



# Youth Action Key Recommendations

What matters to young people in 2023

May 2023



# Acknowledgement of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We understand that sovereignty was never ceded and recognise their continuing connection to lands, languages, waters, and cultures.

Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people. We recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.



# About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We work towards a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged, valued, and have their rights realised. We represent over 150 Member organisations and regularly engage with young people and youth workers from all over the state, as we have for over 30 years.

We give a particular focus to young people who are regional, First Nations, LGBTIQA+, with disability, from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees, and doing it tough. 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 the self-determination of First Nations communities, are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector, and work to be a trust-worthy partner and collaborator.

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# Summary

The past three years have been tough for young people in NSW, with the pandemic, fires and floods and the ongoing intergenerational inequity. The combination of these events has seen young people fall further behind. These events have caused increased poverty and housing insecurity, homelessness, disengagement from education and an increase in mental health issues, and further compounding these issues has been the significant cost-of-living increases.

Unsurprisingly, given the intergenerational inequity these impacts are hitting young people both in Sydney and the regions very hard. With the increase in disengagement from schools and services it is vital that the programs that support young people can increase and expand to meet increasing demand.

Our recommendations draw on what we have heard over the past year from over 2,000 young people in 62 consultations and nearly 1700 youth sector representatives over 40 occasions. Further, we recently polled 1000 young people 16 – 24yrs in NSW about the key issues impacting their lives and to understand their level of engagement with democratic processes.

Strengthening social capital and increasing engagement is key to the successful strengthening of the economy and society especially if we are to establish the conditions for young people to thrive and reach their full potential. Our state will need targeted investment to increase engagement and participation of young people, through supports and services in areas such as mental health, education, employment, housing and homelessness, throughcare for those in conflict with the law, and child protection systems,

and the expansion of youth specific services. Young people need to be actively involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring of these programs and services to ensure their effectiveness.

Over the course of the last two years Youth Acton has conducted many consultations with young people, in the following areas: effects of COVID, impact of sexual violence, employment, renting, learner drivers, young people in conflict with the law, and election priorities. Consistently the top issues raised were education and learning, employment, mental health, and youth participation and rights.

In our recent poll held in January 2023, the issues that young people were most concerned about included the following: cost of living, employment and climate change. Cost of living was their number one concern and the three greatest pressures for young people were the costs of food and groceries, rent and utilities.

# Key Recommendations

## 1. Health and wellbeing

- Investment in capacity of youth services through \$15 million funding increase to provide non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health support programs including provision of funding for additional staff to meet increased demand as well as provision of a diverse range of early intervention programs that can act as soft-entry points for accessing mental health support including outreach, drop-in, peer support, arts and recreation, and youth development models. 75 sites across NSW including 30 in regional areas
- Increased investment in the capacity of the Youth Arts Sector to provide services and programs to improve the wellbeing of young people in NSW
- Investment of \$5 million in the capacity of youth sector to respond to young people tackling mental health challenges through the rollout of skills based, early intervention training such as mental health first aid or accidental counsellor training to the youth sector and identified youth peer support roles.

## 2. Cost of living

- Implement a waiver system for young people doing it tough for COVID and other fines imposed on young people under 25 years
- Allocate an additional \$12 million to expand community-based learner driver programs in 40 additional sites to support young people in NSW to obtain their learner and provisional licences
- Increase investment in youth social and community housing to reduce the number of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

## 3. Education and learning

- Continue to fund the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program for at least 2 years
- Invest \$10 million to embed and expand respectful relationships and consent education in school, TAFE/University, and community-based settings. Importantly, this should educate young people on law reform around affirmative consent and coercive control
- \$600,000 to fund schools together with the Youth Sector to map the resources in their areas so they can better refer and work collaboratively to support young people as well as undertake a study that determines the key tenets of programs that increase young people's engagement with schools and training.

