

NSW Strategic Plan for children and Young People - Consultation Report

Report on regional consultations
held with people who work with
children and young people

Office of the
Advocate for Children
and Young People

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Minister's message

This report from the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People captures the outcomes of six regional consultations with local agencies providing services to children and young people, and an NGO and Civil Society Forum in Sydney, on the themes, directions and priorities for the first legislated Strategic Plan for Children and Young People in NSW.

As the Minister responsible for the carriage of the Plan on behalf of the NSW Government, I have been delighted to have been involved in its development.

From the outset, we wanted to make sure that the voices of children and young people shaped the foundations of the Plan. The Advocate and his team travelled the state from Broken Hill to Bondi, and from Lismore to Ulladulla to talk with children and young people of all ages and backgrounds. The results of these consultations have been captured in a separate accompanying report, the *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People – Consultation Results Report*.

Also from the onset, we recognised the critical importance of the Plan drawing on the wisdom of the organisations that work on a daily basis with children and young people in their communities. Using the principles of co-design to engage children and young people and service organisations in the development of the Plan, the Advocate has sought to involve all stakeholders in the design process to help ensure the results meet their needs.

The Advocate held regional consultations in the Central Coast, Mid North Coast, Far West NSW, South Western Sydney, Illawarra Shoalhaven, and Hunter New England that engaged local non-government organisations, state government agencies at the regional level, local councils, schools, and community groups. As this report attests, the consultations drew on the strengths, knowledge and opportunities that exist within these communities and reflect the fact that local communities are often best placed to design, develop and deliver the solutions that will work for them.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who contributed so strongly to the success of the regional consultations and the NGO and Civil Society Forum, and also to acknowledge the outstanding assistance of the Departments of Family and Community Services and Premier and Cabinet in helping to organize the consultations.

By working together in the ways demonstrated in this report and the development of the Plan, I am positive we can continue to make NSW a better place for children and young people.

I look forward to joining you as we take the next steps to deliver the first Strategic Plan for Children and Young People in NSW.



The Hon. John Ajaka, MLC

Minister for Ageing, Minister for Disability Services, and Minister for Multiculturalism

Introduction by the Advocate

We have many people to acknowledge for their contribution to this report and the regional consultation process.

Thank you to the many people from government, non-government organisations and community group representatives who voluntarily gave up their time to attend the consultation in their region and provide their input into the development of the first Strategic Plan for Children and Young People.

The insights of those who work in the interests of children and young people everyday are an invaluable tool in ensuring that the real needs of children and young people are addressed.

These results compliment the results of consultations that the office of the Advocate for Children and Young People conducted with more than 4,000 children and young people living in NSW. Hearing directly from children and young people and those who work to benefit children and young people is a key method in ensuring that the Strategic Plan can deliver authentic results in the areas that matter.

The process reached a large and diverse group of people who work with children and young people.

We consulted with people covering six districts¹ around NSW: Central Coast; Far West; Hunter/New England; Illawarra/Shoalhaven; Mid North Coast; South Western Sydney as well as NGOs Forums in Sydney.

The consultations canvassed the views of over 500 people who work with children and young people. This was a diverse group, ranging from people supporting vulnerable children and young people through those involved in education, the built and natural environment, transport, planning, healthcare, child protection, families, sports, creative arts, Aboriginal services, training and employment. There were representatives from community groups, non-government services, government agencies (particularly state and local government) and the business community.

The outputs of each of the locations were summarised in two reports, one that was produced for the participants and one that was a literal capture of the outputs.

The Departments of Family and Community Services and Premier and Cabinet played incredibly important roles in shaping and delivering consultations. We would like to acknowledge their generous sharing of information, views and influence in bringing about the rich findings of this report.



Andrew Johnson

Advocate for Children and Young People

¹ Using FACS/Health districts

Summary

- Many people have a stake in the first NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People - children and young people themselves, and the people who work closely with them—whether directly through advocating on their behalf and/or provision of services for children and young people, or indirectly through design and implementation.
- This report draws on regional consultations and forums with approximately 500 people across NSW who work with children and young people. These consultations explored what was working well for children and young people in their location, what was not working well, the priorities for action and ideas for how to improve outcomes for children and young people.
- Service network consultations were coupled with consultations with children and young people in each of the locations. Children and young people were asked to share their views on what was working and not working for children and young people, what the priorities should be for the NSW State Government and the qualities of a good society for children and young people.
- In order to bring the voices of children and young people directly into the room with the participants, each of these consultations incorporated a short video of children and young people from the local area capturing their key ideas and concerns.
- Children and young people across NSW have been clear and consistent about the qualities of a good society for them and about what’s working for them and what is not. This was reflected in their input to the regional consultations and in the wider consultations conducted with children and young people by ACYP.
- The five themes identified through the consultations with children and young people resonated with the feedback from the regional consultations with service organisations, and we have used these themes to report the findings. These themes are: safe; respected; connected; voice; and opportunity. Of the priorities identified, opportunity was an important aspect, particularly for children and young people who are vulnerable or experiencing disadvantage.
- There are a number of boxed sections included under the themes. These are areas where participants in all locations dwelled and were seen as particularly important. The boxes allow for exploration of the issues in a coherent manner. The boxes comprise:
 - The importance of schools and education in supporting a broad range of opportunities for children and young people
 - Transitions between stages, such as from preschool to primary school, which are viewed as critical points at which children and young people can have strengths recognised or can disengage, depending on the approach, in turn affecting their opportunity
 - A desire for strong, joined up services, which is explored in Connected
 - Access to information for both service providers and children and young people themselves, which is also explored in Connected.
- The five themes are mutually reinforcing, so a number of issues cut across multiple themes. These include managing times of transition, making sure all population groups (particularly those with disability and Aboriginal young people) are supported, and supporting young people at all stages of their life development with age appropriate services. There was also criticism of some philosophical approaches underpinning service delivery, for example expecting universal services such as health and education to be enough in themselves for those experiencing disadvantage. It is also clear that *local* matters—good responses work with the strengths and characteristics of local communities.
- There was a strong desire that services match the needs and intensity of life stages. People spoke eloquently about an often overloaded system, in which there are good services in place but just not at the level necessary to make the difference that is needed. Mental health, homelessness refuges,

lack of support for Aboriginal and CALD groups, housing, insufficient allied health services (such as Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy) were all examples cited by participants where more services are needed.

