

Youth Action Submission to the Inquiry into Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Children and Young People in NSW

2 May 2025

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.

1. Introduction

Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Children and Young People in New South Wales (NSW). This submission is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of young people across NSW.

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period during which young people navigate complex social, emotional, and cognitive transitions that shape their trajectory into adulthood. Young people actively navigate these developmental tasks and challenges, and those young people who are nurtured, loved and supported during this time are more likely to thrive.¹ Conversely, young people who experience significant stress or disadvantage during this time are at greater risk of poor mental health² and social exclusion. Young people with disability navigating adolescence can face additional challenges. Social exclusion in the form of bullying, stigma and isolation from peers is often higher for young people with disability. Physical spaces may be hard to access, limiting opportunities for participation in

¹ Emerging Minds & Australian National University. (2020). *Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs): Summary of evidence and impacts*. Emerging Minds. <https://d2p3kdr0nr4o3z.cloudfront.net/content/uploads/2020/02/19102540/ACES-Summary-of-Evidence-and-Impacts-V2.pdf>; Haslam, Divna, Mathews, Ben, Pacella, Rosana, Scott, James Graham, Finkelhor, David, Higgins, Daryl, Meinck, Franziska, Erskine, Holly E., Thomas, Hannah J., Lawrence, David M., & Malacova, Eva (2023) *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Qld. Haslam, Divna, Mathews, Ben, Pacella, Rosana, Scott, James Graham, Finkelhor, David, Higgins, Daryl, Meinck, Franziska, Erskine, Holly E., Thomas, Hannah J., Lawrence, David M., & Malacova, Eva (2023) *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Qld.

² King, T. L., Milner, A., Aitken, Z., Karahalios, A., Emerson, E., & Kavanagh, A. M. (2019). Mental health of adolescents: variations by borderline intellectual functioning and disability. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 28(9), 1231–1240. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-019-01278-9>

social activities. They also report higher rates of poor mental health, and transitioning from a youth focused system to an adult system can be hard to navigate.

Based on the unique circumstances, strengths and challenges experienced by young people with disability, it is critical that the system supporting them can offer developmentally appropriate, relevant and targeted support.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (CRPD)³, of which Australia is a signatory (ratified in 2008), denotes ‘[r]ecognizing that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others⁴. The Social Model of Disability⁵ emphasises that disability is a result of how society is organised and the attitudes it holds, rather than inherent differences within individuals. Article 7 of the UNCRPD emphasises that children with disabilities must be afforded “full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children”, “the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them”; and that “the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration.”⁶

³ United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

⁴ United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Preamble*. Division for Inclusive Social Development. <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/preamble>

⁵ Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. (n.d.). *Social model of disability*. Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. <https://www.afdo.org.au/social-model-of-disability>

⁶ United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Article 7*. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

Foundational supports are the crucial piece of the disability support puzzle for young people as they assist in breaking down societal constraints across various domains, including education, healthcare, housing, and employment, and ensure that young people with disability are afforded the same opportunities as young people without disability.

While the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has had a significant and positive change on the lives of many young Australians, their families and broader communities, the emphasis that care is based upon a 'diagnosis' or a series of diagnoses dictates that some young people with disability are not able to access the support they need. This is particularly relevant given the barriers to accessing diagnostic services including high cost, long wait times to see specialists, limited options in regional and remote areas, and supports that are not tailored to the cultural needs of young people. This creates a society in which people with a successful diagnosis are considered eligible for NDIS support, while others are excluded from receiving the same support. These barriers to participation and access impede the NDIS's intention of enacting a rights-based approach to disability inclusion.

We understand that the NDIS is not the focus of this inquiry, but it is difficult to unpack how to improve support for young people without first recognising the limits of the NDIS and the broader attitudes and perceptions toward disability in NSW.

While there have been great strides within the policy and implementation space for people with disabilities in NSW, there is currently no youth-specific Disability Action Plan guiding the supports and services provided to young people. We have heard from young people and the youth sector that more needs to be done to ensure we have a truly inclusive and accessible community, where young people can fully participate and thrive.

