establish themselves; they not only create a safe, culturally capable and inclusive space for young people, but they model, educate and work with their wider communities to share this approach.

Furthermore, youth hubs engage with the network of adults around young people, increasing their reach and impact. Families, schools and other community supports in contact with young people can access hubs to refer young people, engage in training or access resources. This reinforces the community-building aspect of a hub and deepens the wraparound effect, fostering an ecosystem of care and belonging. This is particularly critical for those young people at risk of engagement with radicalisation and extremism and can provide "safe off-ramps and support" (Step Together, 2025) for those already engaged in these spaces.
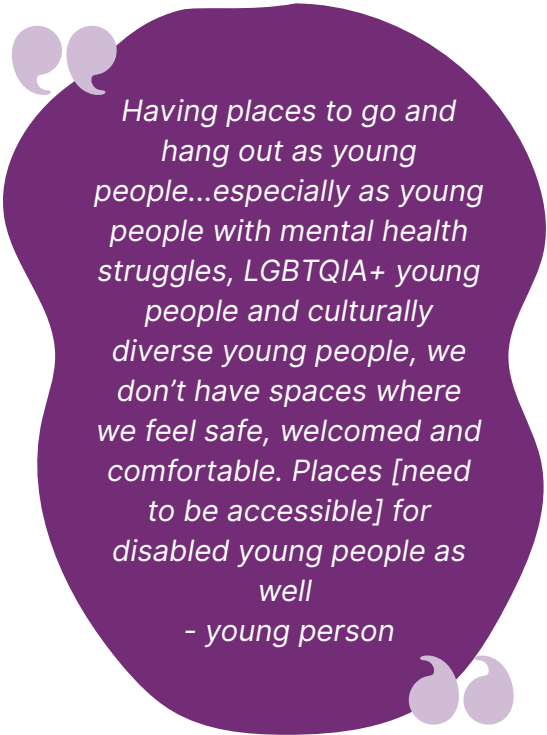
Positive benefits can ripple across the whole ecosystem to empower each individual working with a young person to focus on the support or service they are best placed to provide. The collaborative nature of hubs strengthens the capacity of other workers and families, reduces service duplication, strengthens referral pathways and helps
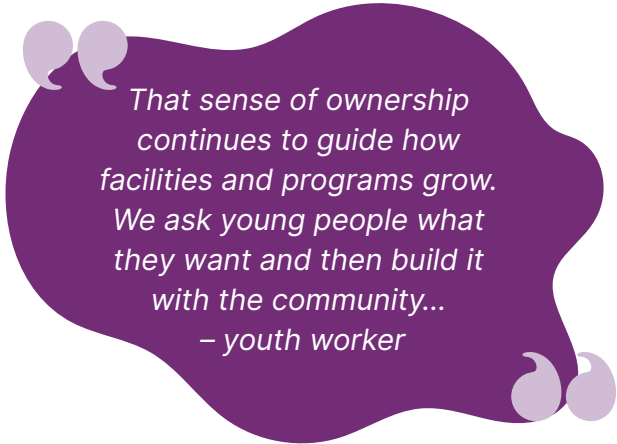
> *Having places to go and hang out as young people that are LGBTQIA+, disability friendly and accommodating of all cultures*
> *- young person*

> *Having places to go and hang out as young people...especially as young people with mental health struggles, LGBTQIA+ young people and culturally diverse young people, we don't have spaces where we feel safe, welcomed and comfortable. Places [need to be accessible] for disabled young people as well*
> *- young person*

In addition, hubs do not have to be fixed sites or tied to a physical building. Street outreach work embodying the hubs approach is an excellent example of adaptive and inclusive service provision, particularly as these services meet young people where they are and are best placed to connect with difficult to reach groups. This implementation of a youth hub is also especially powerful during major incidents, such as environmental disasters, as they can be mobilised to respond rapidly. Prioritising cultural capability and inclusion in design and delivery is a major strength of the youth hub model and vital to reach and engage young people of all cultures and backgrounds.

