Thank you for helping us kids have the opportunity to have our say, it means a lot to be heard.

Young person, 12 years, classroom consultation

I hope that you will consider the need for a flexible, agile model of advocacy for children and young people, a model that can cope with the technological advances that will shape the world of children and young people, not only now but in the next 14 or 20 years.

Minister Dominello, NGO Roundtable

We need someone who sits in an office and sits out on the street.

Young person, Cabramatta Roundtable
Minister’s foreword

As Minister for Citizenship and Communities and the Minister responsible for Youth Affairs, I am committed to ensuring that there is a strong and independent advocate for children and young people in NSW. I am also committed to ensuring that our youngest citizens have the opportunity to be heard on the matters that concern them.

I am conscious that a strong advocate is someone who amplifies the sometimes soft and fragmented voices of children and young people and also channels and coordinates the expertise of the many people and organisations who work with and for children and young people. Part of an advocate’s work is to influence decision making and community attitudes in ways that are positive for children’s health and development.

When the NSW Commission for Children and Young People was first established in 1999, its functions and priorities were shaped by extensive consultations with the community, and in particular with children and young people. Since then, the Commission has been best known for its role in promoting the idea that children and young people should have a say in the making of decisions that affect their lives. I believe in the continuing importance of this principle and the importance of putting it into practice.

Only by hearing from children and young people about their lived experience can we know how to tailor policies, laws and programs to meet their needs in a person-centred way. And that is why children and young people – and the people who work with them – must help shape how an advocate for children and young people should work in contemporary NSW.

The world that children and young people live in today has changed significantly since the Commission was first established. Certainly the place of technology in children’s lives would have been hard to imagine fourteen years ago.

It was time to check back with the community about how children and young people today can best be heard and how their interests can be best promoted. And that is why I asked the Commission to undertake Speak Up! – a wide ranging and intensive round of consultations in July and August 2013 on ways to strengthen advocacy for children and young people in NSW.

The Government has now heard from children and young people across the state, through community roundtables, classroom consultations in more than 30 primary and high schools, and through the NSW Youth Advisory Council and the Commission’s Young People Advisory Group.

We have also heard from many organisations in the non-government sector with a deep interest in the lives of children and young people and from the wider community via the Government’s Have Your Say website and written submissions.

This report fulfils our commitment to tell you what we heard.

I would like to thank our two Youth Ambassadors, Lubna Sherieff and Lucas Hejtmanek, who helped guide this work through all its important stages and made sure that the voices of children and young people were kept at the centre of the consultations.

I would also like to sincerely thank everyone who gave up their time to tell us what they thought, and especially the children and young people who took part. I trust you will all continue to speak up and tell us what matters to you.

Victor Dominello, MP
MINISTER FOR CITIZENSHIP AND COMMUNITIES AND MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS
Overview

The Speak Up! consultations were conducted between July and August 2013. These featured classroom consultations conducted in 34 primary and high schools across NSW, two community roundtables for children and young people, an NGO roundtable, and online consultations via the Government’s Have Your Say website.

Classroom consultations

Classroom consultations were conducted in 34 NSW schools with 915 children and young people. The full Report of these consultations is at Appendix 1.

The Classroom consultations involved an in-class board game and discussion about the place of children and young people in the community followed by students completing individual online questionnaires.

Eight of the classroom consultation schools (more than a quarter) were from regional areas and the remainder were from Sydney (22), Newcastle (3) and Wollongong (1). Five participants were attending a school for homeless young people. Two and a half percent of participants were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Almost all students spoke English at home (97%). Other languages spoken at home included Mandarin (8%), Arabic (5%), Cantonese (4%), Italian (4%) and Vietnamese (4%). In total, 61 different languages were reported to be spoken at home.

Just under half of the students were in Years 6 and 7 (47%), just over one-third were in Years 8 and 9 (38%) and 15% were in Years 10 and 11. Just under two-thirds were female (64%).

Community roundtables

Two independently facilitated community roundtables were held in August, one in Cabramatta and one in Wollongong. Forty young people and sixteen adults took part in the Cabramatta roundtable and thirty nine young people and fourteen adults took part in the Wollongong roundtable. Bringing together young people of different ages and backgrounds, the discussions focussed on what matters to children and young people in their communities and how young people can best be heard.

NGO roundtable

The NGO roundtable was another independently facilitated roundtable attended by over forty non-government organisations (NGOs).

The NGOs represented a wide range of advocacy and service provider organisations focusing on children in the early years of childhood, school age children, youth, family, welfare, wellbeing, children and young people in care, children of prisoners, Aboriginal children and young people, and homeless children and young people. The discussion focussed on the need for an advocate for children and young people in NSW and what should be expected of such an advocate.

Public submissions

More than 20 public submissions were received on the Government’s Have Your Say website.
The key messages

This report cannot do justice to the range and depth of material gathered during these consultations and necessarily includes some things at the expense of others. The report tries to capture the diversity of views of the children and young people who were consulted and is not necessarily representative of the views of all children and young people in NSW.

The report focuses on, and is structured around, the key messages that were consistent across the consultations.

» Children and young people should have a say on the matters that affect their lives because they:
  • Have a right to do so
  • Want to have a say on the things that matter to them
  • Are experts in their own lives and have important insights into what affects them and how to improve the lives of children and young people.