- The consultations revealed many examples of excellent local practice and relationships. Participants were generous in offering suggestions for what to improve and these are reflected in this report. Relationships are at the heart of anything that works, but they are enabled by good and consistent programs and enabled leadership. It is the hope of participants that change in these areas will transform the lives of children and young people across NSW.



About this report, and the way it informs the Strategic Plan for Children and Young People

The approach to this report is grounded in the legislative requirements of the strategic plan for children and young people.

- Specifically, the legislation requires that in exercising functions under the Act the Advocate must:
 - Promote the participation of young people in decisions that affect their lives
 - Focus on systemic issues affecting children and young people
 - Give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people
 - Work cooperatively with other organisations that provide services to or represent the interests of children and young people.
- The input will ultimately contribute to a NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People. This Plan will be cross cutting in nature and will not override the core responsibilities or reform directions of individual agencies. For example, some participants proposed major reforms, such as for the education system. This report reflects the underlying concerns raised, but has treated proposals of this magnitude as out of scope. These proposals are, however, contained in the reports of the relevant regional consultations.
- In formulating this report we have distilled those issues raised by the sector in areas where there is consensus.
- Issues or views are reported as those of the participants and are not presented as established facts.
- The results of the regional consultations with NGOs, civil society and government departments and agencies will be used alongside the results of consultations with children and young people themselves as well as research, one-on-one meetings, an NGO forum and conferences. For these reasons, the findings of this report form only a part of the findings that will underpin the final strategic plan.

Five themes identified by children and young people

Safe

Children and young people are protected and safe. They are supported to develop healthy relationships and access help when they need it.

Connected

Children and young people have the opportunity to be close to family and friends and to be part of their community. Their built environment supports their interactions and they can experience the natural environment. They can also access safe and relevant digital platforms to connect them.

Respected

Children and young people are respected for who they are; the strengths, diversity and potential of all children and young people are supported and recognised; and services are responsive to their individual needs, aspirations and sense of identity.

Voice

Children and young people are included in decision-making processes that affect them and are empowered to be genuinely involved in the design, delivery and monitoring of the services they use.

Opportunity

Children and young people have the fundamental underpinnings to achieve in life such as a home and healthcare; they acquire life skills through supports appropriate to their stage; and they can, through education, training and work, find pathways that optimise their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the community.

Safe

Children and young people are protected and safe. They are supported to develop healthy relationships and access help when they need it.

What's working well and could be built on

In **parenting and child protection**, the most striking finding was a shift towards strengths-based and child-centred approaches. Where they were working (and participants reported many instances) they were highly regarded. Examples included:

- Approaches such as *Signs of Safety* framework and case planning.
- Early intervention parenting programs, particularly with an approach that strengthened attachment.

Some participants observed that reforms from the last five years were working as intended. Examples include the *Keep Them Safe* reforms that made child protection everyone's business, the introduction of Family Referral Services and Child Wellbeing Units as a means of coordinating responses to specific families.

There was some positive feedback on domestic violence reforms in the areas in which they had already been rolled out. There were no specific examples of **domestic violence** initiatives noted, although these areas were seen as priorities.

Areas for improvement

Concern

Parenting was a very significant issue for vulnerable families. Low capacity, poverty and low resilience are recognised as significantly affecting these families. While there are some programs in place, there was a strong sense this needed more effort. As a corollary, there was also concern about the out of home care system, particularly at the number of children now in OOHC.

Domestic violence, with a particular emphasis on the trauma it causes. There were many calls for teachers and educators to understand the drivers of poor behaviour and the links with trauma so children could be assisted rather than further punished.

