



A Fairer NSW for Young People: NSW 2024-25 Pre- Budget Submission

January 2024



Table of contents



Introduction	5
Key recommendations.....	6
Background and context	16
Health and wellbeing	16
Cost of Living.....	19
Housing.....	21
Education and learning.....	26
Employment	28
Youth Services and Youth Participation.....	33
Youth Justice Throughcare	36

Acknowledgment 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, LGBTIQ+, 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.

Youth Action
262 Liverpool Street,
Darlinghurst 2010 NSW
(02) 8354 3700
info@youthaction.org.au
ABN 17 209 492 539
www.youthaction.org.au

Introduction

Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the NSW State Budget for 2024 – 2025. This submission is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of the young people and the services who support them that we heard from in our consultations. Young people in NSW have shown resilience through their capacity to deal with the challenges presented by the significant cost of living crisis, compounded by ongoing intergenerational inequalities. This occurs in the context of residual shockwaves left by the pandemic, resulting in increased incidence of mental health concerns and disengagement from education and training.

Youth Action would like to see a specific focus on young people and the services and supports they need to tackle these challenges in the NSW Government 2024-2025 Budget. We have heard from young people about how they are finding it difficult to make ends meet and feel they are falling behind their peers. A targeted focus on young people can help address this. Young people have highlighted their struggles with increased poverty and housing insecurity, homelessness, disengagement from education and increased mental health challenges without access to appropriate and accessible supports.

In the lead up to the March 2023 NSW State election Youth Action asked over 1000 young people about the top issues that would influence their vote. Cost of living proved the biggest issue, with 76% of young people selecting it as one of their top three issues. Young people told us their top concerns were also employment (40%), the environment (37%) and healthcare (34%).

Our state and our nation will need targeted investment to increase engagement and participation of young people, through supports and services in areas such as mental health, education, employment, throughcare for those in contact with the justice 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.

As young people are disproportionately impacted by growing disadvantage, cost of living challenges and housing insecurity, delayed attention to young people's ability to access employment, housing and cost-of-living relief will increase the likelihood of longer-term impacts and disadvantages.

Key recommendations

Over the past 12 months we have heard from over 2000 young people across NSW through 62 consultations and close to 1700 youth sector representatives across 40 occasions. The topics we have heard about include the impact of the pandemic on the lives of young people, youth employment, health and wellbeing including mental health, education and disengagement, cost of living, sexual violence, and young people in contact with law and justice systems.

We have produced the several reports and submissions with findings from these consultations. Most recently, these include our [Key Recommendations Report](#), [Cost of Living Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Cost of Living](#), [Submission to Inquiry into Equity, Accessibility and Appropriate Delivery of Outpatient and Community Mental Health Care in New South](#)

[Wales, Employment Consultations With Young People in Western and South Western Sydney](#) and [The Voices of Young People on Sexual Violence](#).

These reports and submissions contain a number of recommendations co-designed with young people and the services who support them. Our diverse range of recommendations are aimed at supporting improved outcomes for young people in NSW across the full spectrum of their life experiences.

Health and Wellbeing

- \$15 million investment in the capacity of youth services to provide non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health support programs. This includes 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. This includes outreach, drop-in, peer support, cultural and recreation, and youth development models: 75 sites across NSW including 30 in regional areas are required.
- \$5 million investment in the capacity of the Youth Arts Sector to provide services and programs to improve the wellbeing of young people in NSW.
- \$10 million for the rollout of mental health first aid training, accidental counsellor training, suicide prevention, trauma-informed practice and awareness training and other relevant evidence-based skills trainings to the youth sector, all police, young people, and people who work with young people – including teachers, sports coaches, and tutors, etc. This kind of free crisis support education for young people and people who work with young people is designed to supplement investment in early

intervention, so that young people need crisis support less frequently, but are still able to access effective and useful help in an emergency.

- \$30 million funding injection for specialist youth mental health support from acute and crisis services through to ongoing clinical support for mental health conditions so that services can meet demand. This should include 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).
- Expand specialist youth health services by 10 services across all 15 Local Health Districts.
- The NSW Government develop a comprehensive approach to vaping in young people which addresses preventative and harm reduction measures through increased education in schools, social media targeting young people and the provision of peer support amongst young people. This also needs to be accompanied by addiction support for young people that are heavily reliant on the use of e-cigarettes, especially in view of the upcoming ban on the import of vapes.