» Children and young people from all walks of life should be encouraged and assisted to speak for themselves in ways that suit the individual child or young person.

» An advocate for children and young people is needed in NSW to promote the voices of children and young people and to stand up for their interests.

» Children and young people want respect from adults and see a strong role for adults and experts in helping make the lives of children and young people in NSW better.

» An advocate should have a dedicated focus on enhancing the lives of all children and young people and a focus on vulnerable children and young people and the prevention of disadvantage among children and young people.

» Strong advocacy for children and young people means being solely focused on improving the wellbeing of children and young people and therefore an advocate needs to be independent of other agendas, aims or objectives. This needs to be aligned with a high public profile to champion the interests of children and young people and to reflect their views and comments.

» Strong advocacy for children and young people is underpinned by understanding the lives of children and young people and the role of government and so needs to be supported by sound research and policy analysis.

» An advocate must work with others to make a difference. An advocate needs to make sure there is coordinated action to tackle the issues affecting children and young people, as many of these issues go beyond the province of individual government or non-government agencies.
Children and young people should have a say

It is their right

As the following quotes show, the right for children to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, which is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, resonates with children’s own sense of fairness and morality.

*Children should be allowed to have a say in the things that involve them.*
Young person, 11 years, classroom consultation

*Before making decisions on something that will have serious effects on our lives, come to us first and get our opinion. After all we are the next generation.*
Young person, 14 years, classroom consultation

Children and young people want to have a say on the things that matter to them

*Thank you for helping us kids have the opportunity to have our say, it means a lot to be heard*
Young person, 12 years, classroom consultation

*It’s a lot harder for a young person’s voice to be heard, particularly in a society which cannot decide whether or not they actually want young people to speak their minds or to stay silent and in the shadows.*
Young person, 14 years, classroom consultation

Children and young people are experts in their own lives: they have important insights into the things that affect their lives and what can be done to improve their lives

Regardless of whether children and young people were consulted at community roundtables or in the classroom, face to face or on-line, they provided important insights into their lives and the lives of other children and young people.

At the community roundtables, participants were asked to identify (from a list of fifteen issues) six issues that were most important to them and to write on post-it notes why they thought an issue was important and what might be done about it.

At the classroom consultations, participants rated a list of issues according to which they considered most important to fix.
The issues voted of most concern by children and young people at community roundtables (and attracting most comments) were bullying, using drugs and alcohol, getting a good education and physical and mental health but these were only the top-rated among a range of issues (see Table 1, page 7). Children and young people felt strongly about many other issues as well.

Youth Ambassador, Lubna Sherieff, commented that despite the common ranking of the issues at Wollongong and Cabramatta roundtables, the insights differed. She suggested that an advocate should be mindful that the experiences of children and young people across the State will not be the same.

The classroom consultations found children and young people wanted to have a say on issues spanning school facilities, how schools are run, teaching and learning, public transport, local facilities and safety, laws for keeping young people safe, and working conditions.

Bullying (both at school and online) was rated as the most important issue to fix for young people, followed by misuse of alcohol and other drugs, young people being homeless and young people missing out on a good education. As young people get older, issues such as mental health and unstable family lives are viewed as increasingly important to fix.

Table 2, page 7, shows the issues viewed as most important to fix by respondents to the classroom consultations.

Highlighting the fact that different groups of young people may have different experiences, opinions and perspectives, a small group of homeless young people consulted via the classroom consultations, raised a different set of issues.

They said that they face crime, police harassment, delays in benefit payments, and money and family problems on a regular basis.

A selection of children’s views and perspectives on the range of issues of importance to them is attached at Appendix 2. They represent both their concerns and proposed solutions in their own words.

**Children and young people should be able to speak for themselves in ways that suit them**

> You need to hear from all young people, not just the ones teachers like.
> Young person, Wollongong roundtable

> There should be a show like Q&A for young people, or a You-Tube channel to discuss issues. The audience would need to be both teenagers and adults to hear the issues.
> Young person, Cabramatta roundtable

> Video and media online is not as appealing to students as you think. If your message is short and sweet, our opinions on whatever your point is will be more positive.
> Young person, 14 years, classroom consultations

> A representative from the NSW Commission for Children and Young People should come to schools all over NSW and talk to the children about what they have to say.
> Young person, 11 years, classroom consultations
Table 1 – Ranked issues and number of associated comments from children and young people at the community roundtables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Number of votes</th>
<th>C*</th>
<th>W**</th>
<th>Number of comments</th>
<th>C*</th>
<th>W**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Bullying (including online bullying)*</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Using drugs and alcohol (incl smoking)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Getting a good education</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Physical and mental health</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Being different (race, culture, disability, sexuality)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Feeling safe on the streets</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 The internet and social media</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Making kids too sexual, too young</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Getting around using public transport</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Access to local facilities</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 The future of the natural environment</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Inequality facing disadvantaged kids</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Having enough time to spend with friends and family</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Youth employment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Pressure to have the latest brands/ clothing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Cabramatta **Wollongong