Proposals to support children and young people to feel safe

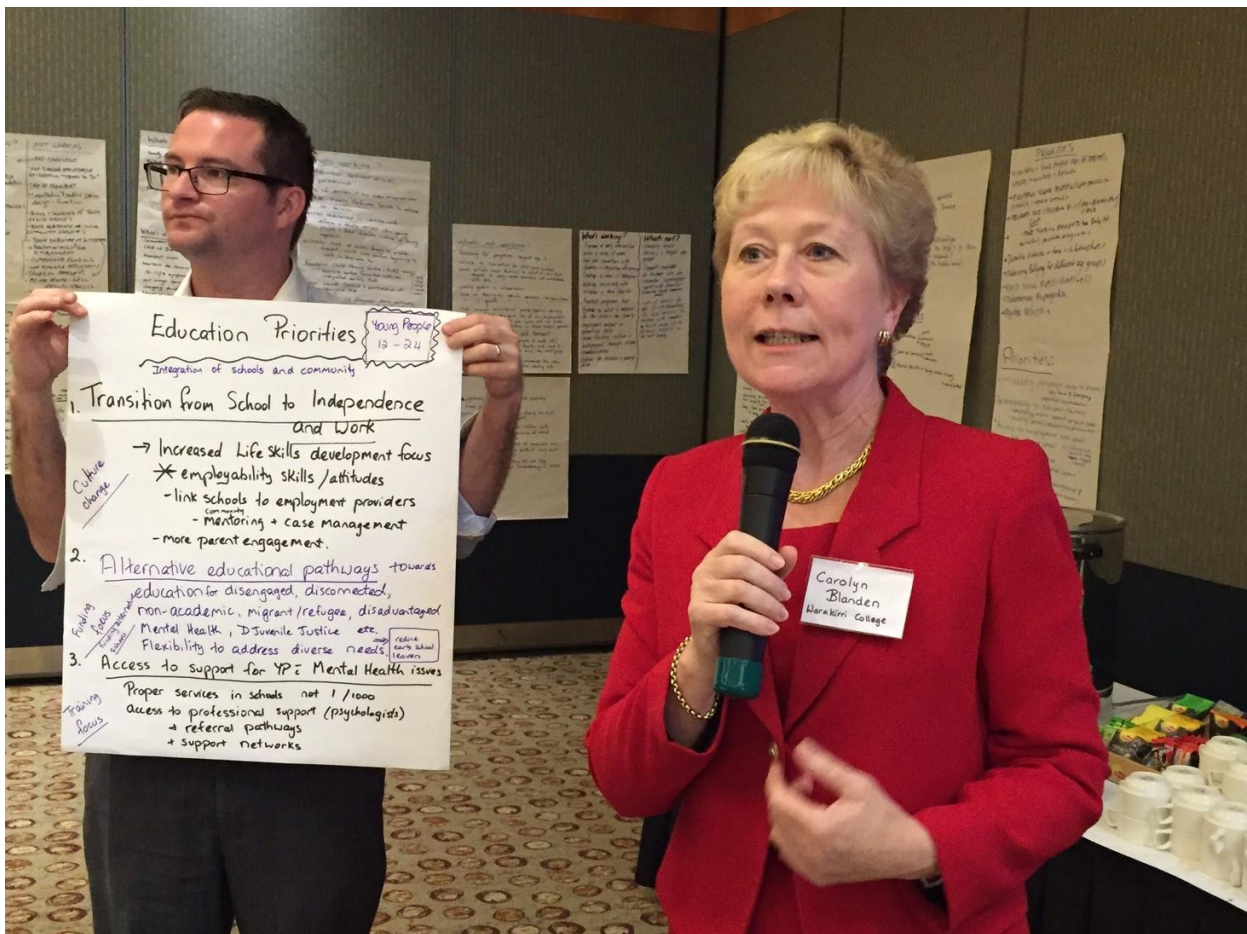
- Build on strengths-based education in the perinatal period, including antenatal visits and classes, to build attachment and reduce trauma; Got IT DEC/Health early intervention and prevention to be rolled out across the state; 7 Generations program, Right Door campaign; greater use of midwives.
- Increase positive media about the role of dads.
- Calls for further increases in funding for ROSH responses by FACS.
- Introduce youth-led initiatives in this area. Examples include Love Bites, Drop the Beat (Hunter), using "map your world" technology to shift the culture.
- Introduce age-appropriate perpetrator programs for young people with funding supporting diversion and self-referral.
- When considering domestic violence, the focus of most discussion was on keeping children and young people safe. There was a desire for stronger responses to domestic violence, including DV courts, earlier intervention with perpetrators, and approaches such as the "Dallas Solution" (a zero-tolerance initiative combining specialised police units, trained counsellors and a dedicated domestic violence court headed by an understanding judge).
- Recognising that children who have experienced domestic violence need "normal" activity like kicking a ball. Understanding the impact that trauma can have, for example on their behaviour at school.

Bullying is an issue that was seen to undermine connection to peers. Concern for this issue extended from in-real-life bullying through to use of social media for coercion, creating fear and exploiting young people.

- Although **bullying** was seen as very important to address, there were no specific proposals for how this should be better tackled.

Resilience was expressed as a concern for all young people. Increasing pressure from study, social and parental expectations, bullying and other areas was leading to what many felt was a generation that found themselves in an impossible situation. Mental health, suicide, drugs and alcohol were all indicative of pressure in this area.

- Integrating mental health/stress management into primary school.



Connected

Children and young people have the opportunity to be close to family and friends and to be part of their community. Their built environment supports their interactions and they can experience the natural environment. They can also access safe and relevant digital platforms to connect them.

Participants thought these aspects were working and could be built upon

Opportunities for connection varied by location, at least partly because of the different features of different locations (e.g. rural, inner metropolitan). Some participants pointed to an abundance of local places of natural beauty—beaches, parks, gardens, national parks that can support connection to the natural environment. Initiatives around garden and food education in schools also perform a role in supporting a connection to place and respect for the environment.

Other locations focused on recreational facilities and sports facilities. These were seen as important for young people as areas to feel valued and to make connections with others and we documented many examples across the state.

Some communities are affected by extreme disadvantage. In these locations, participants pointed to strengths-based approaches to community development as being particularly successful. There seems to be both willingness to and increasing frequency of working with communities through co-design of approaches. Special events targeting those potentially disenfranchised were supported. One example is the Central Coast Connect Day for young people who are homeless, at risk or doing it tough.

Participants promoted the importance of connected services. In particular, efforts by NSW Education to improve the relationships with their communities are perceived as having mixed success, although many acknowledged that when they worked well, initiatives such as the Schools as Community Centres (Windale, Fennell Bay) and Connected Communities were very valuable.

Many locations could point to good examples of collaboration between service providers including increasing examples of co-case management, co-design and other new working arrangements.

Areas for improvement

Concern

Transport was seen as a critical enabler for children and young people—particularly those in the older cohorts—in achieving a sense of connection. Many participants spoke of local services that were time limited, where there were services that served a very local community but did not connect with an adjacent community, where transport to employment hubs took well over 1.5 hours. Others spoke of limited access to public transport and the very high cost of private operators. Concerns for a lack of transport extended to parents, who experience broader social exclusion as a consequence of poor access to transport.

Proposals to support children and young people to feel connected

- Expand transport opportunities. Participant proposals ranged from expanding existing free shuttle buses to more locations, through to making public transport completely free up to a certain age (one group suggested 18) to encourage safe transport options for social connection. One group proposed using underutilised minibuses and buses owned by clubs.
- Introduce regional “pop-up” buses that move between locations to create hubs for young people to connect with each other and to find out about services. These could be operated in a collaborative way between service partners.



Recreational activities and facilities.

