

Office of Youth
Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

Via online submission: https://www.youth.gov.au/get-involved#paper_1

1 September 2023

Dear Office of Youth,

Thank you for the opportunity for the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) to provide feedback on the discussion paper in relation to the development of Australia's Youth Engagement Strategy.

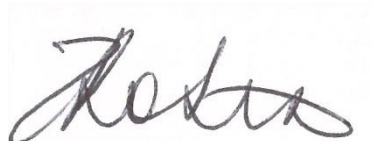
Established under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014*, the Advocate for Children and Young People is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people aged 0-24 years and promotes their participation in decisions that affect their lives. The Act requires ACYP to 'give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people' and to 'focus on systemic issues affecting children and young people'.

As one of the central functions of ACYP is to promote the voices and participation of children and young people in decision making, ACYP strongly supports the policy intent behind the development of a national youth engagement strategy.

Outlined in the document below we have provided some high-level feedback in relation to the consultation paper's discussion questions. We note that ACYP would also be happy to share additional existing data or facilitate feedback from children and young people, in order to assist with the development of the Strategy, as well as any future action plans focused on implementation and monitoring of the Strategy moving forward.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at or my team at acyp@acyp.nsw.gov.au if we can be of any assistance as the Strategy develops.

Yours sincerely,



Zoë Robinson
Advocate
Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People

Office for Youth: Discussion paper feedback

Issues that are important to young people

What are the top three issues that you believe should be a priority for the Australian Government's youth engagement?

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People regularly engages with children and young people - through face-to-face consultations, surveys, and a range of other engagement activities. The three key issues that have come up include:

- Mental health and access to healthcare
 - While this was the third top issue in the 2023 Youth Week Poll behind cost of living and bullying, it has often been the top issue identified by young people in previous polls.
 - Affordability and availability are the primary gaps to be addressed.
- Access to quality education
 - While not specified as a top issue in the Youth Week Poll, young people continue to raise concerns about:
 - i. their lack of preparedness for further study and the barriers to access tertiary education including not being made aware of scholarships, fee free options and the hidden costs associated with learning. During ACYP's Cost of Living consultations, many young people mentioned the fear of having a HECS debt was a disincentive to pursue university;
 - ii. the perceived ongoing disparity between the resources available for students (for e.g., regional and metro, private, faith-based, and public schools); and
 - iii. the ongoing stress and pressure to do well at school.
- Cost of living and housing
 - The 'rising cost of living/ financial pressures' exceeded mental health for the first time with over half of young people very or quite concerned about the cost of living.
 - In the 2023 Youth Week Poll, 65% of young adults report experiencing 'housing stress' and 36% reported anxiety they would never be able to find a rental property.
 - ACYP shares our recently published interim report, "[It should be easier to just exist](#)": How children and young people are impacted by and responding to the rising cost of living in NSW. ACYP are in the process of finalising Cost of Living consultations with a final report due in late 2023.
 - Young people should not fear the possibility of being homeless or never being able to live independently.

ACYP publishes data that tracks the top ten issues raised by young people via polling¹. The next Tracking Report will be published in early 2024.

¹ The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People Tracking Report 01; accessed via: <https://522228.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/522228/NSW%20Strategic%20Plan%20for%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%20Tracking%20Report%2001.pdf>

When it comes to your top three issues, what specific outcomes would you like to see achieved for young people in Australia in each of these areas?

Across all priority areas, a broad spectrum of young people should be consulted throughout any policy/program/model design, development, implementation, and evaluation. The below outcomes are based on what we have heard from young people:

- Mental health and access to healthcare
 - Increase mental health literacy for adults who serve children and young people
 - Increase capacity for young people to provide peer mental health support
 - Decrease waiting times for professional mental health support
 - Greater availability of mental health specialist staff in regional and remote areas
 - Expanded fee help programs, for e.g., extending the limit of 10 sessions under Mental Health Treatment Plans or financial support to travel to a mental health specialist when you live in a regional or remote area
 - Rising GP costs to access basic medical care are addressed;
- Access to quality education
 - Decrease the level of stress and anxiety related to school or study
 - Increase access to practical life skills resources
 - Decrease difficulty for young people in finding work
 - Increase the number of young people in employment, education, or training
 - Increase engagement in learning and education, including early childhood education and transition to school
 - Young people leaving and exiting high school have a greater understanding of the HECS arrangements, available scholarships, and fee free programs from Year 9 – 12
- Cost of living and housing
 - Decrease the number of young people reporting financial instability
 - Decrease the number of young people reporting difficult in finding safe, stable, and affordable accommodation
 - Decrease youth homelessness
 - Increase children and young people's access to transport in regional areas
 - Inherent discrimination in the rental application system is addressed by:
 - i. providing and promoting accurate information to young people about the rental process, their rights and advice on how to address concerns relating to repairs or issues;
 - ii. further regulation of the rental system to support reform and transparency such as excessive rent rises, rent bidding and 'no grounds' terminations; and
 - iii. prohibiting the use of certain data (applicant age or suburb) to assess a rental application.
 - ACYP are currently drafting a report on our Cost of Living consultations and can share more specific recommendations in late 2023.

Youth Engagement Model

How can the Australian Government use the new Youth Engagement Model to ensure it is achieving meaningful engagement with young people?

The definition, scope, and outcomes of this work and specific measures of 'meaningful engagement' should be co-designed in partnership with young people, providing space for young people to lead

how they engage. Feedback should be consistently sought, and the strategy process should be flexible to learnings throughout the process.

To achieve meaningful and best engagement with young people, it is important to consider a wide range of platforms, tools, and mechanisms to capture feedback from young people and engage the broad spectrum of capacity to engage.

ACYP supports the Strategy being informed by the contributions of the five established youth advisory groups. Contributions should also be sought from harder to reach young people “disengaged” from the service system, in particular those not currently engaged in education, employment or those who lack digital infrastructure and literacy.

What additional programs or initiatives would you like to see the new Youth Engagement Model have?

ACYP encourages further consideration of ways to embed governance structures which harness the lived experience of the young people this Strategy is seeking to support.

It is important for the new Youth Engagement Strategy to promote and engage with other programs and events held by other agencies in communities that they are not a part of. While young people are the experts in their own lives, these grass roots organisations have a strong understanding of their community needs. They can be an effective pathway to capture the needs and advice of young people that otherwise would not be provided with the opportunity to inform the work of the Australian Government.

Embedding youth engagement

What best practice models exist across Australia or internationally for implementing large-scale youth engagement successfully?

- **Ireland National Participation Framework**
- Last year, Ireland launched a National Participation Framework aimed at supporting departments, agencies, and organisations to improve their participation practice with children and young people. The framework builds on the Irish National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making (2015-2020) and is based around Laura Lundy’s model of participation.
- The 2020 ‘Our Generation’s Epidemic: Knife Crime’ Report was informed by a 2018 UK-wide ballot “**Make your Mark**” in which knife crime was identified as the biggest concern by 1.1 million young people aged 11 to 18 years.
- Based on the ballot, the members of the UK Youth Parliament debate the top five topics in the House of Commons and two issues get chosen for a national campaign model. Make your Mark is supported by over 780 schools, colleges, youth groups, and Councils across the UK.
- The National Youth Engagement Strategy should also consider creative engagement mechanisms that allow young people greater participation in decision-making, examples include:
Youth Parliaments and Children’s Parliaments
- This already exists in NSW and at a local Government level (for e.g., the 2168 Children’s Parliament and Y NSW Youth Parliament), but there are some models from overseas to draw on that involve young people having meaningful say around legislation and policy development.

- Useful overseas examples include: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/15/europe/irelands-youth-assembly-climate-change-intl-scli/index.html> / <https://eyp.org/>

Citizens Juries

- This is a model that ACYP has used previously – see for example: <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/citizens-jury-2016-health>
- ACYP generally tries to utilise a variety of different mechanisms to engage children and young people across NSW, to ensure that we are engaging with a broad and diverse range of children and young people.

Can you provide an example of a lesson learnt when implementing a similar policy or strategy?