Table 2 – Issues viewed as most important to fix by respondents to the classroom consultations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10–11 year olds</th>
<th>12–14 year olds</th>
<th>15–17 year olds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young people being homeless (84%)</td>
<td>Bullying at school (85%)</td>
<td>Bullying at school (85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying at school (81%)</td>
<td>Bullying online (83%)</td>
<td>Bullying online (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people missing out on a good education (77%)</td>
<td>Misuse of alcohol and other drugs (80%)</td>
<td>Feeling safe in public (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying online (75%)</td>
<td>Young people being homeless (79%)</td>
<td>Misuse of alcohol and other drugs (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misuse of alcohol and other drugs (73%)</td>
<td>Young people missing out on a good education (74%)</td>
<td>Young people missing out on a good education (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling safe in public (71%)</td>
<td>Young People being neglected by their parents (74%)</td>
<td>Neglect/Not having a stable home life (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young People being neglected by their parents (71%)</td>
<td>Neglect/Not having a stable home life (72%)</td>
<td>Mental health issues (73%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Children and young people want to speak for themselves

The children and young people consulted were keen to have their views heard. There are many methods that children and young people think are useful for having their voices heard.

The children and young people who attended the roundtables were generally happy to contribute their views in face to face discussions or to express their views in writing. They also enthusiastically took up the opportunity to briefly write their views in private. While they mentioned that the internet is a big part of their lives, social media was not favoured by all as a way for an advocate to connect with young people.

There is no one way to connect with children and young people but multiple pathways

Public submissions noted that not all young people have access to technology due to financial hardship, disability, homelessness, living in rural and remote areas or in prison or juvenile justice. Some face language and educational barriers. Because of this, submissions suggested it is essential to provide multiple pathways for children and young people to have their say.

In addition to suggestions of using Facebook and You-tube, having an internet presence and a Commission consultation app, participants suggested talking to young people by going into schools, community centres, youth services and organisations who have access to disadvantaged young people and hosting issue-specific forums or festivals where people can give their views in a relaxed atmosphere and tapping into advisory groups.

At the classroom consultations, respondents were given a list of methods for hearing young people’s views and asked to rate how useful each method was. All age groups showed a preference for face to face discussions. Social media received the highest proportion of “not useful at all” responses. Many people thought the classroom consultations themselves were a good way of hearing from young people, with many taking the option of adding comments. More than three quarters of 10–11 years olds rated classroom consultation a useful or very useful method.

Sometimes extra support is needed to get beyond barriers that interfere with hearing from children and young people

It was suggested in public submissions that an advocate not only consult directly with children and young people but also connect with the adults who have established connections and relationships with them to elicit their views. Parents and adults who know young people through school, health, community and social activities should be involved in engaging young people. The advocate should utilise the expertise of organisations who can advise on and organise culturally appropriate ways to consult Aboriginal young people, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children in care, and young people in juvenile justice or prison and ensure that their views are not filtered or altered in the consultation process.

Engagement with children and young people in rural and regional communities should be supported through existing organisations and structures in those communities.

Finally, the submissions offered a reminder of the needs of infants and very young children (the 0-6 age group) who are either preverbal, too young or lack the support to speak for themselves. For this group, it was suggested that an advocate work with other organisations who work directly with or care for very young children.
An advocate is needed

We need to always remember that children as well as young people can give an opinion. However, children lack the resources and time to create infrastructure and organisations that can support them in giving their opinions.

NGO roundtable

The diversity of issues facing children and young people suggests a need for a body to provide a broadly informed and overarching perspective on the lives of children and young people in NSW and the policies, services and systems that affect them.

The consultations affirmed the need for an advocate to raise awareness and advocate for action on the wide range of issues facing children and young people and to monitor and influence efforts to improve outcomes.

An adult submission via the Have Your Say Website summed up a view also expressed in many submissions:

The main issue facing children and young people today is that they are limited in their ability to make decisions for themselves and to influence those decisions made for them, because of their reliance on adults for their wellbeing. This dependence on adults makes children and young people vulnerable, and means they have unique needs with regards to having an advocate.

Young people were clear and concise about their expectations:

An advocate should help young people be independent to live fulfilling lives.

Young person, Cabramatta roundtable

If you ask young people for information, do it to help, not just to gather statistics.

Young person, Cabramatta roundtable

Public submissions included the suggestion that an advocate is needed to focus attention and build strategies around preventing poverty, strengthening the wellbeing of children and young people and building more equal communities and neighbourhoods across New South Wales.

An advocate is needed to encourage organisations to put children at the centre

There was an emphasis on the need for an advocate to help other organisations develop the capacity to involve children and young people in their work.

An advocate should encourage and increase the capacity of government and non government organisations to seek the genuine participation and leadership of children and young people in decisions that affect their lives. An advocate should also follow through on uptake of participation resources and how they are being used and advise and strengthen the agencies’ understanding of how their policies impact children and young people (whether or not children and young people are ‘direct consumers’ of their services).

Public Submission

The NGO roundtable was of the firm view that children and young people need not only to be heard directly by government but also to be supported and championed by an advocate. NGO participants talked about the need for a proactive advocate to empower, enable and assist children.

The NGO roundtable and public submissions indicated there was a need for an advocate to have “a
leadership role for government and non government organisations on the importance of children and young people” and to “market and promote to government the importance of kids to lead to better outcomes”.