The **gender divide in sporting options** between girls and boys was raised . Participants observed that in most locations there were many more options for boys, while girls were often limited to netball. There is a strong desire for this to improve. When looking at **recreational activities**, there was a concern that there was a high cost associated with many activities. While sport was the most discussed recreational activity, in two locations there was a desire to see a greater focus on **art and music**. In particular, participants thought there should be more events open to children and young people.

- Open up schools as a built environment that can contribute to the social activity of children and young people outside of school hours. Examples that could be scaled up include access to air-conditioned school basketball courts in summer holidays as a means of both creating a comfortable place in the far west and other locations affected by extreme heat. Other proposals included removing school fencing to allow access to facilities and integration with the community and greater use of schools for child-led community gardens.
- Create more water parks, such as at The Entrance. These were seen as a great example of a no-cost community opportunity for families.
- Introduce more innovation and creativity in playgrounds, including musical community squares, supported play yards with open-ended materials, and play café models.
- Hold a coordinated series of local “youth activities”. These would bring in clubs and service educators to raise awareness of youth issues and services availability.
- Expand free activities overall. One example is Broken Hill PCYC’s “freestyling Fridays”, boxing, drop in rooms, vacation care and art galleries.
- Participants saw that many benefits could come from subsidised funding for fees, membership and other low cost enablers that support the participation of disadvantaged children and young people in group activities. Small examples included paying for surfing or music lessons.
- Expanding support for local youth art to promote ownership and belonging, including street art, sculpture. This could incorporate creative uses of reverse garbage, to build community and awareness.

Location. Overcoming social isolation requires the ability to move to locations where there are concentrations of children and young people.

There was a concern about the **locational disparity in service offerings**, for example between older, more established locations—which tended to be well resourced—and newer, faster growing communities—in which there were fewer resources, but possibly a higher demand.

The extent to which a **location was safe** for children and young people concerned some participants. Issues raised included unsafe children’s parks, needles and other potentially damaging items.

Some locations—particularly communities in which disadvantage was concentrated—were singled out as needing extra attention.

- Reassess funding distribution.
- See also suggestions under transport.
- Build on the focused work already in place in communities in which disadvantage is concentrated, including creating a sense of belonging. Participants particularly wanted to use a community strengths approach.

Environment. Some participants raised concerns that, despite relatively easy access to beautiful **natural environments**, environmental education is an area that doesn’t receive priority.

Many suggested that it was hard for young people to access **appropriate built environments**.

- Capitalise on national parks by removing entry fees for families and children and expand on initiatives that link children and young people to national parks in ways that are both fun and age appropriate.
- Cultivate natural play spaces as a means of fostering environmental connection.
- Involve young people in the design of built environment, particularly where it leads to facilities (such as parks) intended for their use.

Connections across service systems: joined up services

The service system that sits behind children and young people works best when it is connected. There is a strong sense that connections between those who work with children and young people are improving. Most locations highlighted existing connections as a strength, pointing to a greater level of openness and collaboration, trust and cross-sector thinking.

Yet there was still support for this being a priority into the future. People felt that personal relationships were at the heart of successful collaboration: that is, the right people could make joint effort work despite structural arrangements. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that the right structural arrangements could assist. Some suggested that, for example, connected strategic planning between agencies such as schools, TAFE, FACS and NGOs could underpin integrated service delivery. Others suggested that whole of sector mapping, backed with a structured, planned and coordinated cross-sector delivery approach, with underpinning economic analysis, could be a useful adjunct.

It was clear that the regional coordination role of DPC added considerable value in many locations. Where this occurred there were close relationships between government agencies and a clear sense of purpose. In other locations, for example where the coordination positions had priorities other than human services—such as infrastructure—participants stated that there were less clear about what others were doing and how they could work together.

A different aspect of this issue was around funding certainty. Government needs to retain the ability to fund successful approaches and services (and, by implication, to de-fund unsuccessful approaches). Yet there was a strong call for greater sensitivity, as changed funding arrangements take away stability for the children and young people who are receiving services. There was also a call for funding to be sensitive to regional differences, particularly in the Far West where per capita allocations don't cover overheads. Suggestions to improve current approaches included performance-based funding and devising meaningful measures of program impact.

There was strong support for continued boundary alignment between government agencies, with participants pointing to significant gains where this had happened.

Connections were particularly important in remote locations. Two issues stood in the way of strong connections: one was a highly mobile workforce that moved in and out of smaller towns; and the other was the distance between locations.

Participants noted that there were many service duplications and gaps, and wanted to see a rationalisation of the former, with funds applied to the latter.

An increased use of schools as service hubs was seen as an important way of strengthening service linkages and coordination.

There still seems to be some confusion about the ability to communicate between different services about common clients. Those who used Chapter 16A found it a powerful mechanism to support better coordination. This could be coupled with a greater use of roundtable discussions, in which major agencies meet regularly with their "top 10" cases.

Skills and training for the service system was touched upon. Participants called for cultural awareness and cross-disciplinary training.

To improve service connections, participants proposed building on existing initiatives, such as:

- In the Macleay Valley, where 16 schools work together to create a vision of "the place to be". By working closely with others, including the Aboriginal Community, this initiative is turning the discussion from disadvantage to opportunity.
- Collective community impact work such as Forum of 40 (Broken Hill)

- Health and high school partnerships such as Youth Health Teams, Healthy Schools Healthy Futures Years 7-10
- New programs that support connections between the service network and businesses. While not a completely new idea, some areas (for example Illawarra) noted that there were some strong partnerships in this area that could be built up and adapted elsewhere.

And finally, there were comments on service design, with two issues standing out:

- Early intervention is strongly preferable to later crisis approaches, although participants considered there is a greater need for crises services.
- There was a strong message that services that perceive themselves as being universal (eg health and education in general) do not meet the additional needs of children experiencing disadvantage. By contrast, examples of universal services that offer early identification of issues and connect with related services (such as health nurses in schools) are very much regarded as approaches that address vulnerability and support opportunity.



Information sharing

Despite the extent to which technology supports increased connection, there is still a sense that better information sharing would significantly improve the opportunities of children and young people.