To ensure our response is centred on and informed by the voices of young people with disability in NSW, we consulted over 100 youth services from across NSW and gathered their feedback. This feedback was then reinforced by an intensive online focus group of six young people. The group were between 16 and 24 years old, including two males and four females

with disability. The voices of young people who participated in previous Youth Action consultations have also been included in the submission.

Additional work Youth Action has undertaken relating to young people with disability include, responding to previous recent government inquiries on disability, and the development of Creating Access ⁷, a collaborative project with People with Disability Australia (PWDA), which aimed at improving the self-advocacy of young people with disability and enhancing the youth sector's knowledge of and capacity to support young people with disability.

This submission responds to the following terms of reference:

- a) *the role of such services and supports on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing;*
- b) *the types of services and supports available and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access of such services and supports in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote New South Wales, including medical, community-nursing, allied health services, NDIS services and other service delivery models;*
- c) *the role of diagnostic services, existing gaps and barriers, and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access of such services;*
- d) *opportunities to increase engagement across sectors and improved collaboration across both government and non-government services, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, early learning services, educational settings and health services.*

⁷ Youth Action, & People with Disability. (2020). *Creating Access*. Youth Action. https://www.youthaction.org.au/creating_access

2. Recommendations

1. Development of a youth-specific Disability Action Plan for NSW that is fully informed by the rights-based, social model of disability. The plan would be co-designed with young people with disability and reflect their unique circumstances and support needs, driving inclusion and access for young people in NSW.
2. Establishment of a well-resourced, client-centred support system, which offers unique and tailored supports and services to young people, including foundational supports, mainstream support services and individualised NDIS funding packages. Deliver timely, culturally appropriate, and individualised supports to young people located in places that are accessible and integrated into the community. The youth hubs model would be an appropriate support.
3. Greater investment in a coordinated, interconnected and easily navigable network of government, non-government and private supports to reduce the system burden experienced by young people and their families.
4. Invest in training for services that support young people with disability, to ensure they better understand and can respond to their experiences and needs, and to ensure services are accessible, welcoming, and safe.
5. Greater investment into integrated support within educational facilities, including within policy/practice, teacher education and capital works to ensure that young people have all their educational needs met within the mainstream system.
6. Ensure young people have access to early intervention supports, including those relating to diagnostic processes, so they are connected with the relevant services early in their support journey.

7. Increase targeted investment in rural, regional, and remote areas to ensure equitable access to disability services for young people, addressing the unique barriers posed by geographic isolation. This includes funding for local service infrastructure, outreach programs, digital service delivery, and community-led solutions to ensure young people with disability receive timely, appropriate, and culturally safe support regardless of where they live.

8. Prioritise investment in Aboriginal Owned and Controlled organisations (ACCOs) to ensure Aboriginal young people with disability are supported to thrive in culturally relevant services, in line with Close the gap Targets 11 and 12 ⁸

3. Background - the current landscape

Australia began its journey towards a more disability-inclusive society in 2008 with the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This commitment was then strengthened through the development of the Australian National Disability Strategy. NSW utilised the national framework to begin implementing key priorities as outlined in the strategy. The passing of the Disability Inclusion Act 2014 ⁹ and development of the NSW Disability Inclusion Plan¹⁰ have been formative pieces of legislation in NSW. What is missing within the policy and implementation context in NSW is

⁸ *Closing the Gap targets and outcomes | Closing the Gap.* (n.d.).
<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

⁹ Disability Inclusion Act 2014 (NSW). (2014). *Disability Inclusion Act 2014*. New South Wales Government. <https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/whole/html/inforce/current/act-2014-030>

¹⁰ New South Wales Government. (2015). *NSW Disability Inclusion Plan*.
<https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/download?file=465611>

an overarching youth-specific Disability Action Plan that drives inclusion. **(Recommendation 1)**

In the 2022 Survey of Disability, Aging and Carers (SDAC), 13.9 % of Australians aged 15-24 were living with disability. This was an increase from 9.3% in 2018.¹¹