An advocate is needed to promote a balanced message about children’s lives

Many submissions linked the need for an advocate to the need for a voice for particular groups of children who experience disadvantage. Others emphasised the need for an advocate to gather and promote positive stories about children and young people’s experience and to champion their interests through the “strength-based language of capacity.”

Adults and experts have a role to play

Across all forums, there was support for adults and experts having a role beyond seeking children’s views or supporting them to have their say. Adults and experts (parents, teachers, older children, and dedicated advocates) were all seen to have a part to play in representing children and young people and speaking up for their rights and interests.

The NGO roundtable noted that "children …need adults to go with them on their journey – adults are an important resource."

The majority of students consulted in the classroom consultations felt that all the groups should be listened to when working out how to fix issues for children and young people, with parents and carers and adults who work with children and young people receiving the most support:

» Parents and carers (89%)
» Adults who work with children and young people (89%)
» Young adults (18–25 years) (86%)
» Children and young people less than 18 years (81%)
» Experts (79%)
» Police (75%)
» Politicians (53%)

There are issues that children and young people need adults to pursue on their behalf

In addition to the issues raised by children and young people themselves, adults, experts and NGOs, raised a wide range of issues facing children and young people in NSW.

The degree to which children and young people are able to have a say and influence action on a given issue may be debated, but submissions proposed many areas requiring the attention of adults and the focus of an advocate.

Issues included poverty, wellbeing, secure housing, cultural equity, health (including diabetes, asthma, obesity, reproductive and sexual health and teenage pregnancy), mental health (including youth suicide), disability, education, (including alternative education, closing the gap between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal students, investment in early education and action on 3–5 year olds
not in pre-school or early learning), employment (especially in rural and remote areas), identity issues for young men, protection of children from risk of harm, law and justice issues (including justice reinvestment), early intervention and quality and consistency of services for vulnerable children, action to prevent entry to the juvenile justice system, transition planning and support for children in out of home care, action and protection around social media, sexualisation of girls, stereotyping and role modelling.

This list is not exhaustive but gives an indication of the range and complexity of the issues that affect children and young people and why adults and experts have a role to play in tailoring a whole range of policies, laws and programs to meet the needs of children and young people.

**An advocate to work for all, especially vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people**

*It should have an arm’s length overview of the system for disadvantaged kids and where things are falling down for them.*

NGO roundtable

*An advocate should promote the idea of where the whole child is at, and not the child as defined by the services he/she is receiving.*

NGO roundtable

*An advocate should work for all children and young people – this means working to give marginalised children a voice and focusing on empowerment and supporting all children to confidently create their own destiny.*

NGO roundtable

The consultations confirmed the need for an advocate for all children and young people and drew strong support for a focus on those who are disadvantaged. Many submissions drew attention to the needs of children and young people who are poor, homeless, living in or leaving out of home care, living in rural and remote areas, refugees or asylum seekers, children and young people living with disabilities, from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, involved in the Juvenile Justice system, with parents who are incarcerated or have a mental illness, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex (GLBTI), or who are young carers.
Respondents to the classroom consultation from all age groups proposed groups of vulnerable or disadvantaged young people (such as children and young people with a disability, Aboriginal children and young people, homeless young people and those from low socio-economic backgrounds) as most needing an advocate.

However, very few felt that only disadvantaged children and young people need an advocate. Notably, all five homeless respondents felt that a child advocate should be for all children and young people in NSW, with a focus on preventing disadvantage. One young homeless person summed up the views of many:

You need to start with more disadvantaged children and young people, but that does not mean that you don’t put effort into children who have their basic needs covered. Sometimes children can have a steady home and school life but still need someone else to give their opinions to.

All children and young people need an advocate, even those who are too young to speak and those who are young adults

Part of thinking about what advocating for all children and young people means, involves questioning what age group this should include. The consultations confirmed support for advocacy for children 0–17 and also made a case for expansion of an advocate’s remit to take in the 18–25 group.

Over 40% of the children and young people involved in the classroom consultations said that children and young people aged 0–25 years need someone to stand up for their interests. This compared with 30% for children and young people aged 0–17 years; 20% for young people aged 12–17 years, and 7% for children aged 0–12 years.

Among the public submissions, some asserted the needs of infants and very young children (0-6) and others highlighted the issues associated with the transition to adulthood and compounding of disadvantage for young adults (18–25) who are unsupported.

At the community roundtables, children and young people raised issues about employment and training and other issues affecting those at the older end of the age spectrum.

An independent advocate with a public profile

Independence should be central to the function. The Commission should not sit in a department or answer to a department. It should be outspoken, be able to use the media, have autonomy in terms of budget, expenditure and priorities, and have access to Parliament.

NGO roundtable

There needs to be someone above and beyond individual departments to tell the stories that are really critical. For some kids the starting line is farther back – the way they look, the way they are dressed – it requires more money to get them to the same place as other kids who started in a different place.

Adult service provider, Wollongong roundtable

[An advocate] should not be afraid to start a conversation.

Young person, Cabramatta roundtable

To be credible and powerful an advocate needs legislated powers, such as an inquiry power but other powers as well.