This issue took two forms. The first was getting information to service providers.

- There were varying degrees of connection between service participants at different locations across the state. In some locations, there were evidently strong connections and joint work. In others, there was a recognition that more could be done. Yet in every location, consultation participants were able to make new connections and identify work of others that could support their own work during the consultations themselves. There is a strong desire for better communication and information between those who work with and support children.
- The intervention most overwhelmingly supported was Patchwork, a mobile phone app that is facilitating communication about specific young people. While there are a few who are a little sceptical of its benefits, those using it were very positive and other areas were appealing for it to be rolled out to their location. Some even suggested that Patchwork be built into service specifications.
- There was a call to educate those working with youth on the best means of communicating with children and young people.
- Participants also wanted to continue to build on information sharing around vulnerable young people—potentially changing the legislation or at least better education on how to use the provisions in existence. This could be coupled with developing better tools for analysis and risk management.

The second form was getting information to children and young people themselves—and sometimes by their families. There was real concern that children and young people needed to know what was happening in their location. This took a number of forms.

- The first was the need for young people to stay connected with each other
- The second was the value of young people having ready access to recreational and development opportunities in their location
- And the third was the need for access to information and support in times of crisis.

Some suggestions have been included elsewhere in this report; a further proposal was to create a digital space where young people can enter their postcode and find out what activities/services are available for them.

Access to the internet is highly varied across the state. In major centres, internet access is relatively common. In remote locations, access was much more difficult. While there was support for good information access through the internet, participants noted this limitation. There were calls to expand access to free internet.

Other forms of social media were noted as central to communicating with young people. Participants also foreshadowed further media innovation and suggested that the Office for Children and Young People could capitalise on this to extend its reach.

Respected

Children and young people are respected for who they are; the strengths, diversity and potential of all children and young people are supported and recognised; and services are responsive to their individual needs, aspirations and sense of identity.

Participants thought these aspects were working and could be built upon

Participants highlighted some areas which supported Aboriginal children and young people's connection to land, language and culture. These include land care programs that respected local traditions and connected young people with the land, and the language and culture nests from the OCHRE plan.

The leadership approaches seen as most effective were strengths based. These build on the capability of young people and focus on improving self-esteem, an area seen as important for all but particularly important for those more vulnerable.

There is a range of existing leadership programs that work well for many young people; scaling them up for vulnerable young people could generate big returns for little investment. These include programs run by Lions, Rotary, Girl Guides, Scouts etc.

Concerns for young people from CALD backgrounds varied by location. Naturally, this was a more significant issue in locations with higher CALD populations and, particularly, more humanitarian refugees. Some locations were able to point to new services, such as those in Auburn that worked well.

Clubs such as PCYC, girl guides and scouts were widely applauded for their ability to engage with children and young people. Some places have drop-in facilities for young people, such as CHAIN and Headspace. Other areas have neighbourhood centres, such as in Toukley, offering an internet café, sports and games. These entry points are highly valued.

Concern

Aboriginal children and young people.

There was a clear concern for Aboriginal children and young people including continued high mortality rates, discrimination, poor school attendance, not enough foster carers, not enough Aboriginal people employed in mainstream services, not enough access to early childhood programs. There was considerable discussion about how to better support their identity, connection to place and culture.

Proposals to support children and young people to feel respected

- Boost support for Aboriginal children and young people, focusing on safety, culture, identity and education.
- Build on the approach of organisations like Bara Barang (Central Coast) to build indigenous connection and skills.
- Expand models such as the Minto Aboriginal Child Family Centre across the state. Couple this with enhanced links between NSW Health and the Aboriginal Medical Service.
- Require Aboriginal history and culture in the school curriculum.
- Address multigenerational trauma at a community level, coupled with an empowerment strategy.

Children and young people with disability. The concerns participants had for every child were intensified for children and young people with disability. Specifics include a lack of work opportunities, limited schooling access, providing opportunities for those with disability to be heard. Some raised concerns about the NDIS, which is seen as important for normalising children with disability, but amidst a fear that it does not have enough resources to support those individuals with mild-moderate needs.

- Better support for children and young people with disability especially cognitive/behavioural/developmental delays.

The **LGBTQIA** group was mentioned in three locations as being poorly served.

- There were no specific suggestions to support LGBTQI young people feel more respected.

CALD and humanitarian refugees. There were concerns that there were insufficient appropriate supports for young people in these groups. Further, other issues such as racism were undermining community coherence.

- Institute a formal referral system for this group.

Leadership. Leadership was not a concern per se, but was seen as a priority by many participants. In fact, many saw the current status of leadership programs as a real opportunity that could be built upon, and so gave this issue emphasis.