The NDIS was established in 2013 to provide people with disability in Australia access to individualised support, greater choice and long-term care. Prior to the NDIS, disability support was fragmented, inconsistent and often underfunded, leaving many individuals and families without adequate access to support. While the NDIS has been hugely beneficial to some people with disability, its inception has created an unbalanced support system with few options for people outside the NDIS. It is essential that all young people have timely access to the supports and services they need, including foundational supports, mainstream services, and individualised NDIS funding packages, in ways that are youth-specific and embedded in their community. **(Recommendation 2)**

A report from June 2021 highlighted that just over 74,200 young people aged between 15-24 were participating in the NDIS across Australia¹². Assuming NSW's share is proportional to its population (approximately 31% of Australia's total), it can be surmised that an estimated number of 23,600 young people aged 15-24 are NDIS participants. An alternative way to view this, of the 139,000 young people with disability in NSW (if there are 1 million young people and 13.9 % have a disability), only 17% are accessing NDIS support.

A considerable number of young people with disability are therefore excluded from or remaining outside the NDIS support system. Access barriers may include eligibility (the NDIS

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Disability, ageing and carers, Australia: Summary of findings*. Australian Bureau of Statistics. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/ageing/disability-ageing-and-carers-summary-findings/latest-release>

¹² National Disability Insurance Scheme. (2021). *Young adults in the NDIS*. National Disability Insurance Scheme. <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/research/young-adults-ndis>

requires young people demonstrate that they have a ‘permanent’ or ‘significant’ disability), and lack of awareness and understanding of the NDIS and lengthy, complicated and expensive application processes¹³. An issues paper from Victoria reported that young people also struggle to engage with the NDIS and have their voices heard. Those not living with their families or without an appropriate advocate face additional challenge.¹⁴ For young people outside the NDIS support system, services and supports are inconsistent, underfunded and lack coordination.

In the Working Together to Deliver the NDIS¹⁵ report, the number one recommendation made by a panel of independent experts was *‘for the investment in foundational supports to bring fairness, balance and sustainability to the ecosystem supporting people with disability.’*

(Recommendation 2)

The youth hubs model of support would be an appropriate model to deliver foundational supports to young people. The youth hubs model is premised on the idea that the youth hub is a central pillar within a community. Similar to the local school, childcare centre, health facility and post office, it is an essential service providing support to young people within the community. The youth hub model is best practice, as it offers a holistic support response for young people, particularly to those who are without a strong familial support system. It highlights the importance of a responsive, intensive and well-coordinated support network

¹³ Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA). (2019). *CYDA NDIS survey 2019: CYDA submission: Improving the NDIS for children and young people with disability and their families*. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. <https://cyda.org.au>

¹⁴ Victorian Council of Social Service. (2020). *Issues paper: NDIS access, eligibility and independent assessments*. Victorian Council of Social Service. <https://vcoss.org.au>

¹⁵ Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme. (2023). *Working together to deliver the NDIS: Independent review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme final report* (p. 4). <https://www.ndis.gov.au>

that, when adequately resourced and sustained, works to prevent and overcome systemic vulnerabilities and empower young people to thrive.

These findings closely align to the experiences young people with disability have shared with us in relation to their own personal experiences.

4. What young people have told us

Throughout consultations, young people have told us they need more everyday support across all areas of their lives. They described significant challenges arising from support systems operating in isolation, leading to additional levels of stress and burden for both young people and their families and carers. **(Recommendation 3)**

They spoke about the need for consistent support and continuity of care. The relational work of building trust between a young person and a support worker or clinician takes time and the journey is unique to every individual. Young people spoke about having to re-tell their story over and over and the negative impact that has had on their wellbeing. Noting the role of the NDIS navigators is to provide guidance and support, we recommend that they are trained in youth engagement practices to ensure young people are suitably supported.

Young people also spoke about the difference between youth services and adult services, where youth services are often more friendly, approachable and accommodating than adult services, which enables young people to feel safe and ask for the support they needed.