NGO roundtable

Both adults and young people talked about the need for an advocate with independence, influence, capacity and reach into the community.
Adults want an independent champion for young people with a system-wide perspective

At the NGO roundtable and in public submissions there was strong support for an independent champion for children and young people to advocate for systemic change.

Being “one step removed from agencies providing services to children and young people” was seen as key “to enable independent oversight”.

There was strong support for an advocate who could in the words of one submission: “adopt a system-wide perspective and arms-length scrutiny, together with a broad, systemic, cross agency and cross-sector focus.”

All sought a body with a defined role - not part of a government department or agency, with independent oversight of legislation, policies and programs and accountable to the NSW Parliament.

Some submissions emphasised a key feature of independence as full investigative powers to run inquiries and to follow up and monitor implementation of recommendations.

An effective advocate needs a public profile

The NGO roundtable pointed to the need for a future advocate to have a stronger public profile than the current Commission. It was noted that public profile is linked to the level of resourcing and independence of the advocate. Public submissions suggested that an advocate with an overarching perspective and a high profile could help to raise awareness of agendas that smaller, less well-known agencies struggle with.

Young people want an advocate who is solely there for them

An advocate should be someone who doesn’t have an agenda.
Young person, Cabramatta roundtable

An advocate should appeal to everyone - not just be liked by one group.
Young person, Cabramatta roundtable

Young people at the roundtables suggested that an advocate should be a strong, passionate individual, approachable by and standing up for all groups. The key characteristics are strength and passion and an interest in the diversity of children and young people’s experiences.

Young people suggested that direct experience of young people’s issues would be a bonus rather than a necessity and an advocate would not have to be young. An advocate “just needs to be able to provide a platform for young people to share experiences and stories with each other” and “have enough influence to make a difference to things that matter to young people like regulation and reporting around social media and online bullying.”
Research and policy support effective advocacy

Data needs to be collected, quantifiable information needs to be gathered on various different interventions and the government needs to hear the message.

Adult, Wollongong roundtable

Policy and research needs to inform the advocacy and championing work of the Commission. It should be used to help set priorities.

NGO roundtable

Research and policy analysis shapes public debate about what needs to change for children and young people

Public submissions at the NGO roundtable, stressed the necessary connection between policy, research and advocacy.

A policy capacity was viewed as necessary to influence government policy through effective monitoring of implementation and promotion of best practice. The NGO roundtable expressly proposed that advocacy should be informed by ‘cutting edge research’ in service of ‘practical policy’. They said that an advocate should use the media to publicise research to inform the public debate.

NGOs also suggested the use of research and policy capacity to allow the advocate to hold the government to account and monitor the implementation of policies that affect children and young people.

Research should be done in partnership with children and young people

Cutting edge research, in partnership with others and involving, driven or led by young people, was seen to be critical in supporting effective advocacy. Submissions supported the idea of a body that can provide leadership on research, policy development and good practice by bringing together and highlighting the evidence base on the wellbeing of children and young people in NSW and “utilising its evidence base to provide informed recommendations on policy, legislative reform and practice”.

Research helps to set the agenda

Non-government organisations emphasised the importance of knowledge of existing research, gaps in research and research evidence on best practice. They proposed that the Commission/ an advocate set priorities for research to inform policy and target areas where there is a need to influence practice.

In view of the wide range of issues that an advocate could focus on in the interests of children and young people, research is necessary to lead the sector in informed and directed collaborative
efforts for the benefit of children and young people.

**Working effectively with others will be key**

*It should not be a controlling body of other organisations but needs to have a close relationship with these bodies and work together. It should try and have an overarching voice.*

NGO roundtable

*Need to find key leaders and grass roots, bottom up connections and connect with kids.*

Adult, Cabramatta roundtable

*Organisations should be supported through their funding bodies so that systemic advocacy [and engagement with the advocate] is an essential part of their work program.*

NGO submission

*An advocate or commission will need foot soldiers – perhaps achieved by using an “octopus model” with a central body and tentacles into the regions. It should have a children and young people’s plan for every region, and partner with organisations in regions.*

NGO roundtable

NGO and public submissions suggested that an advocate needed to have a clearly defined leadership role, noting that well-articulated roles and relationships will improve collaboration, reduce duplication and improve reach into the community and regions.

Specifically, the NGO roundtable suggested that an advocate could help ensure a more connected and unified approach across the diverse issues affecting children and young people in local communities. The advocate would play an overarching coordination and facilitation role that brings together key stakeholders and children and young people on a regular basis to exchange information and work towards shared agendas.

The NGO roundtable did not think that this role could be performed by a non-government organisation and suggested instead that a body like the existing Commission could develop better articulated structures to aid consultation down to the local level with children and young people, working through the connections that NGOs have with children and young people on the ground.

**Service delivery and systemic advocacy should not compete for funds**

The consultation did not canvass resourcing or the mechanism by which any necessary improvements will be achieved. However, the NGO roundtable considered that the question of value for money should inform any decision about how an advocacy body is constituted and carries out its work to ensure that funding for systemic advocacy is not at the expense of service delivery. The NGO roundtable concluded that advocacy and service delivery are both necessary and complementary and that both should be resourced appropriately.