Youth hubs naturally adapt to their surroundings, using nearby resources to maximise benefits. This may look like hubs co-located near universities or TAFEs offering student placements or volunteer positions, or the integration of a social enterprise, such as a café, led by young people who gain experience through their services during hours that meet young people's needs. Many times, satellite and street outreach approaches do this especially well, integrating with local social enterprises or education providers to reengage young people with work or learning on their terms. These integrations serve ground hubs in their local community and embed a sense of belonging and safety for young people that positively impacts their ongoing development. They also serve to break down barriers, including negative community perceptions of young people, and siloed service provision, promoting broader social cohesion.

> *That sense of ownership continues to guide how facilities and programs grow. We ask young people what they want and then build it with the community...*
> *– youth worker*

Gemma's* Story

Gemma is a young Aboriginal woman who has been coming to her local youth hub on and off for several years. Throughout her life, she has faced experiences that deeply affected her sense of safety and stability.

Growing up around family violence, and later experiencing violence in her own relationships, took a significant toll on her mental health and left her without a safe place to live. Living in fear, poverty and insecurity while coping with the mental health impacts of experiencing trauma led Gemma to use alcohol and other drugs. Gemma's children were taken into the care of the Minister, compounding her distress with immense grief.

Gemma arrived at the hub, isolated and overwhelmed. The youth workers welcomed her with genuine warmth and care. They got to know her, understand what she needed support with, and connected her with support services. Over time, this consistent kindness built a strong, trusting relationship. The hub became a place where Gemma felt safe to come back whenever things became difficult.

After completing a rehabilitation program, the hub was the first place Gemma returned to. She knew the hub was a place where people cared about her and would be genuinely pleased to see her and celebrate her success.

Having access to computers, help navigating government services, and practical essentials like food and clothing made a real difference during some of the hardest moments of her life. These supports helped Gemma stay connected, regain control, and move forward with confidence.

Even though she is now older than the hub's usual age range, staff continue to welcome her, remaining a steady presence in her life because the hub is part of her community. This continuity has created a rare kind of trust. For her, the youth hub is more than a service; it's a safe harbour in a life often marked by instability.

Her story reflects the unique value of youth hubs: places that respond not just with programs, but with people who care, spaces that adapt to the needs of those who return, and a culture that honours resilience, autonomy, and the right to be supported without conditions.

* Name has been changed

A part of the youth hubs models appeal is its cost effectiveness. A recent report by The Front Project, CoLab, Woodside Energy and EIF found that the economic burden of inaction on addressing youth health and development issues is substantial. Disregard for early intervention measures for Australia's young people in 2024 cost the economy $22.3b, with NSW spending $6.4b – the most of all states and territories (O'Connell, 2025). This cost includes youth justice, which in 2023-2024 averaged at $2,814 per day or over $1m annually for each child held on remand (Productivity Commission, 2025). In comparison, the costs associated with running a youth hub for a year, excluding building costs, sits at less than approximately $700k (Youth Action, 2025). While it is a moral obligation that we improve the lives of young people, there is a very distinct economic benefit to doing so through early interventions.

Existing youth hubs across NSW are concrete proof that these models are more than aspirations. They demonstrate that building and operating wraparound services designed for young people using this model can make a meaningful impact on youth outcomes, grow social cohesion and do so at a low cost.

Youth hubs are a powerful tool to strengthen social cohesion and empower young people to be active, valued community members. The services that hubs provide build agency, connection and stability in young people, which in turn creates positive impacts for everyone. These impacts have significant alignment with the NSW Human Services Outcome Framework (Department of Communities and Justice, 2025), and can directly contribute to achievements in multiple domains, including social and community, safety, education and skills, economic and health. Hubs are financially prudent and flexible interventions that address the diverse needs of young people, ultimately helping to shape our young people as the assets they are for themselves and our communities.