Cost of Living

Employment

- Explore the feasibility of introducing a Youth Job Guarantee as identified to ensure that eligible young people are offered a job, paid internship or training opportunity when they register as unemployed.

Energy Bill Relief

- The NSW Government collect data on how young people on low incomes experience cost of living pressure from increasing energy prices and explore options to extend energy bill relief to young people living in shared accommodation who might not hold an energy account in their name.
- Promote the uptake of current energy bill relief schemes such as the low-income energy rebate and the EAPA scheme to young people under the age of 25 that are living independently on low incomes who might not be aware of the energy assistance that is available to them. Ensure that this promotion also targets young people from socially excluded groups such as regional and remote young people and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who need information available to them in their language.
- The NSW Government collects data on young people's reliance on Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) loans to pay for necessities like groceries and energy. This data is used to build a reform agenda around young people's financial literacy regarding BNPL products and targeted measures that will limit the impact of BNPL on exacerbating existing hardship.

Support for families

- Restore the means tested Active and Creative Kids vouchers program and increase the value to \$100 per voucher. Promote eligibility for youth and community organisations to be program providers to allow improved access in communities where there are limited opportunities to fully utilise vouchers.

Transport

- Extend the \$2.50 per day Opal fare cap that is available to seniors and pensioners to young people doing it tough on low incomes or income support payments such as Youth Allowance to reduce the barrier these young people face to access to services, employment, education and recreation.

Food insecurity

- Release the Review of Food Relief Provision commissioned by the former state government in 2021. Explore the establishment of a taskforce of NGO experts, including those working with young people, to advise on system improvements in relation to food security in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

Other

- 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.
- Implement a waiver system for young people doing it tough for COVID fines imposed on young people under 25 years.

Housing

Youth Action supports the recommendations of Yfoundations, the NSW peak body for youth homelessness. They make the following recommendations:

- State and territory governments should review existing policy setting for private rental assistance products (i.e., rental bond support or rent

subsidies) that support young people to live independently in the private rental market to ensure the product is fit for purpose and can be realistically implemented with private landlords.

- Youth Action supports Yfoundations recommendation for a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan to be supported by the state and territory governments in recognition of both the scale of the issue and the specialised responses that are required.
- Increase investment in youth social and community housing to reduce the number of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Yfoundations suggests a target of 15% social and affordable housing delivered, community housing providers and state housing agencies should be allocated to youth specific housing models. A further 15% should be allocated to support young people to exit supported housing models.

Education and Learning

- Continue to fund the Education Future Fund to support students requiring extra assistance with numeracy and literacy.
- Double the funding of the Student Wellbeing Innovation Fund to \$7 million to provide expanded evidence-based student programs and initiatives that target student wellbeing across a range of areas. Extend current contracts from 18 months to 3 years to allow initiatives to embed long term change for students that need it.
- Invest \$10 million to embed and expand respectful relationships and consent education in school, TAFE/university, and community-based settings. This needs to be made available statewide and across age

ranges, starting with younger students and continuing throughout schooling. 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 they need 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.

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 the NSW Public Service for young people both with and without tertiary education. Prioritise places for young people from socially excluded groups.

Youth Services

- \$52 million increase to ongoing funding to expand youth service delivery in early intervention, youth development programs, disaster resilience and preparedness, 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.
- Ensure NSW Government grant programs focused on promoting community safety encourage applications for social infrastructure initiatives supporting young people.
- Double the current the NSW Government Youth Opportunities program to \$30 million 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.
- 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 when working with young people.

- Ease the pressure on the youth sector by extending funding arrangements for the sector to a minimum of five years. This would provide certainty and job security to workers experiencing burnout in demanding roles.

