



# Youth Action NSW 2026-27 Pre-Budget Submission

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## **Acknowledgement of Country**

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.



## About Youth Action

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.

# Introduction

Youth Action warmly welcomes the opportunity to contribute this submission for the 2026-27 NSW Budget. At Youth Action, we believe it is imperative that we listen to and take action on the experiences, challenges and recommendations that young people share with us. As is outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is the right of all young people across our state to be genuinely listened to and provided the conditions to learn, grow, play, and to thrive. As such, our submission is grounded in the voices of our state's young people, and of those in the youth sector who work tirelessly to support them.

Young people and the youth sector have been consistent in their calls for greater engagement and action on the pressing issues facing young people in NSW. In 2025, 41% of NSW young people reported that they do not feel positive about their future<sup>1</sup>. In our consultations, young people and the youth sector have told us that that are concerned about the ongoing pressures of the rising cost of living, community cohesion, employment, housing, and the environment. Young people are increasingly experiencing homelessness, mental health illnesses, challenges engaging with school, poverty, and interactions with a youth justice system that negatively impacts their life trajectories. These signals tell us that our current investments are not effective.

Misguided spending can rapidly balloon when our policy approaches are reactive rather than proactive. Figures calculated by the Front Project have shown that NSW's lack of investment in early intervention cost the state economy \$6.4b in 2024<sup>2</sup>.

We must reprioritise the way we approach challenges, including embedding youth voices and considerations across the whole of government, to tackle these issues early before they spiral into crises. Doing so will result in long-term social and economic benefits, as is evident when we look to those nations already implementing best practice, such as Scotland and Wales. Through putting these principles into action and upholding the rights of young people, Scotland has achieved the removal of all under 18 year olds from youth detention into secure care homes<sup>3</sup>, and Wales has criminalised all forms of physical punishment of children and young people<sup>4</sup>. These changes uphold and protect the rights of young people, preventing unnecessary and harmful experiences that can reverberate across families and generations, while avoiding significant downstream costs to government by reducing reliance on high-cost, reactive services.

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<sup>1</sup> McHale, R., Brennan, N., Freeburn, T., Richardson, E., Rossetto, A. & Carmody, M. (2025). *Youth Survey Report 2025 New South Wales sub-report*. Sydney, NSW: Mission Australia

<sup>2</sup> O'Connell, M. (2025, August). *The Cost of Late Intervention 2024*. The Front Project. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/policy-and-research/research/396-coli-report>

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Government. (September 2024). *No under 19s in Young Offenders Institutions*. <https://www.gov.scot/news/no-under-18s-in-young-offenders-institutions/>

<sup>4</sup> Welsh Government. (Unknown). *Ending physical punishment in Wales*. <https://www.gov.wales/ending-physical-punishment-children>

Youth Action is calling for targeted investment in young people and the services that support them in the 2026-27 NSW Budget. Urgent action is required to address the systems impacting our states young people. Commitment and investment in early intervention and holistic supports are a moral and public policy imperative, ensuring young people are supported to thrive while delivering substantial long-term savings by preventing the far higher costs associated with late intervention.

The following recommendations were determined in consultation with young people and Youth Action youth sector members. They represent a non-exhaustive list of areas of concern that are front of mind for young people and the youth sector and are considered a high priority for the upcoming financial year.

## Key Recommendations

- 1. Invest \$12m to fund 15 new youth hubs across NSW, with at least nine in regional, rural and remote communities.**
- 2. Invest \$8m annually to support 10 existing youth hubs, including at least four outside of metropolitan areas. This additional funding will empower services to engage more staff or specialists, bolster programs, increase hours of availability or explore other opportunities to upgrade service delivery to meet the growing needs of their communities.**

Youth hubs are an evidence-based, cost-effective early intervention that is proven to improve community and individual outcomes, including reducing crime rates, improving school participation and increasing community cohesion.

- 3. Invest in community-led and youth-driven, non-clinical mental health supports.**

Invest in locally driven, youth-led mental health initiatives that prioritise non-clinical, relational approaches to wellbeing, strengthening community connection, reducing loneliness, and buffering young people against other challenges, including through social prescribing. Delivered through trusted youth services, these initiatives would enable young people to access practical, strengths-based supports that sit outside the clinical system, such as peer connection, community activities, cultural engagement, mentoring, and pathways to education, training and employment. This approach responds to rising youth mental distress by addressing social and environmental drivers of poor mental health, complements clinical services, reduces pressure on acute systems, and ensures supports are accessible, culturally responsive, and designed with and for young people in their own communities.

4. **Double the total funding for the Community and Family Support Program to expand youth service delivery in early intervention, individualised support, disaster resilience and preparedness, and services aimed at increasing the engagement, confidence and participation of young people.**
5. **Invest \$500,000 as stopgap funding to provide essential support to the young people and families who were engaged in the now ceased 'Targeted Early Intervention in Schools' program as a temporary measure over the summer of 2025-26.**

The timing of the end of funding to this critical program is deeply concerning. It is critical to ensure consistency of service provision during the summer holiday period to ensure care and support during a sensitive transition period is provided to the young people and families who were directly accessing these services.

6. **Invest \$4m to establish a 5-year pilot that doubles the number of services delivering support in a new stream of targeted early intervention in schools funding to assist young people and families experiencing school anxiety, exclusion or disconnection.**

The targeted early intervention in schools program filled a significant gap in supporting students who have very limited to no connection with formal schooling due to systemic issues. While some funding is available for some early interventions that may provide the necessary intensive assistance, through the CAFS program and the Department of Education, this program was vital for many young people and their families and is not well addressed through exclusively school-based programs. This critical funding would ensure this valuable, integrated and collaborative approach to service delivery continues and that students and their families are adequately supported to participate in learning which promotes positive, long-term outcomes.

7. **Invest \$400,000 to develop a best practice guide for effective throughcare led by an Aboriginal research company, in consultation with sector experts, community organisations, government and young people with lived experience of the justice system.**

A best practice guide, co-designed with young people and led, designed and delivered by an Aboriginal research company, will provide a much needed blueprint and ensure consistent, effective approaches are used to support young people who are in contact with the justice system. It is important that this process also incorporates a funded Aboriginal reference group and thorough literature review. Throughcare is a holistic, needs-based approach that provides coordinated support before, during, and after a young person's contact with the justice system. By addressing the impacts of systemic

disadvantage and marginalisation, effective throughcare prevents initial justice involvement, minimises harm for those who do come into contact, and reconnects young people to family, community, and services, reducing re-contact with the justice system and strengthening community safety and wellbeing.

**8. Raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years old to 14 years old.**

Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 years old must be done without exception and involve the reinvestment of significant funding from a criminal approach to a therapeutic one. Not only does this change uphold the rights and dignity of children and young people, but it will result in better outcomes and life trajectories for young people, the whole community and the budget in the long-term.

**9. Invest funding for a standardised and sufficient indexation model, supported by one-off boosts to meet cost pressures not currently covered in the SCHADS award.**

This includes portable long service leave, implementation of SCHADS award changes and insurance premium increases.

**10. Invest \$12.4m, ongoing, to establish and operate a NSW Child Safety and Wellbeing Commission. The commission and funding must also facilitate the appointment of a NSW Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.**

The commission will provide an independent and centralised body to oversee reforms to our child protection system which we know is not working effectively for young people. The establishment of a NSW Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People will also bolster this, recognise Aboriginal communities' rightful role and expertise in safeguarding First Nations children and young people, keep government accountable, and bring NSW in align with the ACT, Victorian, South Australian and Commonwealth models.