Case study: One 3 One Youth Hub

The One 3 One Youth Hub (the Hub) was run by Regional Youth Support Service (RYSS) and operated between July 2022 and April 2024 on the NSW Central Coast. The Hub assisted young people aged 12 – 25 with a wide range of supports and services delivered in collaboration with community organisations and service providers. These vital services were identified by RYSS as critical for the young people in the region, who face higher rates of homelessness (Homelessness NSW, 2021), mental health conditions (Mental Health Commission of NSW, 2022) and exposure to family and domestic violence (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2024) than their counterparts in metropolitan areas.

The Hub operated based on a deep understanding of effective, regional youth service delivery and knowledge of the community's needs. The Hub was carefully curated by local youth sector experts; however, a key aspect that enabled its success was its flexibility to adapt delivery over time.

The Hub was reactive to the changing preferences and needs of young people, using youth views and feedback to guide improvements. Young people's intimate knowledge of their local areas was integrated into service provision, informing programs implemented in the Peninsula and guiding content produced for the RYSS

podcast. This adaptive programming and genuine, ongoing co-design exemplifies best practice under Article 12 of the UNCRC.

The Hub was extensively used and received high praise from adjacent organisations and the young people and families it served. A Newcastle University research report that evaluated the Hub surveyed those accessing or working with One 3 One, and found the vast majority rated the services as a four out of five or higher (Krogh, Dimmock, & Buykx, 2024). One 3 One averaged 10 new referrals each week and more than 3,000 young people engaged with the Hub in the two years it was operating, highlighting the extreme demand and value of this assistance.

Despite this impact, without a new source of funding and the expiry of the Australian Government's Safer Communities grant funding, the One 3 One Hub had to close. The Central Coast region is forecast to increase population to over 400,000 over the next 20 years (.id [Informed Decisions], 2024), which will undoubtedly increase the demand for support. For service providers in regional communities, the existing and looming pressures on their ability to deliver quality services for their communities is a genuine and urgent concern.

Case study: Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario

Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario (YWHO) is a Canadian program that manages over 30 youth hubs throughout Ontario. YWHO were developed to address high rates of young people experiencing mental health and addiction disorders, recognising that reaching individuals during adolescence was the optimal time to reduce the long-term impacts (Henderson et al., 2017). The first 10 hub sites were selected in 2017 and opened their doors in 2019, funded by both the provincial government and philanthropic sources. Using an evidence-based approach that acknowledges the complex reasons leading to these experiences in young people, the YWHOs were designed to streamline access to a wide range of supports with low barriers to entry.

The YWHOs are especially significant due to their longevity and scale, particularly resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first hubs had been running for only a year before lockdowns required operations to pivot to a majority virtual environment. The rapid transition forced hubs to be dynamic and to extend outreach to ensure young people knew they were available as supports, inadvertently raising wider awareness and reaching groups of young people that are often considered hard to reach. In response to YWHOs making a substantial contribution to the Ontario government's strategy to improve mental health, and the increased demand on the services during the pandemic, additional hub locations were expanded to 14 in 2021, and to 22 in 2022.

The success of the YWHO program is embedded in their execution of known, key principles of effective youth hubs. Each site implements a set of core features, including accessible and culturally sensitive services, coordinated governance, centralisation of community supports and family and youth engagement. However, each hub is locally led and adapted to offer or connect their resident young people with the specific services they need, at a single, youth-friendly access point.

YWHOs also implement goal-based outcomes, supporting young people to articulate and evaluate their service needs through developing personal goals they hope to achieve by using the hub (Chiodo etal., 2025). This maintains an ongoing feedback loop that keeps hub activities informed by youth experiences. By approaching service delivery in this coordinated and community-led manner, the model represents an efficient investment that has contributed to the ongoing government and philanthropic funding and generated widespread community support.