## 4. Employment

- Develop a comprehensive, whole of Government Youth Employment Strategy, including Steering Committee for oversight and monitoring, with young people's voices and lived experience placed at the centre of

the Strategy. Such a strategy should identify a diverse range of education and employment pathways as well as promote secure work and training opportunities for all young people in NSW

- Increase resourcing to expand the availability of specialist youth employment programs with a particular focus on study-to-work transitions and young people from socially excluded groups and those with limited education and employment experiences
- Expand existing number of places in traineeships and graduate programs within NSW Public Service for young people both with and without tertiary education. Prioritise places for young people from socially excluded groups.

## 5. Youth Services

- \$52 million increase to ongoing funding to expand youth service delivery in early intervention and youth development programs and services aimed at increasing engagement, confidence and participation of young people
- Increase funding and supports to the Aboriginal Owned and Controlled sector to enable them to meet demand
- Extend the NSW Government Youth Opportunities program to fund a greater number of multi-year grants for local youth-led and co-designed participation initiatives beyond the current 12 month funding period.

## 6. Youth Participation

- Invest in training on how to work better with young people and ensure that all contracts with government embed youth participation and leadership into the design, implementation and monitoring of all NSW

- Government funded youth programs and policy development
- Ensure that the role of regulation of child safety and policy and participation of young people continue to remain separate and independent bodies
  - Invest in rights-based training for young people and the services that support them.

## 7. Support for young people in conflict with the law

- Fund the establishment of a state-wide interdepartmental and NGO working group on vulnerable young people ensuring that young people experiencing poverty, OOHC system, conflict with the law and homelessness are represented
- Greater investment in drug and alcohol support options for young people, particularly in regional areas, including intensive residential rehabilitation and inpatient programs, counselling, therapeutic groups, and health education and information provision
- Increased provision of after-hours and weekend programs to engage children and young people in meaningful activities. Activities should be free of cost, conveniently located, accessible to all children and young people and linked with opportunities to learn about and access support services.

# Background and context

## Health and wellbeing

During our consultations, young people and the youth sector spoke at length about the difficulties they are experiencing accessing mental health support across the full spectrum of treatment from early intervention programs through to crisis and ongoing clinical support. This was compounded by the fact that during lockdown many mental health programs were not available so young people did not receive crucial support during that time.

Young people talked about difficulties with long waitlists for clinical mental health support. Some waitlists were months long while other services had closed their books. Young people in regional areas reported experiencing limited access to mental health support.

*“We have quite a few services available to them [young people] already, but it’s the waiting times between having the problem and accessing help for it” - Young person, Katoomba Youth Action consultations*

*“Headspace have long waiting lists ... during lockdown there was literally no one to talk to.” - young person Orange*

Additionally, the cost of private mental health treatment was unaffordable for many young people.

*“Mental health (treatment) being completely covered under Medicare would be amazing” - Young person, Katoomba, Youth Action consultations*

Youth services talked about the importance of early intervention, non-clinical

support offered by youth programs and activities. Youth workers regularly expressed their frustration as they feel the significant wellbeing benefits of the deep relational work undertaken by the youth sector is poorly resourced. The diverse nature of this support means many young people connected to youth services literally “grow up” in these programs, first connecting when they are pre-teens and staying engaged until they reach adulthood. This long term, ongoing, wholistic support provided through individual case management, crisis and material assistance, drop-in, outreach, arts and recreation, peer support, and youth development initiatives all act as soft entry points to connect young people to non-clinical assistance and help support the wellbeing of those with more complex mental health issues until they can access clinic intervention.

Both young people and the youth sector identified the impact on their wellbeing of concurrent family stress and pressure. Some young people spoke to us about the caring responsibilities they had as a result of parents or other family members suffering ill-health related to COVID.

Access to medical support for young people is also an issue, especially for those living in less resourced environments.

*“Young people in the regions don’t have access to youth specific health services.” – young person, Kiama, Youth Action consultations*

There is limited availability of appropriate youth-friendly, culturally safe youth health services as is the case for young people in regional areas or First Nations young people, those from culturally diverse communities, LGBTQIA+ young people, or those with disability.