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.
- Invest in rights-based training for young people and the services that support them, with a particular focus on trauma informed practice and ensuring cultural safety for First Nations young people and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

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 resourcing for 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. Some of those particularly relevant to First Nations young people include increasing high school completion rates, completion of tertiary qualifications, participation in employment, access to suitable housing, overrepresentation in the justice system and rates of First Nations children in out-of-home care.
- 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 and entrenched intergenerational inequality.
- Raise the age of criminal responsibility for young people in NSW from 10 years to 14 years. This needs to be accompanied by an additional \$10 million in resourcing to offer supports and services to young people 10 to 13 years that would otherwise come into contact with the justice system. This includes the provision of case management and counselling support, youth development and cultural programs, and after-hours activities.
- Increased resourcing for whole-of-community youth programs, particularly in regional and Aboriginal communities, to help strengthen capacity to tackle systemic conditions such as 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.

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. Young people requiring crisis or ongoing support have talked about their inability to access the treatment they need due to the high costs associated with private treatment and the long waitlists for free services.

In terms of accessing acute support, young people are familiar with over the phone crisis supports. However, the young people we spoke to had difficulty accessing phone or text-based support due to long hold or slow response times. One young person gave an example of waiting over an hour to hear back from a crisis text service, while another young person told us they were on hold for six hours when they called the suicide hotline.

Similarly, young people have told us about their 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 significant difficulties when trying to access any kind of mental health support in their local communities.

“There is an increasing number of suicides in the community, we would like to see workers and community members receive more suicide awareness training to support young people.” –youth worker, Miyay Birray Moree, Youth Justice Throughcare Consultations 2022

*“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, Youth Action consultations

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

“In some rural and urban areas, health services are quite expensive, which usually put youth off from finding help for their issue. Finding ways for youth to afford and access vital health services will really help some areas that struggle.” – young person, consultation for Youth Action’s submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs with respect to the provision of general practitioner and related primary health services to outer metropolitan, rural and regional Australians in 2021

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.

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 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 and are more susceptible to health misinformation. They expressed concerns about the number of their clients that have missed out on important health information because they did not have trusted adults with whom to discuss their concerns. The lack of health services in some rural and remote areas was also a particular challenge for some young people who had to access telehealth or travel distances to see GPs or specialists.

Recommendations

- \$15 million investment in the capacity of youth services to provide non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health support programs. This includes 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. This includes outreach, drop-in, peer support, cultural and recreation, and youth development models: 75 sites across NSW including 30 in regional areas are required.
- \$5 million investment in the capacity of the Youth Arts Sector to provide services and programs to improve the wellbeing of young people in NSW.
- \$10 million for the rollout of mental health first aid training, accidental counsellor training, suicide prevention, trauma-informed practice and awareness training and other relevant evidence-based skills trainings to the youth sector, all police, young people, and people who work with young people – including teachers, sports coaches, and tutors, etc. This kind of free crisis support education for young people and people who work with young people is designed to supplement investment in early intervention, so that young people need crisis support less frequently, but are still able to access effective and useful help in an emergency.
- \$30 million funding injection for specialist youth mental health support from acute and crisis services through to ongoing clinical support for mental health conditions so that services can meet demand. This should include 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).

- Expand specialist youth health services by 10 services across all 15 Local Health Districts.
- The NSW Government develop a comprehensive approach to vaping in young people which addresses preventative and harm reduction measures through increased education in schools, social media targeting young people and the provision of peer support amongst young people. This also needs to be accompanied by addiction support for young people that are heavily reliant on the use of e-cigarettes, especially in view of the upcoming ban on the import of vapes.

Cost of Living

In our recent polling, the major issue for young people was cost of living. This came up frequently in our consultations over the last two years but has been further exacerbated by the recent economic changes.

Cost of living increases have disproportionately impacted young people on low incomes, who often go without family support and live independently. These young people spoke about their struggle to support themselves on low incomes, Youth Allowance and JobSeeker payments. Many young people also struggle to support themselves and their families while managing other commitments such as school, study or caring responsibilities.

Young people have told us that they have struggled with many aspects of the cost-of-living crisis such as accessing healthcare that is not fully bulkbilled, paying for the high costs of running a car or accessing public transport, paying for essentials such as petrol, groceries, utilities and rent.

Food security has also been made precarious by the current cost of living crisis. We heard from young people during our consultations who reported that they currently rely on food pantries, skip meals or maintain an incomplete diet to get by. Some young people rely on By Now Pay Later to buy vouchers to supermarket chains, going into debt to feed themselves.