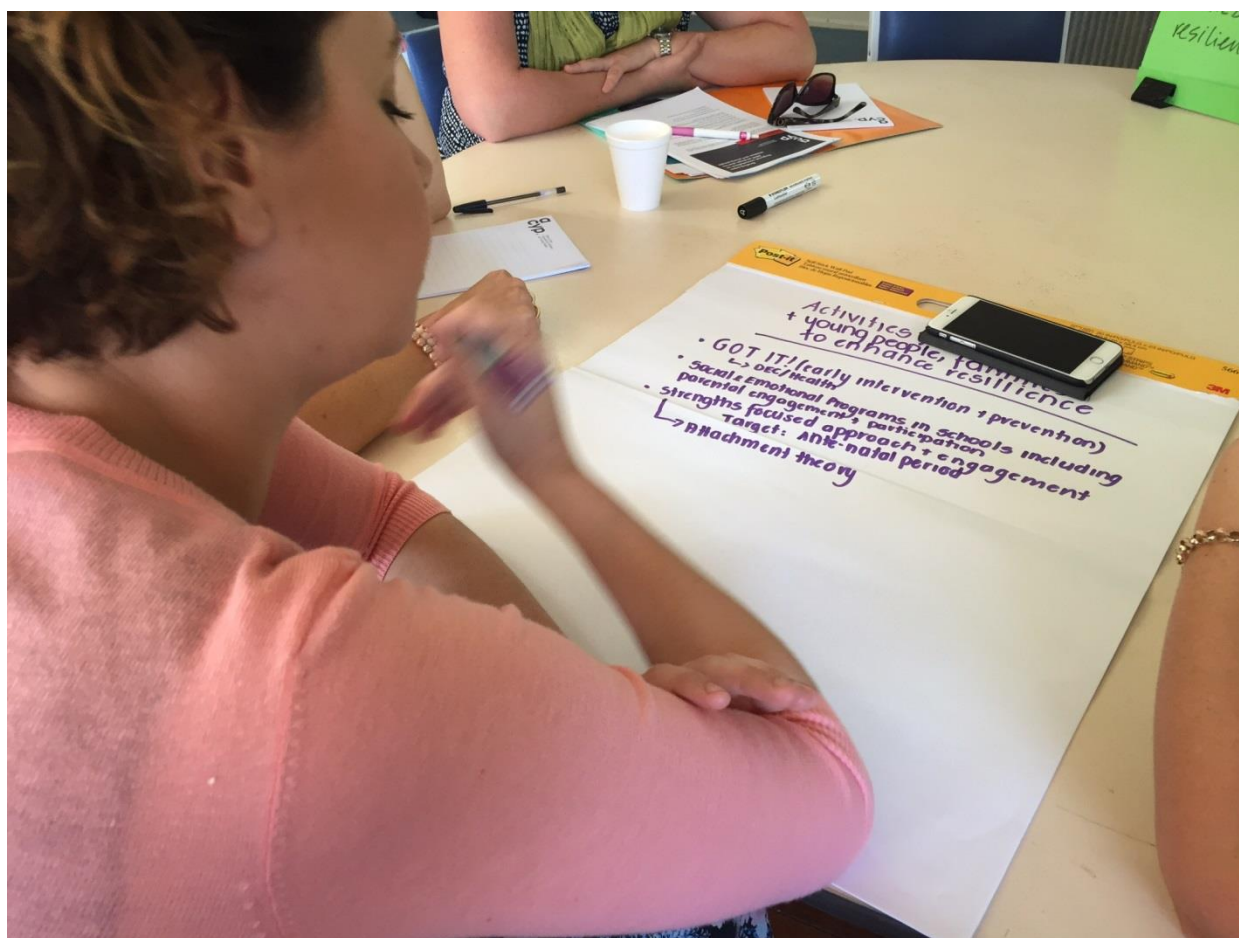
- Expand mentoring programs, which are low cost ways to support the development of individuals. Ideas proposed included funding mentoring programs that could harness volunteers. One suggestion pointed to the “big sister” program as a template for responses for both genders.
- Expand programs that provide role models, as these are particularly important for young people.
- There is a range of existing leadership forums that could be expanded including SES SLSC, scouting/cadets/guides, organised sports, Girl Guides, Scouts, Lions Youth of the Year, Rotary RYLA, Rotary Youth Exchange, Grow a Star, Heywire, Indent funding, RYDON (Hunter). Participants were clear that these worked and no adjunct programs should be developed. They called for further support and for children and young people experiencing disadvantage to be channelled through these programs (for example, supporting young people in out of home care to experience a student exchange, an option reported as costing less than \$5k per person). Leadership is also widely practised in schools and effort to develop this further are supported.

Vulnerability. Participants’ concerns were intensified for children and young people experiencing vulnerability. While many of these concerns are raised under other themes, one particular issue was the barrier being vulnerable creates to accessing a wide range of social activities.

- Create a new program to “Adopt a young person” which builds on newer crowdfunding and traditional sponsorship approaches. This would open up corporate/philanthropic/personal sponsorship opportunities to; for example, sponsor a young person to be in scouts for a year, or to learn a musical instrument.
- Free YMCA/YWCA membership for vulnerable families.

Supporting access to services. Many participants raised the need for spaces that provide soft entry points to a whole range of responses, but which were not identified as "support services" so young people could seek support discreetly and in a way that offered respect.

- Support neighbourhood centres and other drop-in locations that are not seen as stigmatised by other young people, but which can provide further information and pathways to specific support, such as mental health supports. An example is the Bellingen Youth Hub Pilot.



Voice

Children and young people are included in decision-making processes that affect them and are empowered to be genuinely involved in the design, delivery and monitoring of the services they use.

Participants thought these aspects were working and could be built upon

Participants noted that when children and young people participated in designing programs and facilities that affected them the results were always superior.

It was clear that in some locations, local governments have taken children and young people seriously. Some councils have well established youth councils and involve young people in co-design of facilities. For others, there is scant or no regard given to involving children and young people in local issues. There is much to be gained by highlighting strong practice in this area.

Participants highlighted the additional value gained when young people were involved in the design of play spaces; in some locations, this feature made the difference between well-used and loved facilities and those left to languish.

Similarly, there were good examples of services that had involved young people in consultation and participation about programs.

Areas for improvement

Concern

Structured input. There was a strong concern that children be heard in all aspects of life. This ranged from service design in small NGOs, through local council involvement in design to an expectation that state government agencies move to ask and listen more seriously.

Capturing the voices of Aboriginal children and young people. This group was singled out because of the extent to which they are vulnerable to disempowerment.

Proposals to support children and young people to feel they have a voice

- Establish and expand youth advisory panels and youth reference groups in state and local government.
- For local councils, work directly with children and young people when designing and developing facilities that affect them. This is low cost and leads to greater relevance, uptake and care for the facilities.
- Invite discussion with young people on policy issues. Bring respect to the conversations, demonstrate that they are being heard and provide feedback when appropriate.
- Give children a real voice in planning and other decisions about the environment.
- Propose that all local councils hold a roundtable consultation for Aboriginal children and young people to develop a vision and integrated local services.
- Require use of Aboriginal elders and children and young people at all stages of development programs, including facilitated consultation.