Young people without adult support within their families also struggled and had to rely on other adults such as youth workers, to help them access reliable health information and support. Workers reported that young people in this situation are less likely to access GPs or NSW Health Hubs to get vaccinations or boosters and are more susceptible to health misinformation. They expressed concerns about the number of their clients that have missed out on important health information about COVID-19 because they did not have trusted adults with whom to discuss their concerns.

The sustained anxiety felt by many young people throughout this period and the new Omicron outbreak has reignited these feelings of uncertainty and fear for many young people.

*“I was really fearful seeing people in my neighbourhood with COVID” – young person Fairfield, Youth Action consultations*

*“I get really anxious when people say it’s never going to be normal again ... this really freaks me out” – young person Kiama, Youth Action consultations*

## Recommendations

- Investment in capacity of youth services through \$15 million funding increase to provide non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health support programs including provision of funding for additional staff to meet increased demand as well as provision of a diverse range of early intervention programs that can act as soft-entry points for accessing mental health support including outreach, drop-in, peer support, arts and recreation, and youth development models. 75 sites across NSW including 30 in regional areas
- Increased investment in the capacity of the Youth Arts Sector to provide

- services and programs to improve the wellbeing of young people in NSW
- Investment of \$5 million in the capacity of youth sector to respond to young people tackling mental health challenges through the rollout of skills based, early intervention training such as mental health first aid or accidental counsellor training to the youth sector and identified youth peer support roles
  - Increase availability of specialist youth mental health support from acute and crisis services through to chronic mental health conditions with a particular focus on access for socially excluded groups of young people (regional, First Nations, culturally diverse communities, young people with disability, young people doing it tough, and LGBTQIA+ young people)
  - Increase young people's access to specialist youth health experts through increased investment in youth specific training for general practitioners and designated youth health professionals with a particular focus on access for socially excluded groups of young people (regional, First Nations, culturally diverse communities, young people with disability, young people doing it tough, and LGBTQIA+ young people)
  - The provision of access to free rapid antigen tests (RATs) to young people under the age of 25
  - Allocated resourcing through NSW Health to build on current communications directed to young people through developing a strategy to involve them in the co-design of COVID youth-focused COVID messaging across a range of platforms for a diversity of target groups and develop campaign to promote where young people can look to find reliable, accessible information, including utilising peer-education and

youth ambassador models to provide health information to young people through their own networks as well as government ones

- Explore partnership opportunities between NSW Health, Local Health Districts, NSW Education, and non-government youth services for young people under 25 years to receive vaccinations and boosters through outreach clinics in schools, youth services, or other community locations where young people gather, with a particular focus to improving accessibility for young people in regional areas.

# Cost of living and intergenerational inequity

In our recent polling the major issue for young people was the cost of living, this constantly came up on our consultations over the last two years but has been further exacerbated by the recent economic changes. Low income young renters are at significant risk, rental increases and the rising cost of living have placed even more stress on young people who are renting and is increasing the risk of homelessness.

Cost of living increases have disproportionately impacted young people on low incomes e.g. COVID related health costs like RAT tests and medications. Young people on low incomes without family support and living independently, spoke about their struggle to support themselves on Disaster or Jobkeeper and Jobseeker payments.

Access to affordable housing for young people, which has been a long-term issue, has reached crisis point in many regional areas where professional people moving from cities have pushed up the demand and price of rental properties. And the experience of young people from socially excluded groups highlighted the differences in the availability of services and supports in resourced versus less resourced areas.