(Recommendation 4)

“They are very like kind and open and approachable in the way that they act, which makes you feel more comfortable “(16yo female)

“Youth spaces are always one of the most accessible spaces” (21yo female)

4.1 Health and mental health support

Some young people in our focus group shared that NDIS funding packages have allowed them to access significant mental health support – primarily through psychologists – which has helped them to build stronger peer connections, develop key social skills, and establish healthy boundaries setting in both personal and professional relationships.

“Having that specialist assistance has been life changing. I would not be the same person as I am right now, I probably wouldn’t be talking to you right now here, doing this conversation, without them. So, they have been a huge help,” (18yo male)

While the NDIS has offered significant positive impacts on some young people’s lives, for others there are additional challenges. Young people spoke about extensive wait times for specialists, and once a specialist has been sought, young people spoke about the lack of continuity of care, with psychologists having limited time or staff changes within a practice, leaving young people feeling frustrated having to re-tell their stories and to have to start again in building a trusting relationship. Having continuous support is a protective factor for young people and influences whether they stay engaged with a support service. In addition to mental health challenges, young people spoke about negative experiences relating to their physical health, including not being taken seriously by a practitioner or being misdiagnosed or wrongly medicated. The youth sector echoed these challenges and reported that young people with disability seeking health-related supports are often lumped into mental health services, even though it may not be the appropriate space for them.

These concerns are even more challenging for young people living in rural, regional, and remote areas, where distance from metropolitan centres makes existing barriers harder to overcome.¹⁶ Targeted investment in these communities is essential to ensure equity of access and outcomes. This includes funding for local service infrastructure, outreach and

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mobile service models, digital service delivery, workforce development and retention strategies, and community-led solutions. Such investment must be designed to overcome the unique challenges of geographic isolation and ensure that young people with disability can access timely, appropriate, and culturally safe support, regardless of where they live.

(Recommendation 7)

4.2 Education

There is no disputing the essential role that education plays in shaping an individual. The NSW Legislative Council, Portfolio No. 3 Committee – Education reported that “inclusion in education has profound and lifelong impacts on the life of a young person with disability across various domains including housing, health, education, social life and more.” The Committee also linked greater inclusion in education to lower rates of school disengagement, school expulsions and lower engagement with youth justice.¹⁷

Young people have shared with us the many challenges they have faced within their educational settings, including bullying, school disruption and an overall lack of support. The youth sector also reported that access to support in schools was not easy, streamlined, or understandable for many young people requiring support. **(Recommendation 5)**

There was a shared sentiment within the focus group that the education system did not have sufficient understanding of the everyday challenges encountered particularly by neurodivergent young people. Young people reported that despite having the relevant diagnosis and documentation relating to their needs for special provisions, schools were unwilling to accommodate those requests. They spoke of the difficulties encountered undertaking exams within the mainstream system, with many leaving an exam feeling

¹⁷ New South Wales Parliament, Legislative Council, Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education. (2024). *Children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings* (Report No. 52). Chair: Ms. Abigail Boyd MLC. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au>

overwhelmed, exhausted and burnt out to the point where they were unable to function for days after.

“Yes, I am a straight A student but I am coming home after an exam, which I am not getting provisions for, and I am not able to work, I am not able to go to school, I am sleeping, it is just destroying my life” (16yo female)

One young person reported that she was told by her school that she could not stay at the school as she wasn't able to sit her exams. She was then moved to a mental health school. When given a scribe, she was able to undertake an exam comfortably and without excessive anxiety. She was later told that she wouldn't be able to have access to a scribe for her HSC.

“You can't access higher education, if you can't do these standardised exams, you can't access higher learning, you only get told you can do life skills” (16yo female)

Young people reported needing supportive provisions, including extra time for exams and assessments, rest breaks, one-on-one lessons and undertaking exams in a different space outside the mainstream area.

They spoke about feeling discriminated against by their educational institutions, and the frustration in not having a suitable pathway, other than the Human Rights Commission, to voice their concerns.