Opportunity

Children and young people have the fundamental underpinnings to achieve in life such as a home and healthcare, they acquire life skills through supports appropriate to their stage; and they can, through education, training and work, uncover a pathway that optimises their contribution and wellbeing.

Participants thought these aspects were working and could be built upon

In services, there was much praise for those programs that offer **prevention and early intervention** to keep children out of the crisis-response system. Work in areas such as case management, the integration of allied health with child services and national quality frameworks were also praised for supporting young people to realise opportunity. There was also overwhelming support for strong prevention and early intervention services that keep children out of the system. While they are not widespread, they are present and reportedly effective.

Parenting skills were seen as fundamental to building resilience and positioning young people to take advantage of opportunity. Grassroots programs that connected families with services-particularly long-term intensive family and parenting programs were praised.

Health was seen as an important component in security. In the Illawarra, approaches to sexual health were singled out as working effectively. There are examples of joint health/human services initiatives that are noted in other priorities.

For **mental health**, Headspace is viewed very positively by most participants, as is Kaleidoscope. Local initiatives such as Kids Count mental health and wellbeing program were also highlighted. Professional referral pathways are seen as important and largely functional.

Drug and alcohol initiatives were seen as a priority.

There is some positive activity around **housing and homelessness**, as responses such as the Homeless Youth Assistance Program, youth Private Rental Subsidy and the Youth Accord take effect.

Programs that encouraged children to **school** and supported them to achieve once in school were widely praised. These ranged from breakfast programs (e.g. "Toast and Milkshake") through to those that supplied uniforms for children whose families could not afford them.

There are also programs in place that support Aboriginal children. For example, children in the Illawarra can access a homework centre (AIME) and other educational programs.

Some **universities** offer valuable soft entry points for young people who can become familiar with what's on offer prior to school completion. Of all those discussed, Wollongong University's approach received particularly high praise. Initiatives include the Early Start Discovery/Engagement Centres, Science Centre, iAccelerate and other programs encouraging exposure to university facilities and study.

Areas for improvement

Concern

Life stage. There is a concern that services do not always match the needs of children and young people at different stages, and that the forms of support are not always appropriate. Participants also noted that long waitlists undermine the effectiveness of early intervention programs.

Health. Comment focused on the appropriateness of services, particularly sexual health, and called for multidisciplinary approaches.

Mental health. While there was considerable praise for services such as Headspace and for early intervention services such as ABC (Act, Belong, Connect), there was also a strongly expressed view that issues such as insufficient services, long wait times, high staff turnover and difficult access were barriers to these models being truly successful. There were also calls for the system to be expanded, through extended use of Medicare support and better terms and conditions for staff.

Drugs and alcohol. There were calls for additional rehab and detox facilities appropriate for young people. In addition, participants called for services appropriate to age. This related both to the 18-24 cohort, but also to calls for better services for under 16s.

Housing and homelessness. This becomes an issue for vulnerable young people from their adolescence. Concerns included too few accommodation options (particularly coupled with support) and the need for sustained accommodation linked to educational support

Proposals to support children and young people to feel opportunity

- Participants from many locations noted that while services in general were strong for 0-8 year olds, there was a significant gap for those in the 8-12 year bracket. Despite this, some called for improved access to counsellors for child care centres. There was also concern that services for adolescents were patchy (eg missing out on free school holiday programs), while those for young people who were technically adult (ie 18+) but emotionally still children were often inappropriate.
- Expand programs like SKIP (Skills in Paediatrics) that grow medical, allied and nursing staff skills and awareness of early year issues.
- Integrate health services so there is a degree of anonymity for young people when seeking, for example, mental or sexual health support.
- Shift the focus on food in schools from commercial/fundraising interests to healthy children—and enforce nutrition policy.
- Expand existing early intervention programs such as Headspace and ABC (Act, Belong, Connect).
- Require that all teachers undergo training in mental health first aid and trauma informed practice.
- While not strictly a mental health issue, participants highlighted improved access to behavioural disturbance management support as being important.
- Develop voluntary community accords that remove alcohol from public spaces and sales for set times such as in the far west.
- Increase service education in schools to boost resilience.
- Tailoring rehab and detox to the needs of young people and making available spaces, particularly in regional and rural locations.
- Separating out the requirement for treatment from other necessities, such as access to housing.
- Expand Foyer-type models linking accommodation with support for education and enhanced life skills.

Schooling for multiple needs and interests.

As noted in the Education box, there was widespread, detailed discussion about the education system and the extent to which it was working (or not) for young people who did not fit the mainstream model. A particular concern was keeping young people engaged with education and learning and setting them up for rewarding employment in the future.

- Expand programs that allow young people to try a trade. These could be specific—for example aimed at Aboriginal young people, or girls—or they could be general. Dapto High School was cited as one model.
- Significantly expand school-based traineeships for years 11 and 12, in which young people have school-based education, alongside practical learning streams (with Cert III qualifications) and placements with local businesses. The view was that these programs were attractive for young people, relatively low cost and have been successful in the past. This could be coupled with mandating training opportunities in government contracts (suggested net cost of <\$8k per person).
- A similar proposal was creating local apprentice scholarships focusing on young people who want to learn a trade in locations with a capacity for local employment.
- Create practical work experience and options for early school leavers through numeracy/literacy programs with TAFE links.
- Support alternative schools like Alesco schools (e.g. Robinson College), Café Horizon, Learning Links.
- Introduce individualised flexible learning plans that support (rather than punish) those that fall behind. These plans would include the opportunity for individuals to “taste” different careers.
- More informed career advisors at schools, making sure their information on jobs for the future is sound.
- Life skills—introducing broader life skills into the education curriculum. This could include managing finances, relationships and getting jobs. Of the range of life skills, relationships are singled out most often. Participants pointed to programs such as Love Bites as being successful, but wanted to see more for students at other stages beyond Years 9-10. In particular, healthy relationships skills for younger students is desirable. These were also discussed in the item on the importance of transitions in achieving a sense of security.