## Recommendations

- Implement a waiver system for young people doing it tough for COVID and other fines imposed on young people under 25 years
- Increase investment in youth social and community housing to reduce the number of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

- Support young people doing it tough by increasing JobSeeker and Youth Allowance by \$76 per day in line with the ACOSS Raise the Rate campaign. This will allow young people to afford rent and other essentials, giving them better capability to maintain their studies and access employment.
- Explore options for tackling the impact that the cost-of-living has had on young people's ability to afford rent. This could include a rent freeze, limits to rental cost increases and addressing the availability of rental stock such as through further investment in Build to Rent schemes.
- Replace no-grounds evictions in the current NSW tenancy law with a range of specified reasonable grounds.
- Where tenants are evicted for reasons other than a breach, introduce provisions requiring compensation for moving costs by the landlord.
- Invest in youth specific homelessness services as a priority to ensure crisis support is available for young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness.
- Commit to implementing a National Child and Youth Homelessness Strategy, as proposed by youth housing advocates to address the need for a multidisciplinary response that addresses the unique needs of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness through prevention, early-intervention, crisis responses, long-term responses.
- Explore options for increasing the provision of bulk-billed appointments under Medicare for all young people up to the age of 24, in particular those with no income or on a low income.
- Improve the provision of education and information for young people about Medicare, the costs of accessing the health system, and privacy and healthcare rights. This could be made available to young people directly

through education institutions or youth programs as well as being available within medical services.

- Explore options to reduce the burden of growing student debts through abolishing indexations of HECS loans or increasing the minimum repayment threshold.
- Expand investment in community-based learner driver programs to support young people to obtain their learner and provisional licences with a particular focus given to young people in regional areas.

## Education and Learning

All the young people and youth workers we heard from described the difficulties young people have experienced with education which were exacerbated by the pandemic. All expressed compassion for the context in which teachers and educators have had to operate. Some schools were able to navigate the complexities and students spoke positively about the support and understanding they received from teachers and education staff. Youth workers and young people spoke about their worry about the negative consequences of these students disengaging from their studies and falling behind in their learning. The issue of disengagement from school was a major issue.

*“There needs to be free, accessible tutoring as so many young people missed out school ... it needs to be extra one on one tutoring.”- young person, Orange, Youth Action consultations*

Some young people who felt well supported in their learning, valued the flexibility and lessening of pressure provided by remote study. They talked about how they appreciated the opportunity to work at their own pace, away

from difficulties they usually have in classroom contexts managing interpersonal interactions or different learning styles.

*“Having the ability to put things aside or spend more time on a subject. More time in the morning and after school to work instead of travelling.” – young person, Narrellan Vale, Youth Action consultations*

Others who had felt less supported with education during this time were worried about missed learning, especially those in the final years of school. They stressed the need for intensive individual assistance and for their experiences to be taken into account when assessing their final results.

*“I guess the real impact COVID has had is that it just made it that much harder as a disabled youth to get a job because not only am I young person, I'm one that's in a wheelchair... I think the main issue came down to my education, so when we all went into lock down the very first time, I really struggled with at home learning... I often get scared, am I going to after all this be qualified enough to get into the Uni I want to get into and get into the scholarships I need to do that?” – young person, Tamworth, Youth Action employment consultations*

Youth workers' concerns were predominantly about the intersection between young people's mental health challenges and their capacity to learn. They reported seeing a much larger group of young people with both learning and emotional or behavioural issues than in previous years. The uncertainty across society caused by the pandemic outbreak and young people's fears about getting behind in their learning coupled with pre-existing mental health issues such as social anxiety or depression mean the prospect of returning to school is extremely daunting for these young people. The youth sector feels it

will require significant investment in a diverse range of long-term wellbeing and learning support programs located in both school and community contexts to ensure those young people who have disengaged are able to return and thrive.

Additionally, young people in our consultations highlighted the important role schools can play as a site to access valuable life skills. They gave many examples about programs that are offered through partnerships between schools and non-government youth services that they feel could be extended such as stress management, goal setting, financial literacy, employment and career skills, healthy relationships and consent education, and skills for independent living such as learn-to-drive programs.