- In terms of consultations, it is important to meet children and young people where they already are in terms of events, activities, and capacity.
- With informed consent and confidentiality being key, time should be spent building trust to encourage open feedback from young people. Reporting back to young people on what was heard and how it will be used is critical.
- Discussion should enable children and young people to directly share their experiences and opinions on how they would solve an issue. Capacity building is key to this.
- Where polling is used, it should seek a statistically representative sample wherever possible.

Barriers for young people engaging with the Australian Government

What are the barriers young people experience when engaging with the government?

There are a number of barriers young people have identified when engaging with Government:

- Trust in Government and burnout from previous relationships with Government. ACYP notes under 25's demonstrated the lowest levels of 'social trust' in Scanlon Institute's 2022 report on [Trust and Social Cohesion in Australia](#).
- Consultations being held during school hours; a mix of weeknight and weekend consultations can cater to different living circumstances.
- Young people who live in regional, remote, or metro areas disconnected from public transport are unable to attend metro-based events.
- Young people do not feel that they fit into a demographic of importance and their opinions are not taken seriously, particularly if they are under the voting age.
- Some young people do not see themselves represented in the governing body and as such do not believe they have a place to hold.
- Questions are not asked using plain child-friendly language that can be understood regardless of learning capacity.
- Young people are facing different circumstances. Their time should be valued, particularly where their participation is preventing them from earning a living. Young people should be reimbursed for their time (for e.g., a sitting fee, gift card etc).

How do you think the Government can remove these barriers to support all young people to engage with the Australian Government?

See ACYP'S Guide to participation in practice found here: <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/participation-guide>. For the purposes of removing the barriers that prevent young people from participating in meaningful engagement, government bodies need to build initial and ongoing rapport with young people by:

- Building trusting relationships, following through with a result, (for e.g., ongoing communications post consults and provide them with the report at the end).
- Using ice breakers, explaining, and reiterating consent arrangements/ voluntary participation, the purpose and outcome of the work.
- Highlighting what is involved and if there is an incentive for young people, this can be an incentive of them knowing they have made a difference to the future of Australia.
- Consider when engaging with particular cohorts if to the facilitator should be the Office for Youth or whether it could be a third party who already has an existing relationship with the young people.
- Consider and implement culturally safe, inclusive, and respectful environments and representation throughout all consultations.
- Consider opportunities to reach out to and engage with cohorts of young people who might not typically engage with government bodies. This includes thinking about ways to create safe and inviting spaces, and speaking to young people in spaces where they already are. For example, this could include running consultations at existing youth-focused events, such as sporting events and community festivals; or speaking to young people at services that they already engage with – such as youth centres, youth justice centres, homelessness services and out-of-home care providers.
- Consider strategies to keep young people engaged in the consultation topic and mix up the engagement mediums in recognition that young people learn and engage differently e.g., using audio-visual explanations, continuum line exercises, focus groups and one-on-one deep dives).

Engaging with diverse young people

What does safe and inclusive engagement look like for you?

When considering what safe and inclusive engagement with young people, it is important to consider the needs of the group and to develop a greater sense of what this looks and feels like for them.

Some principles for safe and inclusive engagement with young people include:

- Providing time for young people to consider and advise what respectful engagement looks like and means to them – with the wider group, their communities and government
- Considering what the best mode of communication and discussion for the young people involved and how to best support them to participate to the best of their ability. For example, consideration of whether the engagements should be conducted face to face or online.
- Taking a trauma-informed approach to engage with young people.
- Responding to individual needs in the moment and afterwards by providing support to contribute ensuring that it is in their best interest and how they wish to participate (for e.g., providing a space or time for a young person to provide input if they felt like may not have a voice in that setting).

What do you think the Australian Government should think about to engage effectively and sensitively with you or with young people from the diverse backgrounds?

The Australian Government needs to consider utilising peers, service providers and existing community connections with whom young people have already built trust and rapport. Where

appropriate, these trusted individuals should be asking the questions – e.g., having an Elder present when or asking questions of Aboriginal children and young people. Doing so ensures a more effective environment to facilitate open and honest discussions.

As highlighted above, child and youth friendly language should always be used and appropriate support people and/ or translators should be made available to facilitate the full engagement of young people from diverse backgrounds.