**Conclusion**

*Children’s views must not be suppressed. Each human being deserves a voice. Adults often think that children do not understand complex issues revolving about society. I cannot tell you how wrong they are.*

Young person, 14 years, classroom consultations

This Report will inform the NSW Government’s thinking about the future role and functions of an advocate for children and young people in NSW. The information gathered also provides a very
rich source of information from which to draw for future planning, priority setting and advice to government.

The consultations demonstrated that there remains a strong desire for an advocate to both support children and young people in making their voices heard and to provide leadership in understanding and responding to the needs and interests of children and young people in NSW today.

Children and young people showed throughout the consultation process that they not only had a strong desire to speak for themselves but insights to share about their lives and ways to improve their lives.

It is clear that an advocate for children and young people needs to be free to offer sensible and balanced but unhampered advice on what are seen to be children’s best interests. Advocacy needs to be underpinned by sound research and policy analysis and to take a coordinated approach to action with other government and non-government agencies to tackle the often complex issues affecting children and young people.

While the consultations confirmed the need for an advocate they also pointed to the challenge ahead.

*I still don’t feel that anyone ever actually listens to what young people say. They claim they do, they pretend to but in the end, everyone’ll still take the word and ideas of an older and more respectable adult. But look at what great ideas young people can have, how we can change the world. I feel we need easier ways to express our voice.*

Young person, 14 years, classroom consultations
Appendices
Appendix 1. Report of Classroom Consultations

Introduction

This is the report of the classroom consultations which were an important part of the Speak Up! consultations undertaken by the NSW Government on ways to strengthen advocacy for children and young people in NSW.

Invitations to schools to participate in classroom consultations were distributed through the Department of Education and Communities, Association of Independent Schools and each of the Catholic diocese across NSW. Invitations were also sent to schools with which the Commission has an existing relationship.

Who participated?

Classroom consultations were held in 36 NSW schools from across the state. Students from a further 9 schools and one school leaver provided feedback through an online survey.

A wide variety of children and young people aged 10 to 17 from diverse backgrounds completed the survey and told us what they thought:

- 915 students participated in the classroom consultations and 17 young people completed the online survey;
- Classes from Years 6 to 11 were consulted;
- Students ranged in age from 10 to 17 years;
- Just under half were in Years 6 and 7 (47%), just over one-third were in Years 8 and 9 (38%) and 15% were in Years 10 and 11; and
- Just under two-thirds were female (64%).

Children and young people from a wide range of backgrounds were included:

- 2.5% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander;
- Almost all students spoke English at home (97%). Other languages spoken at home included Mandarin (8%), Arabic (5%), Cantonese (4%), Italian (4%) and Vietnamese (4%). In total, 61 different languages were reported to be spoken at home;
- Five were attending a school for homeless young people; and
- About a quarter of the classroom consultation schools were from regional areas (8) the remainder were from Sydney (24), Newcastle (3) and Wollongong (1). Students from a further three regional areas participated in the online survey.

What issues should an advocate for children and young people focus on?

To help answer this question, respondents were asked how important it was to fix a wide range of potential issues facing children and young people.

Among all respondents, bullying (both at school and online) was top rated as very important to fix, followed by substance abuse and homelessness among young people; and then young people missing out on a good education.
Among the small group of homeless young people who were consulted on these questions, they highlighted crime, police harassment, delays in benefit payments, money problems and family problems as very important to fix.

Young people also raised concerns about equality and fair treatment, better treatment of refugees, preventing animal cruelty and rights such as gay marriage. Very few saw wanting and having too many possessions or having over-protective parents as an important issue for young people.

**Bullying**

Among most respondents, bullying at school (84%) and bullying online (82%) were rated as very important issues to fix.

“I believe that there needs to be something to prevent bullying from occurring, causing suicides making some families miserable.” (12 years)

“I think that mental health and bullying is a major factor in schools and schools don’t do enough to prevent it from happening or make us aware of how to deal with these situations. Yes, a few lessons are been taught about mental health and depression but do a few lessons help? Or are those lessons not helping those children/students/teenagers who are taking their lives because of bullying that they cannot handle it no longer?” (15 years)

**Substance abuse and homelessness**

More than three-quarters of respondents rated misuse of alcohol and other drugs (78%) and young people being homeless (78%) as very important to fix.

**Missing out on a good education**

Three-quarters of respondents also rated young people missing out on a good education as very important to fix (75%).

“I would certainly ask for better education for young homeless children in NSW because education is important for all of us to succeed.” (12 years)

“Do more to improve schools and to make it a fairer playing field.”

**Mental Health, feeling safe, neglect**

Combining the issues that young people felt were both ‘very’ and ‘quite’ important to fix sees mental health, feeling safe in public and neglect emerge as areas of widespread concern.

**Other issues**

A wide range of other issues were also raised as important to fix first for children and young people.

Those raised most frequently included schools needing better resources, community perceptions of young people, animal cruelty, treatment of refugees and prisoners and gay marriage rights.