*"I believe that young people should be taught the red flags that can be seen as abusive in any relationship whether it be friendship or romantic ....This is something that should be taught in school as it may help decrease the number of people being caught in abusive situations" – young person, Murrumbidgee area, Youth Action consultations*

## Recommendations

- Continue to fund the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program for at least 2 years
- Invest \$10 million to embed and expand respectful relationships and consent education in school, TAFE/University, and community-based settings. Importantly, this should educate young people on law reform around affirmative consent and coercive control
- \$600,000 to fund schools together with the Youth Sector to map the resources in their areas so they can better refer and work collaboratively

to support young people as well as undertake a study that determines the key tenets of programs that increase young people's engagement with schools and training

- Resource delivery of digital infrastructure to ensure all young people enrolled in education have access to the digital technology to equip them in both school based and remote learning contexts.
- Funding should be increased for full-time positions for career advisors in NSW Government schools, and particular attention should be given to schools in low-socio-economic areas.
- Increase level of engagement between schools and youth sector - learn examples where this is working – i.e. youth conferencing, SSOs and ECLOs

# Employment

Having access to secure, meaningful, and well compensated employment is a key factor to young people being set up to fulfil their potential within society. It is widely recognised that the insecure, casual nature of employment for many young people, often in industries harshest hit by economic downturns, meant that they were disproportionately impacted by the employment upheaval and job losses during the pandemic and the current economic situation.

Young people told us they already experience challenges across the employment spectrum from becoming job ready and navigating employment pathways through to securing and maintaining employment. The pandemic made things even more difficult for them. Young people from socially excluded groups experienced additional barriers due to their lack of access to youth specific employment support to develop essential employment skills or find out about available career options.

*"[When] I came to Australia, and I wanted to find a job. I had never applied for any jobs before, so I went to the store near my home, and they said, OK bring in your resume. I went home and I wrote in reasonable handwriting, then I went to the shop, and I gave it to the shop owner, and he said, I will call you back. He never called me back. Now I realize that the reason was because there was not much for me to write, I don't have experience" – young person Western Sydney, Youth Action consultations*

*"I'm pretty concerned about the people with disabilities, because they might not know how to write a resume, [they need encouragement] to just build up the courage to go ... and ask for employment. The workplace itself matters a*

*lot, because someone with anxiety and autism, like me, wouldn't really cope in a fast-food restaurant or a fast retail place because it would just be too overwhelming. But I've noticed that's where most of the jobs for young people are" – young person Hunter region, Youth Action employment consultations*

*"I think it's hard [for newly arrived refugee and migrant young people] to find a job because of the language and the knowledge that we don't have in comparison to a person that is born here" – young person Western Sydney, Youth Action consultations*

The wholistic, wrap around support offered by the youth sector plays a crucial role in assisting young people with their employment and career aspirations. Undertaking the steps necessary to secure and maintain employment is a common goal identified by many young people in their case planning with youth workers. Services say their work with young people to address issues such mental health, substance use, homelessness, experiences of trauma, and learning deficits all contribute to young people's capacity to achieve this goal. Young people we heard from who were connected to youth services, youth employment programs, or attending school or university said they valued the support they received through these organisations. However, young people said that if you are not connected to organisations like those, especially during transition periods such as leaving school/university, changing jobs, or whilst unemployed you can find it very overwhelming and hard to know what to do. They felt this is an important area that needs to be addressed as they recognised that without this knowledge and individualised support, young people cannot even begin a career journey.

Young people acknowledged that having formal qualifications through school, TAFE, or university was another important factor in increasing their likelihood of securing work. This makes young people's re-engagement with learning post pandemic even more crucial. Young people were clear that entry into the courses and qualifications need to be accessible to young people from a diverse range of backgrounds, especially those in less resourced areas such as in regional NSW or in low socio-economic communities.

*“Education is such a powerful tool, it's kind of like your armour as you go through the world. Since going to university, I've learned so much more about the workforce, our government, all of these things that now I would see are integral into the way that I view the world and I want everyone to be able to have that opportunity if they choose that” – young person Youth Action First Nations employment consultations*

Young people in the consultations expressed feeling pressured at times by the expectation that they should know what to do. They felt that there are many careers or professions that exist that they might like, however they did not know about how to find out about them. Several spoke about a desire to be able to try different kinds of jobs to get a better sense about what would suit them. They thought this was especially important when young people are first starting out.