Recommendations

1

MAP WHAT'S WORKING AND WHAT'S MISSING

a. Undertake a statewide mapping project to pinpoint where services are strong, where gaps exist, and identify what areas young people most need support.

b. Use this evidence to target funding where it will make the biggest difference, including those areas that will most contribute to focus areas including Closing the Gap and the NSW Human Services Outcome Framework .

2

BUILD MORE YOUTH HUBS

a. Invest now in our young people by funding 15 new youth hubs across NSW, prioritising communities experiencing the greatest disadvantage, and those areas with the highest numbers of young people. Ensure least nine are locate in regional areas.

b. Boost impact by backing 10 existing hubs, including four in regional areas that need extra support.

3

CENTRE YOUNG PEOPLE IN EVERY DECISION

a. Ensure young people are at the heart of youth hub design by embedding genuine co-design processes that support them to lead design and delivery and shape outcomes. This honours Article 12 of the UNCRC, affirming their right to be heard and to have their views given real influence.

4

FUND TRUSTED LOCAL LEADERS

a. Direct youth hub funding to established, community-trusted organisations that can coordinate services around the hub.

b. Hubs should be whole-of-community driven but coordinated by one accountable local organisation to ensure clarity and impact.

5

PRIORITISE ABORIGINAL LEADERSHIP

a. Prioritise funding for Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, especially where most young people accessing the hub are First Nations.

b. This ensures self-determination, cultural safety, connection, and local leadership are at the heart of every hub.

6

ACT NOW WITH INTERIM SUPPORT

While new hubs are being built, create immediate support for young people by:

a. Working with local councils to identify existing and underused spaces that could be repurposed as youth hubs.

b. Appointing youth workers in other government spaces, including libraries, to extend youth support and inclusion across communities.

c. Fund Youth Hubs to operate beyond 9–5pm to be genuinely accessible, meeting young people at the times they most need support, opportunities and a safe place to connect.

7

KEEP MOMENTUM AND ACCOUNTABILITY

a. Commit to regular consultations between the Minister for Youth Justice, the Minister for Community and Families, the Minister for Youth, the Minister for Health, the Minister for Education, and the Office for Youth, in partnership with youth hub experts (including the Youth Action Youth Hub Working Group), emphasising that all departments share responsibility for making the system easier for young people to navigate and ensuring they can access the support they need.

b. Support the development of a clear, consistent, and transparent outcomes framework co-designed with young people and the youth sector. This will strengthen service quality, improve value for money, and drive continuous improvement, leading to lasting positive outcomes for young people and their families.

This ensures ongoing collaboration, transparency, and progress in delivering youth hubs across NSW.

Conclusion

The time is now for the NSW government to take the opportunity, invest in the young people of NSW, and make a genuine difference to their lives and the communities that support them. Delaying early intervention is no longer viable and is driving avoidable social and economic problems across the state.

Youth hubs are a proven, evidence-based and cost-effective solution. They connect young people to opportunity, belonging and hope; particularly for those young people who might otherwise slip through the cracks.

Not only do youth hubs fill critical gaps in support for young people, but they also have the potential to respond to an ever-growing community need. They have clearly demonstrated this ability to create meaningful change both in NSW and across the globe.

Hubs are not just smart policy, they are a smart investment. Every dollar spent on hubs is an investment in our young people, our families, and our current and future communities. By coordinating community-led services and bringing people together, youth hubs strengthen connection, reduce disadvantage, and build thriving communities where everyone belongs.

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Appendix

Costings and economic case

The funding needed to establish or support the operation of a youth hub varies based on location, opening hours, number and type of programs delivered, and other variables. What is compelling about the economics of youth hubs is that numerous focus areas of significance to the NSW government are addressed by the activities and services delivered. Of note, there are multiple domains of the NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework that would be advanced with the scaling up of the youth hubs model across the state. This includes in social and community, education and skills, economic, health and safety domains. This multidimensional impact of hubs produces a higher return on investment than alternative propositions or interventions.