A suite of cost-of-living measures is needed to ease the financial burden many young people are currently facing. Comprehensive cost of living support for young people will mean that many can better balance their work, study, caring and other commitments while continuing to thrive and pursue their goals.

Recommendations

Employment

- Explore the feasibility of introducing a Youth Job Guarantee as identified to ensure that eligible young people are offered a job, paid internship or training opportunity when they register as unemployed.

Energy Bill Relief

- The NSW Government collect data on how young people on low incomes experience cost of living pressure from increasing energy prices and explore options to extend energy bill relief to young people living in shared accommodation who might not hold an energy account in their name.
- Promote the uptake of current energy bill relief schemes such as the low-income energy rebate and the EAPA scheme to young people under the age of 25 that are living independently on low incomes who

might not be aware of the energy assistance that is available to them. Ensure that this promotion also targets young people from socially excluded groups such as regional and remote young people and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who need information available to them in their language.

- The NSW Government collects data on young people's reliance on Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) loans to pay for necessities like groceries and energy. This data is used to build a reform agenda around young people's financial literacy regarding BNPL products and targeted measures that will limit the impact of BNPL on exacerbating existing hardship.

Support for families

- Restore the means tested Active and Creative Kids vouchers program and increase the value to \$100 per voucher. Promote eligibility for youth and community organisations to be program providers to allow improved access in communities where there are limited opportunities to fully utilise vouchers.

Transport

- Extend the \$2.50 per day Opal fare cap that is available to seniors and pensioners to young people doing it tough on low incomes or income support payments such as Youth Allowance to reduce the barrier these young people face to access to services, employment, education and recreation.

Food insecurity

- Release the Review of Food Relief Provision commissioned by the former state government in 2021. Explore the establishment of a taskforce of NGO experts, including those working with young people, to advise on system improvements in relation to food security in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

Other

- 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.
- Implement a waiver system for young people doing it tough for COVID fines imposed on young people under 25 years.

Housing

Access to affordable housing for young people has been a long-term issue and has reached crisis point in the midst of the current cost-of-living crisis. The availability of rental stock in the private market has reached an all-time low, and young people face particular difficulty accessing residential tenancies as the cost of rents skyrocket. Young people from socially excluded groups highlighted the differences in the availability of services and supports in resourced versus less resourced areas.

“We will often put ourselves in bad situations because we need a roof over our head.”

“When I was searching for anything under \$400 in Sydney to be close to work, it took a long time because a lot of the properties weren’t in good areas or had issues or were close to unliveable. Think broken cupboard doors, communal laundries in an isolated area of the building, no heating or cooling.”

- young people, consultation for the NSW Tenants Union and Youth Action 2021 report, Young Renters: We hear you!

Increasing the availability of rental stock is important for young people to be able to live in safe and secure housing. Young people living in residential tenancies also face the difficulty of harsh rent increases that make the rental untenable and are forced into less appropriate accommodation or risk experiencing homelessness, which exacerbates the existing strain on the Youth SHS sector.

Youth Action supports the budget recommendations made by Yfoundations, the peak body advocating for young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, and the services that support them. Young people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness are also faced with an overstretched youth homelessness sector that is unable to provide enough crisis accommodation. Young people experiencing homelessness on their own and presenting to services without a parent or guardian face particular challenges as many services only accommodate children and young people presenting with their families.

The youth homelessness sector has also stressed the need for early intervention in recognition of the fact that many young people experience homelessness in the form of couch surfing, returning to violence, living in

crisis refuges, living in crisis refuges with no exit options, living in severe overcrowded housing and sleeping rough.

Government responses need to take into account young people's ability to access safe and secure housing. This includes the need for stable rents, access to available rental properties, young people's ability to pay rent and increased funding for youth-specific social and community housing for those on low incomes.

Recommendations

- State and territory governments should review existing policy settings for private rental assistance products (i.e., rental bond support or rent subsidies) that support young people to live independently in the private rental market to ensure the product is fit for purpose and can be realistically implemented with private landlords.
- Youth Action supports Yfoundations recommendation for a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan to be supported by the state and territory governments in recognition of both the scale of the issue and the specialised responses that are required.
- Increase investment in youth social and community housing to reduce the number of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Yfoundations suggests a target of 15% social and affordable housing delivered, community housing providers and state housing agencies should be allocated to youth specific housing models. A further 15% should be allocated to support young people to exit supported housing models.