“There is nowhere to go to report that your needs aren't being met” (21yo female)

“I want government to be more strict with the education system in not discriminating against those with disabilities.” (21yo female)

4.3 Barriers to access

Youth Action advocates that disability inclusion for young people must be premised on a rights-based, social model of disability. We acknowledge that the current disability support model is largely driven by diagnostic processes. While an accurate diagnosis can guide appropriate treatment, management plans, support and interventions – ensuring the best possible outcomes for a young person with disability – the youth sector has highlighted many difficulties young people with disability face in navigating these diagnostic pathways and the multiple, often fragmented, systems of care. Barriers may be attributed to many factors including, but not limited to, the prohibitive costs involved, availability of diagnostic services, navigating the NDIS website and payment processes, extensive waitlists, culturally inappropriate support options, and ability of young people to attend regular appointments.

(Recommendation 6)

One young woman reported that it took two years to receive a diagnosis for a sleep disorder through the public hospital system. During this time, she was forced to switch to online education as she was unable to stay awake long enough to attend a mainstream school. The prolonged diagnostic process significantly affected her academic performance, mental health, and social wellbeing. This example highlights the urgent need for more timely, youth-friendly, and accessible diagnostic and support pathways within the public health system to prevent long-term impacts on young people's development and participation in education and community life.

During the focus group, the value of early intervention was highlighted by one of a young participant who shared that she and her brother were diagnosed at the same time, despite being a year apart in age. Because her brother received support earlier – just one year ahead – his support needs have since decreased, while hers have increased. Foundational supports can be critical in such circumstances, acting as a buffer while young people wait for formal diagnoses. They can ensure continuity of care and provide tailored support that considers a young person's broader social and developmental needs, even in the absence of a confirmed diagnosis.

Young people involved in government systems, such as out-of-home care, or the youth justice system, often face complex and overlapping challenges when accessing support. These challenges are further compounded for young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, particularly when they are navigating multiple systems that are not culturally responsive or coordinated. The over-incarceration of First Nations children in Australia's youth justice system, and the over representation in the out-of-home care system is a critical issue, deeply rooted in systemic disadvantage and the pervasive and ongoing effects of colonisation on individuals, families, and communities. For Aboriginal young people with disability, this has further compounded adverse impacts on health, wellbeing and development. This highlights the urgent need for investment in culturally specific early intervention supports to ensure Aboriginal young people with disability are supported to thrive and are in line with Close the Gap Targets 11 and 12.¹⁸ **(Recommendation 8)**

For young people under the age of 18, and who are being supported by a Specialist Homelessness Service, additional barriers may occur. Many of these young people have left their family home or place of guardianship due to violence perpetrated against them but, due to their age, do not have ownership of their care plans. Without access to their care plan, they are unable to seek out the relevant supports. In these situations, foundational supports embedded within youth and homelessness services can act as a vital conduit to care. They can support young people to navigate service systems, advocate for their needs, and fill the gaps where formal systems fall short.

¹⁸ Closing the Gap. (n.d.). *Closing the Gap targets and outcomes*. Australian Government. <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

There is strong evidence suggesting that many young people involved in the justice system are likely to have a disability, many of which are undiagnosed.¹⁹ For some, it is within the justice system that they received their very first formal diagnosis. Furthermore, there is an intersection between young people in out-of-home care and youth justice, with the responsibility for these young people often shared between the Department Communities and Justice, Juvenile Justice, out-of-home care and ancillary support services. Prioritising the wellbeing of children and young people can help mitigate the systemic causes of criminalised behaviour, making any involvement short-lived and transitional for children. When we understand the needs of a young person from a social health perspective, rather than from a criminal justice perspective, we can ensure responses and supports fit the needs and capacities of a young person's stage of cognitive, emotional and social development. As the responsibility for some young people is transferred between the various agencies, young people, particularly those with complex circumstances, can be overlooked and placed in unsafe situations. The youth sector suggests that better coordination and communication between these agencies is required, which would need to include dedicated financial resources to ensure that interventions and supports are provided at the earliest point possible and young people.