“Schools having proper equipment e.g. new laptops, better educational environment.” (14 years)

“I believe that the perception of young people is quite low in society. This could be improved by proving to society that youth are good people and MOST do not do bad things.” (14 years)
“People mistreating animals.” (10 years)

“Anxiety, treatment of third world children, safety of animals, treatment of prisoners.” (11 years)

“Gay marriage should be allowed because there is nothing wrong with being gay and it’s not fair for those people to not be able to be with someone they love.” (14 years)

“Legalising gay marriage, because I don’t think it’s fair at all that straight people are allowed to marry but gays aren’t.” (15 years)

**Age differences in opinions**

There is a generally consistent pattern in the types of issues that respondents said were very important to fix across the age groups (10–11, 12–14 and 15–17) but with some small but interesting variations.

Bullying at school and online was top rated as very important to fix by 12–14 and 15–17 year olds, while 10–11 year olds top rated young people being homeless as very important fix.

Misuse of alcohol and other drugs is seen as a bigger issue for 12–14 years olds than for the younger and older age groups, while feeling safe in public was clearly felt most acutely by 15–17 year olds.

There was a surprising and consistent level of concern about young people missing out on a good education across all age groups, with approximately three-quarters of respondents in each age category saying that this was very important to fix.

As young people get older, mental health issues and unstable family lives become increasingly important areas of concern.

**Issues viewed as most important to fix by respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10–11 year olds</th>
<th>12–14 year olds</th>
<th>15–17 year olds</th>
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<tr>
<td>Young people being homeless (84%)</td>
<td>Bullying at school (85%)</td>
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<td>Bullying at school (81%)</td>
<td>Bullying online (83%)</td>
<td>Bullying online (82%)</td>
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<td>Young people missing out on a good education (77%)</td>
<td>Misuse of alcohol and other drugs (80%)</td>
<td>Feeling safe in public (79%)</td>
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<td>Bullying online (75%)</td>
<td>Young people being homeless (79%)</td>
<td>Misuse of alcohol and other drugs (75%)</td>
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<td>Misuse of alcohol and other drugs (73%)</td>
<td>Young people missing out on a good education (74%)</td>
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<td>Feeling safe in public (71%)</td>
<td>Young People being neglected by their parents (74%)</td>
<td>Neglect/Not having a stable home life (73%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Young People being neglected by their parents (71%)</td>
<td>Neglect/Not having a stable home life (72%)</td>
<td>Mental health issues (73%)</td>
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</table>

» “Teenagers staying up all night drinking.” (11 years)

» “Everyone should have a home and make it safe.” (11 years)

» “I think that children who are not safe online and cyber-bully should not be allowed social media until they understand the consequences.” (12 years)
» “Allowing refugees to have an equal education.” (13 years)
» “The community should work together in making parks and other recreational areas safe and reliable.” (16 years)

The views of a group of homeless young people

A face to face consultation was conducted with five young people from a school for homeless young people. The issues raised as most important to fix for this group of young people were:

» Homelessness
» “Do more for homeless young people. Do all they can to get them off the streets and into accommodation.”
» Crime – young people as both victims and perpetrators and feeling safe
» Police harassment
» “All coppers have cameras on their shoulder”
» Young people not receiving Centrelink payments in a timely way. For example, one young person couldn’t receive payments until he supplied a birth certificate, which was difficult for him to get hold of.
» More casual jobs needed for young people
» More refuges for young people needed
» More control of drugs on the street
» “More sniffer dogs around the streets”
» “Get drugs off the streets"
» Family problems (e.g. violence, parents’ drug addiction).

Issues viewed as less important to fix

At the other end of the spectrum, almost half of the respondents nominated the following issues as either “not important” or just “a little important” to fix:

» Young people wanting and having too many possessions (48%); and
» Having over-protective parents (48%)

This finding was the same across all age groups.

Children and young people want a say on the matters that affect their lives

» “I think everyone should be treated fairly and equally. No one should ever feel like they’re left out.” (12 years)
» “Everyone should have the right to know and stand up for their rights.” (12 years)
» “Young people need just as much rights as anyone else.” (13 years)
Most children and young people said they would like the opportunity to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. The areas they felt most strongly about as a group were those related to their immediate environments, and in particular school-related decisions and decisions about their local areas:

» School facilities (e.g. playground, sporting equipment, toilets) (89%)
» Places and opportunities to walk, cycle and exercise (89%)
» Improving things to do in your area (e.g. local parks) (85%)

More than three-quarters of respondents agreed on the following school-related decisions and decisions about their local areas:

» What schools look like (77%);
» How children and young people are taught at school (77%);
» What your local area looks like (77%);
» How safe your local area is (75%); and
» What children and young people learn at school (74%).

Students were more divided in their responses about other areas where they could have a say, but for each area a clear majority still said that young people should have a say:

» Laws about keeping young people safe (70%);
» Health services in your area (including mental health & other support services) (59%);
» Improving public transport (59%);
» Working conditions for young people (59%); and
» How schools are run (58%).

Responses for each age groups (10–11, 12–14, 15–17 years) followed the same pattern.

“Everyone has a right to have a say especially kids because it is our life.” (10 years)

“Children should be allowed to have a say in the things that involve them.” (11 years)

“12–17 year olds really need a say in what goes on in their suburb, town or city.” (15 years)

“Everyone should be able to have a say and their opinions should be valued equally no matter the age.” (15 years)

“I think that all children are equal so they should all have a say in some way. There needs to be more opportunities for teenagers to have a say.” (15 years)

**The importance of having a say**

Respondents felt that having a say on decisions that affect them was important not just for themselves but also to improve the quality of the decisions. Some said that young people are being under-utilised.