*“You see a lot of people who once they are out of school, they don't have any prior experience and school only offered a one-time work experience and from that they have got to decide if that is what they want to do” – young person, Youth Action employment consultations*

Another theme across all consultations was the need for both young people and employers to understand their rights in the workplace. Young people said they felt there should be more education about their rights at work and how they can better advocate for themselves.

*“Not just teaching young people but ensuring that workplaces are upholding their rights. Young people who have migrated to Australia with no experience are trying to get a job through the correct avenues, but because of all the barriers, it's not possible... What ends up happening is that their only opportunity for employment is through people in their community like family, friends and relatives. Often these people are not employing or paying them properly” – young person, Western Sydney, Youth Action consultations*

Young people spoke about the stress of combining study and employment and the impact upon their mental health and wellbeing. Young people said there needs to be more information about where they can seek support to learn to manage this stress. They also expressed a strong desire for employers to have a greater understanding about mental health, mentally healthy workplaces, and how to support young people, new to the workplace, to manage their mental wellbeing.

*“You're expected to work hard, and you're expected to go home every single day and stay up until 9pm and get those good grades. If you don't, then you're not going to go anywhere in life. That's just what people think. Not all people, I know but a lot of our current generation believe that if we don't go to university or if we don't get a trade, then we're going to be nothing” – young person Tamworth, Youth Action employment consultations*

## Recommendations

- Develop a comprehensive, whole of Government Youth Employment Strategy, including Steering Committee for oversight and monitoring, with young people's voices and lived experience placed at the centre of the Strategy. Such a strategy should identify a diverse range of education and employment pathways as well as promote secure work and training opportunities for all young people in NSW
- Increase resourcing to expand the availability of specialist youth employment programs with a particular focus on study-to-work transitions and young people from socially excluded groups and those with limited education and employment experiences
- Expand existing number of places in traineeships and graduate programs within NSW Public Service for young people both with and without tertiary education. Prioritise places for young people from socially excluded groups.

# Youth Services and youth participation

As outlined in the introduction, the key to successfully strengthening the economy and society is a significant investment in the social capital that establishes the conditions for young people to thrive and reach their full potential. This has the benefit of not only improving the immediate situation for young people but also continues to provide cost saving benefits into the future by reducing the burden of young people's reliance on the social services sector and increasing their capacity to contribute to the state's economic wellbeing.

Young people spoke repeatedly about the strong, protective factors provided by a cohesive community and strong connection to family, peers, and culture. These conditions help young people build resilience in challenging times as well as contribute to community recovery.

*"We need outdoor activities like sport, art, music, social gatherings ... staying together we'll recover together ... Have a festival to bring people together and make people excited" – young person, Fairfield, Youth Action consultations*

*"Cultural activities for young people, there's not a lot for young people ... [we need] to be able to teach young people our cultural knowledge" - young person Broken Hill, Youth Action consultations*

The youth sector and young people agreed that youth services and programs need to be recognised as an important component for this social capital investment. The work undertaken by the youth sector in providing opportunities for young people to develop skills to participate in decision making within their lives, have their voices heard, and become active citizens

in their communities is often overlooked, especially in times of crisis and disaster. Workers said it can be hard to access funding for these innovative, strengths based early intervention and youth development initiatives as criteria for funding programs frequently frame young people as problems with issues be solved by professionals rather than underutilised assets within their communities with potential and agency to lead the development of their own solutions.

## Recommendations

### Participation

- Invest in training on how to work better with young people and ensure that all contracts with government embed youth participation and leadership into the design, implementation and monitoring of all NSW Government funded youth programs and policy development
- Ensure that the role of regulation of child safety and policy and participation of young people continue to remain separate and independent bodies
- Invest in rights-based training for young people and the services that support them.