Education and learning

The young people and youth workers we heard from described the difficulties young people have experienced in re-engaging with education since returning to the classroom after the successive lockdowns. All expressed compassion for the context in which teachers and educators had to operate remotely during lockdown, the impact of teacher shortages and overstretched class ratios and increasing disengagement that has emerged in the wake of the pandemic.

Some schools have navigated these complexities well and students spoke positively about the support and understanding they received from teachers and education staff. Youth workers and young people spoke about how they were worried about the negative consequences of these students disengaging from their studies and falling behind in their learning.

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

Many young people have been concerned about their difficulties re-engaging with education in the context of significant teacher shortages. Many young people have told us about often having classes combined or left without cover, sometimes for weeks at a time. They stressed the need for intensive individual assistance and wellbeing support programs at school.

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 and natural disasters of fires, floods, and drought amplified young people's fears about getting behind in their learning coupled with pre-existing mental health issues such as social anxiety or depression. For these young people, catching up with missed learning has proved difficult and many are starting to disengage.

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 romanticThis 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 Education Future Fund to support students requiring extra assistance with numeracy and literacy.
- Double the funding of the Student Wellbeing Innovation Fund to \$7 million to provide expanded evidence-based student programs and initiatives that target student wellbeing across a range of areas. Extend current contracts from 18 months to 3 years to allow initiatives to embed long term change for students that need it.
- Invest \$10 million to embed and expand respectful relationships and consent education in school, TAFE/university, and community-based settings. This needs to be made available statewide and across age ranges, starting with younger students and continuing throughout schooling. 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 they need 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.

Employment

Having access to secure, meaningful, and well compensated employment is a key factor to young people's ability to grow their independence, support themselves and contribute to their communities. It is widely recognised that the insecure, casual nature of employment for many young people, often in industries hardest hit by economic downturns, means that young people are susceptible to employment upheaval and job loss.

The latest ABS October 2023 Labour Force statistics highlight that youth unemployment has increased to 8.7% which is over double the 3.7% national unemployment rate. In areas such as Western Sydney and regional NSW the rate is much higher.

Young people told us that they already experience challenges across the employment spectrum from becoming job ready and navigating employment pathways through to securing and maintaining employment. 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 that 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 important. Young people were clear that entry into 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 the 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

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. This has the benefit of not only improving the immediate situation for young people but will also continue to provide cost saving benefits into the future by reducing the burden of reliance on the social

services sector and increasing the capacity of young people 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 in the wake of the pandemic.

"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 to be solved by professionals rather than underutilised assets within their communities, with the potential and agency to lead the development of their own solutions.

Recommendations

Youth Services

- \$52 million increase to ongoing funding to expand youth service delivery in early intervention, youth development programs, disaster resilience and preparedness, 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.
- Ensure NSW Government grant programs focused on promoting community safety encourage applications for social infrastructure initiatives supporting young people.
- Double the current the NSW Government Youth Opportunities program to \$30 million 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.
- 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 when working with young people.
- Ease the pressure on the youth sector by extending funding arrangements for the sector to a minimum of five years. This would provide certainty and job security to workers experiencing burnout in demanding roles.

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.
- Invest in rights-based training for young people and the services that support them, with a particular focus on trauma informed practice and ensuring cultural safety for First Nations young people and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

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, substance misuse, 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.

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 and 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 resourcing for 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. Some of those particularly relevant to First Nations young people include increasing high school completion rates, completion of tertiary qualifications, participation in employment, access to suitable housing,

overrepresentation in the justice system and rates of First Nations children in out-of-home care.

- 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 and entrenched intergenerational inequality.
- Raise the age of criminal responsibility for young people in NSW from 10 years to 14 years. This needs to be accompanied by an additional \$10 million in resourcing to offer supports and services to young people 10 to 13 years that would otherwise come into contact with the justice system. This includes the provision of case management and counselling support, youth development and cultural programs, and after-hours activities.
- Increased resourcing for whole-of-community youth programs, particularly in regional and Aboriginal communities, to help strengthen capacity to tackle systemic conditions such as 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.