There is an urgent need to strengthen the cultural responsiveness of disability services, concurrently with skills in youth-specific engagement, to ensure equitable access for young people from CALD backgrounds. This includes investing in outreach tailored to recently settled communities (including those arriving via humanitarian pathways) and streamlined pathways for CALD families to navigate eligibility and planning processes. Culturally safe service models must be embedded across the NDIS and foundational support systems to reduce access barriers and improve outcomes.

¹⁹ Salerno, D. (2020). *People with disabilities in the corrections system and youth justice in Australia*. Written for the Office of the Public Advocate. <https://www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au>

Foundational supports have a vital role in mitigating these barriers. While diagnosis remains important for access to formal supports, foundational supports can provide non-clinical, wraparound assistance that ensures young people are not left without help while navigating lengthy or inaccessible diagnostic processes. Investing in youth-specific, culturally safe foundational supports can offer young people critical early assistance and connection to services.

4.4 Employment services

In consultations undertaken with young people with disability in 2022, it was reported that the availability of secure and meaningful employment opportunities in a range of industries is crucial in ensuring long-term positive outcomes for themselves and their peers. Young people with disability expressed concerns about the barriers they faced both in securing and maintaining employment. These young people spoke about difficulties knowing how to find suitable roles that they could undertake as well as finding employers who had the capacity to support them once in employment. Young people with disability said they required extra employment support from services who understood the unique challenges for young people with disability, including ongoing advocacy with employers to help them better understand how to support an employee with disability and provide a disability-inclusive and accessible workplace.

“I’m pretty concerned about the people with disabilities, because they might not know how to write a resume, and to just build up the courage to go and give their resume to a workplace and ask for employment. I don’t really see much supporting that. 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” (Anonymous)



The youth sector spoke about the lack of voluntary youth employment programs, which support those who may not be eligible for federally funded programs, due to their prohibitive administrative requirements. The sector noted the effectiveness of the government-funded Youth Employment Program, which ceased in 2020.

Young people connected to youth services, employment programs, or attending school or university said they were more likely to receive disability-inclusive support through these organisations. However, young people said that if you are not connected to these supports, especially during transition periods such as leaving school or university, changing jobs, or being unemployed, it is hard to know how to do these things.

Foundational supports can play a role in helping young people prepare for and transition into work, particularly those who are not engaged with formal disability employment services. Community-based programs, peer mentoring, and employment navigation support delivered through youth services can offer tailored, strengths-based pathways into employment, while also providing a critical safety net during life transitions to ensure young people are not left without guidance, resources, or advocacy.

“The job agency was able to help my brother, who has a disability, with finding different jobs, creating a resume, and getting a bit of experience. They were very helpful in getting him interviews, keeping his resume updated and finding jobs that would employ him” – (anonymous).

5. Conclusion

A young person's disability is largely based upon the societal barriers they face – such as inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes and perceptions, and exclusionary systems –that limit their full participation in everyday life. There is a need to truly embody the international and domestic rights-based approaches pertaining to young people with disability, and to shift the current frameworks, policies and systems relating to disability away from the medical model to the social model.

Further, it is crucial that NSW builds a comprehensive and coordinated support system, comprising foundational supports, mainstream services and individualised funded packages through the NDIS, which can deliver the right support to a young person with disability at the right time.

Foundational supports offer the opportunity to deliver a more holistic approach to supporting a young person's wellbeing by enhancing the impact of clinical interventions through complementary non-clinical services and providing support to those prior to diagnosis.

With adequate and sustained investments, a more inclusive and equitable system that empowers all young people in NSW to lead fulfilling, independent lives will be available to young people with disability.

Finally, to ensure future supports are effective and relevant, it is essential that any initiatives or recommendations made by the Committee are co-designed with young people with disability. Young people have a deep understanding of what they need to thrive and must be meaningfully included in any decision-making processes that affect their development and wellbeing.

Thank you to the young people and the youth sector whose rich insights, lived experiences, and powerful advocacy have shaped this submission.