### Youth Services

- \$52 million increase to ongoing funding to expand youth service delivery in early intervention and youth development programs and services aimed at increasing engagement, confidence and participation of young people
- Increase funding and supports to the Aboriginal Owned and Controlled sector to enable them to meet demand

- Extend the NSW Government Youth Opportunities program to fund a greater number of multi-year grants for local youth-led and co-designed participation initiatives beyond the current 12 months funding period
- Embed youth participation and leadership into the design, implementation and monitoring of all NSW Government funded youth programs and policy development
- Build professional capacity of the youth sector workforce through scholarships, investment in peer-to-peer work, and training in youth participation and rights-based approaches to working with young people.

# Youth Justice Throughcare

Our consultations with young people in contact with the law, justice, and child protection systems and the services who support them highlighted the complexity of issues such as mental health, family and domestic violence, housing insecurity, loss of income, disengagement from education, and experiences of trauma increase as a result of the pandemic but many of the services these young people rely on to help them navigate these challenges were less available.

Whilst essential youth services were able to maintain face-to-face service delivery, others had to shift to online service provision. Youth workers told us about the difficulty they have had over the past 18 months engaging this group of young people because they did not have reliable access to digital technology to communicate with youth services remotely and online service delivery does not allow the intensive relational work necessary to support these young people across multiple dimensions of their lives.

One area that of particular concern to youth workers has the been the COVID related Public Health Order fines accrued by young people in contact with the law and justice systems. Young people with unsafe or insecure home situations said it was not always possible to stay at their home address. Those without access to supportive adults to explain the public health rationale for the orders did not always understand why the restrictions were important or the details of the orders. Some felt particular groups of young people were targeted and not offered the same diversionary options that other population groups were. Workers have reported clients accruing amounts in the tens of thousands of dollars and felt these fines are undoing

much of the previous good work undertaken by Revenue NSW to reduce the disproportionate impact of fines on vulnerable young people experiencing disadvantage and divert these young people from the fines system.

The youth sector stressed the importance of resources being directed to addressing issues of systemic disadvantage which frequently underlie young people's involvement in justice and child protection systems as well as building workforce capacity to provide specialist culturally safe, trauma-informed, and evidence-based services to these young people. The need for First Nations young people to have access to services and programs provided by Aboriginal Owned and Controlled Organisations was particularly highlighted as well as the positive impact that can be achieved for young people in raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years.

*“Connection to family and culture teaches you to do stuff that our ancestors taught their kids...[We need] more culturally-informed, trauma healing services for parents to help explain to children and young people what is happening for them.” – young person, Youth Action consultations 2020, NSW Parliament Inquiry into Child Protection and Social Services*

## Recommendations

- Fund the establishment of a state-wide interdepartmental and NGO working group on vulnerable young people ensuring that young people experiencing poverty, OOHC system, conflict with the law and homelessness are represented
- Greater investment in drug and alcohol support options for young people, particularly in regional areas, including intensive residential rehabilitation and inpatient programs, counselling, therapeutic groups,

and health education and information provision

- Increased provision of after-hours and weekend programs to engage children and young people in meaningful activities. Activities should be free of cost, conveniently located, accessible to all children and young people and linked with opportunities to learn about and access support services
- Greater commitment to Closing the Gaps targets
- Implementation of Family Is Culture Report recommendations
- Work with the youth sector and young people from socially excluded groups (regional, First Nations, culturally diverse communities, young people with disability, young people doing it tough, and LGBTQIA+ young people) to co-design a whole of Government approach to address the growing disadvantage experienced by these groups as a result of the pandemic
- Raise the age of criminal responsibility for young people in NSW from 10 years to 14 years
- Increased resourcing for whole-of-community programs youth programs, particularly in regional and Aboriginal communities, to help strengthen capacity to tackle systemic conditions such poverty, substance use, mental health difficulties, family violence, and intergenerational trauma to support children and young people and prevent them from entering the justice system.