One such significant example for NSW is the RYSS One3One Youth Hub. Annual costs of operating the Gosford hub were approximately $700,000. Notably, short terms of limited funding put the young people these organisations support at great risk. Consistent, long-term funding provides better outcomes for young people and further ongoing economic and social benefits.

Youth hub or program	State	Funding received	Funding period	Notes
RYSS Youth Hub	NSW	$1,455,570 (federal)	Two years	Funding for the establishment and operation of a youth hub
Humanity Matters	NSW	$1,638,286 (federal)	Two and half years	Funding for street outreach delivery and programs using youth hub model
Lebanese Muslim Association Youth Hub	NSW	$653,125 (federal)	One year	Funding to trial a youth hub; the hub is now ongoing
Ceduna Youth Hub	SA	$825,000 (federal)	Two years	Funding for operation of the hub
Fitzroy Crossing Night Space	WA	$285,000 (mixed source)	One year	Funding for a trial, including building refurbishment costs
Youth Off the Streets	NSW & QLD	$1,099,051 (federal)	Two years	Funding for street outreach delivery and programs using youth hub model
Brotherhood of St Laurence Thrive Hubs	VIC	$1,306,500 (federal)	Two years	Funding to trial and establish youth hubs; the Thrive Hubs are now ongoing

Early interventions provide a higher return on investment

There is a wealth of evidence that supports the strong economic case for early intervention. Youth hubs are a holistic and multidimensional approach, meaning they are capable of having far reaching impacts across multiple areas when successfully implemented.
The below table demonstrates what can be financially expected when we invest in early interventions.

One such significant example for NSW is the RYSS One3One Youth Hub. Annual costs of operating the Gosford hub were approximately $700,000. Notably, short terms of limited funding put the young people these organisations support at great risk. Consistent, long-term funding provides better outcomes for young people and further ongoing economic and social benefits.

Financial implication	Focus area	Source
Return on investment of $2.41-$2.87 for every $1 spent	Programs that address loneliness	KMPG for the Australian National Mental Health Commission (2019)
Return on investment of $7.90 for every $1 spent	Preventative or early intervention for young people at risk of anxiety or depression	KMPG (2018)
Return on investment of $10.50 for every $1 spent	Early intervention for young people experiencing initial onset psychosis	KMPG (2018)
Return on investment of $2 for every $1 spent over a 10-year period	Early intervention that prevents additional young people entering child protection or out-of-home-care (Victoria)	Social Ventures Australia for Berry Street (2020)
$65.7m in economic benefits as a result of $19m in expenditure	Enhancing social cohesion through early interventions, measured via overall life improvement, gainful employment, development outcomes for young people, and volunteering rates	Deloitte for the National Community Hubs Program (2023)
$2,704 lost for each child and young person in Australia every year + $22.3b spent on late interventions	Lack of early intervention in multiple domains, including child protection, justice, mental and physical health and family violence	The Front Project, CoLab, Woodside Energy and EIF (2024)
Return on investment of $6 for every $1 spent	Program addressing youth homelessness, when compared to the cost of operating the current specialisation homelessness services in operation	Accenture for The Foyer Foundation (2022)

Non-financial outcomes and other evidence

Non-financial outcomes

Direct outcomes of the impact of youth hubs and hub model programs can be difficult to track and discern. Limited periods of funding and extremely stretched resourcing in the organisations that pioneer this work results in little time for highly detailed evaluation. However, in conversations with young people, community and service providers, it is clear the programs have significant impact. Below is a non-exhaustive list of non-financial impacts that have been identified by organisations who have had the opportunity to conduct reviews and evaluation of impacts of their services.