Seeking further study. There were no real concerns raised for university education or the transitions from university to employment. However, there were issues raised of the TAFE reforms. Participants saw them as alienating vulnerable young people and limiting their prospects of training progression due to the prohibitive costs of second and third courses.

- Expand the leading university early entry programs to all universities, and introduce more university based programs for younger students.
- Expand the use of online language, literacy, and numeracy screening tools that assess readiness and help identify students who may need extra services.
- Make further education (TAFE and university) free for all to the age of 25.

Employment. Every location raised concerns about employment. This took three forms.

- The first was too few jobs—particularly in regional locations—and the extent to which young people could aspire to local work.
- The second was that young people were not considered in economic development planning and, as a consequence, fell out of the system. There was a strong desire for local career pathways.
- The third was the way job services are not sufficient to have an impact on youth employment.
- Reassess the higher leaving age as compulsory. For those who struggle with conventional schooling, this can be a point at which they disengage and fall out of the system.
- Strengthen the link between employers and job seekers, such as through local forums that bring parties together;
- Support small start-up businesses owned by young people as a means of gaining important experience and fostering entrepreneurship.

Some suggested that interventions to boost employment needed to be more lateral—specifically, rather than focusing solely on conventional employment options, activity should expand to social enterprise and individual entrepreneurialism as the new economy opens up surprising work options.



The importance of the education system in supporting access to opportunity

Much of the attention, not surprisingly, focused on education for children and young people. Schools are possibly the single common experience of different children and young people. Teachers are at the centre of children's lives. Yet many expressed the need for greater engagement and stated that they were benefited from greater interaction with schools.

Further, there was concern that so much depended on individual principals and their interest (or not) in the connections with the community and specific areas such as life skills. Those that chose to focus only on school education in a narrow sense were sharply contrasted with those that reached out and made schools a hub.

Programs that operate around school education, such as breakfast programs, uniform supports and after school care are widely supported where they are in place.

Every session raised concerns about the educational opportunities for children experiencing disadvantage. These took a number of forms:

- That in general, children experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability weren't supported to identify educational aspirations; a concern was that they could be channelled into non-academic streams. Further, more support was needed through interventions such as additional tutoring to achieve their best. The issue of suspension was raised. Rather they were even punished for their behaviour through suspensions with insufficient support.
- That those children and young people channelled into non-academic stream needed robust alternatives to academic education. This was particularly marked with feedback on TAFE reforms. There was wide consensus that the reforms have discouraged young people from accessing and furthering their training.
- A call for alternative education opportunities, whether through school-based traineeships or completely different forms of schools. Some spoke of successful schemes that had operated in the past and thought them feasible solutions to the current issue.
- A call to make education more relevant to the full spectrum of children and young people (e.g. more experiential, linking Year 11 maths to car loans, making it possible to get a driver's licence through schools) so they could build on their own strengths to learn. This also translates to a desire for improved career counselling.
- That teachers are, in general, not experienced in identifying trauma and understanding its consequences. As a result, young people are punished for poor behaviour rather than supported. Instead there was a call for greater school awareness of trauma-informed practice.

The other issue of significance from each session was a strong desire for schools to operate as community service hubs. In particular, welfare support and health services were highlighted as potentially transformational adjuncts to the educational offerings:

- *Kaleidoscope*, a joint initiative between NSW Health and NSW Education in which healthcare is delivered through school clinics, was seen as evidence of what could be delivered through a more imaginative use of school facilities.
- School counsellors that worked to coordinate other services were applauded and could serve as a basis for expansion as could using clinical coordinators to target health issues in schools as good health underpins good performance.

The importance of well-managed transitions in supporting opportunity

The importance of times of transition was a common theme in most of the consultations. All children and young people undergo significant transitions: when they enter preschool; move from preschool to school; progress from junior school to high school; and when they leave high school to further study, training or employment. Participants were clear that they would like these transitions to be as seamless and supported as possible. When badly managed, transition points are when lively and engaged children can become overwhelmed and disengage.

Children who were vulnerable or disadvantaged were also singled out as needing particular attention during transitions. The single biggest area of focus was young people leaving out of home care. Participants pointed out that this cohort was disproportionately represented in statistics on the criminal justice system, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse and mental health, and so this transition required extra attention.

Participants proposed a range of initiatives to support children and young people through transition periods:

- For those moving from **preschool to junior school**, having literacy and numeracy preparation in place—in some locations these were highlighted as strengths, but they are not everywhere and particularly important for disadvantaged children. Initiatives such as Early Start Engagement Centres were highlighted. Work by the Australian Early Development Census to identify strengths and support educators was regarded as valuable.
- For those moving between **Years 6 and 7**, a focus on retaining interest, tailoring to need and connecting to community. One example was introducing a warm referral from primary to high school, capturing information about the specifics of each child to personalise responses especially for vulnerable children eg setting up stable classrooms and rotating teachers rather than the reverse. Others included an integrated collaborative program for Y6 students introducing them to local services in their community so they have a better sense of what is available.
- **For those moving from high school to work or further study** introduce skills training such as job readiness, including interviews and personal presentation. Potentially, increasing school hours to provide a more realistic transition, providing the time for an additional life skills including areas such as resilience, civics, communication and collaboration, parenting skills and financial literacy.

For children in the out of home care system, there was a particular focus:

- There was overwhelming support for an **extension of support for young people in the out of home care system** after the age of 18 years. Many participants spoke of the extended period that most “normal” and “relatively capable” young people were living at home with parents, while “vulnerable” young people were being “forced to fend for themselves”, and pointed out that investment in this period would reduce the need for investment in other services such as criminal justice and homelessness responses. For some young people, this can be as basic as assistance with finances, food and housing. Some commented that this would have a positive impact on Aboriginal people particularly.
- There was also a desire to change the term “out of home care”. It was seen as stigmatised, and about the system, not the individual.



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