Organisation	Outcome
BackTrack (Armidale, NSW)	Youth crime rates dropped by 52% in Armidale between 2006–2013 following the establishment of BackTrack.
	Engagement with BackTrack supported improved employment and education outcomes, with 85% of young people completing the program pursuing either one after engaging with the program.
Fitzroy Crossing Night Space (Fitzroy Crossing, WA)	Monthly rates of youth crime in Fitzory Crossing reduced by 43% after a year of operation.
Youth One Stop Shops (YOSS) (New Zealand)	Self-evaluation data from young people noted that accessing the hub service resulted in improvements to mental health - 52% of those experiencing some difficulties, and 58% of those experiencing complex needs reported improvements.
	Self-evaluation data from young people noted that 94% of those engaging with the hub service felt that it was effective in helping them.
Foundry (Canada)	Self-reported data from young people following engagement in the program found 70% improved school or work engagement.
	Self-reported data from young people found physical health improvements from 68% of participants
	Self-reported data from young people found mental health improvements of 77% of participants following engagement

NSW Health Alcohol and Oher Drug Hubs

The rollout of NSW Health's Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Hubs are a clear example of the NSW Government's acceptance and support for integrated, hub-model interventions. Catalysed by the 2018 Special Commission of Inquiry into the Drug Ice, NSW Health directed funding to 12 expert organisations to broaden access to support in this space. Like the youth hub model, the AOD Hubs are inclusive and place-based, providing an accessible one-stop-shop for people seeking assistance with substance use. AOD Hubs provide holistic, wraparound care and connect people with numerous ancillary services, such as counselling and peer support, government programs, community groups and housing supports.

This commitment to scale and provide ongoing funding, signals that the NSW Government is not only aware of the strength and impact of hub-models; but are active supporters of the approach. Applying this intervention, with a focus on improving outcomes for young people, is then arguable not a novel or risky investment, but a logical extension of a government endorsed model.

Youth hubs models

The significance of the youth hub as a model, not a physical location

One key factor of the success of the youth hub model is tied to its inherent adaptability and community-led nature. Each youth hub is unique and will change as the needs of its community change.

This means hubs do not have to be tied to one physical space and can tailor youth services towards one or a few specified areas as determined by community need, while still enacting a youth hubs model. This could mean:

- Street outreach
- Employment and career pathways
- Refugee and newly settled migrant
- Mental health

What is key to youth hubs is the inclusion of the central components that enable true wraparound support and meet young people where they are, on their terms. These include:

- Led and supported by professional youth workers who cultivate therapeutic relationships
- Facilitating access to multiple services and resources, and providing soft entry points for referral
- Fostering an environment that is accessible, inclusive and culturally capable, tailored to the needs of the community it serves
- Initially and iteratively co-designed with young people

Staffing

A core hubs model ideally has five full time employees. It should be noted that services will differ in terms of hours of operation, and that for those providing support 24/7 additional costs would be incurred. Core staff must be trained in mental health first aid, trauma-informed care, cultural awareness and safety training, rights based training, and reporting requirements.

- Intensive youth support workers x 3
- Centre manager x 1
- Activities officer x 1
- Aboriginal youth support workers (as appropriate)

Activities

Scheduled activities in a hub will vary throughout the year and will be tailored to each community. Activities that may be offered could include:

- Individualised support work (culturally appropriate)
- Job placement
- Job preparation including fetes and presentations
- Support to obtain a drivers' licence, white cards, etc.
- Leadership and advocacy training
- Family reconnection and reunification
- Sport and sport camps
- Other physical recreation
- Arts camps and classes
- Drama and music classes
- Provision of material assistance, such as clothing, sanitary or hygiene products, etc.
- Provision of food
- Intensive education programs
- Accommodation supports
- Outreach, including street programs
- Mentorship programs

Support services

- Nurses, including those specialising in sexual health, substance use, etc.
- Regularly visiting GPs
- Counsellors, psychologists or formal linkages to a local mental health service
- Nutritionists
- Legal Aid
- Case workers
- Connection and access assistance to government services, including:
  - Centrelink
  - Social housing
  - NDIS
  - LAC (local area coordination partners)
- Education and skills-building – these opportunities should be positioned close to local schools and have links to NSW TAFE, other alternative learning institutions and social enterprises
- Connection to employment services

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