» “Government needs to listen to what the youth and young citizens have to say.” (13 years)
“Everyone should have a say of what they want in the community. For Australia to prosper everyone needs to be listened to and have a chance to speak up for themselves no matter how poor/rich, young/old they are.” (15 years)

“Before making decisions on something that will have serious effects on our lives, come to us first and get our opinion. After all we are the next generation.” (14 years)

“It’s important for everyone to realise that young people’s opinions are important and should not be neglected.” (14 years)

“Children in today’s society are rarely given the opportunity to voice their thoughts and ideas for their community.” (14 years)

Respondents said that having a say is a matter of respect and equity for children as citizens.

“Children and young people need to be treated as equals and they need the chance to make their voice heard.” (11 years)

“Children’s views must not be suppressed. Each human being deserves a voice. Adults often think that children do not understand complex issues revolving about society. I cannot tell you how wrong they are.” (14 years)

“I think that children and young people do not have enough of a say in the issues within society. It is common belief that we don’t understand or know enough and therefore are neglected.” (15 years)

Adults and experts have a role in improving the lives of children and young people

Respondents said that both adults and children and young people should be listened to when working out how to fix issues relevant to children and young people. They also strongly supported the idea of adults and experts representing children and young people and speaking up for their rights and interests.

More than 85% of respondents agreed that adults and experts should have a say in almost all of the decisions about children’s lives identified in the survey.

Overall, parents and carers and adults working with children and young people received the highest support for having a say in decisions which affect young people. This was closely followed by young adults (18–25 years), children and young people less than 18 years, adult experts and police.

Parents and carers (89%);
Adults who work with children and young people (89%);
Young adults (18–25 years) (86%);
Children and young people less than 18 years (81%);
Experts (79%);
Police (75%); and
Politicians (53%).
Responses for each age group followed a similar pattern.

Respondents were asked to nominate any other groups of people that they felt should be listened to when trying to fix things for children and young people. Overwhelmingly, students responded that everyone has the right to be listened to:

» “Everyone has the right to be listened to.” (11 years)
» “Everyone should have a fair say and everyone’s opinion should be valued equally.” (15 years)
» “Anybody who wants to stand up for what they believe in.” (15 years)

Respondents also felt that people affected by the issue should be listened to the most:

» “People who have experienced these things.” (14 years)
» “The people in that situation.” (15 years)

One young person also mentioned the need for those involved in making decisions to be able to relate to children and young people:

» “Anyone who can sympathise or even understand young people.” (15 years)

How should children and young people be heard?

There are many ways that children and young people think are useful for having their voices heard. In general however, face to face methods are viewed more favourably than written and other non-face to face methods.

Respondents were given a list of methods for hearing young people’s views and asked to rate how useful they felt each method was.

The following were rated as quite useful and very useful ways for children and young people to have a say:

» Inviting experts to school to hear what young people have to say (82%);
» Face to face discussions (79%);
» Through an adult who knows what to do that I trust (75%); and
» Through activities involving other children and young people (75%).

Responses for each age group followed the same pattern.

» “Having private conversations with an adult you trust.” (10 years)
» “I believe that having face to face discussions is the best options as it enables the young children to express their emotions face to face.” (14 years)
» “Anything where you meet the people being asked.” (12 years)
» “Generally face to face discussions are better as the questions asked are generalised and they can discuss their own issues.” (16 years)

Non-face to face methods were viewed as less useful. However, just over half still rated these methods as quite useful and very useful ways to have a say:

» Writing a letter, email or other written feedback (55%);
» Online questionnaires (55%);
» Social media (50%);
» Through performing and creative arts (55%) – this could be viewed as a face to face method, although it does not involve the discussion that the other methods involve.

Some could also see the benefits of these methods for some young people.

» “It’s great that you are anonymous because it means you can say what you really think and not be afraid to state your opinions.” (14 years)

Responses for each age group followed the same pattern.

Ratings for classroom consultations fell in between the face-to-face and non-face-to-face ratings:

» Classroom consultations like this one (68%):

» “It’s better when we don’t get nervous. If we do we are scared to speak up. Anonymous is good because you won’t know who we are. We don’t mind saying things.” (11 years)

» “Children don’t really get much say in anything because adults are too busy and they are sometimes too shy to stand up for themselves, so anonymous surveys like this are very helpful.” (12 years)

While around 66% of 12–17 year olds rated classroom consultations as quite useful or very useful, 78% of 10–11 year olds rated them as a quite useful or very useful way to have a say.

Age group differences were most apparent in the ratings for social media as a method of communication and consultation:

» 25% of 10–11 year olds rated this method as not useful at all and 30% rated it as quite or very useful.

» 50% of 12–14 year olds rated social media as quite useful or very useful.

» 63% of 15–17 year olds rated social media as quite useful or very useful.

It is worth noting that 15% of all respondents, 11% of 15–17 year olds and 15% of 12–14 year olds rated social media as “not useful at all” for having a say.

Some other ideas put forward about how young people would like to have their views heard are included below. Most of the ideas involve face to face methods of consultation.

» “A representative from the NSW Commission for Children and Young People come to schools all over NSW and talk to the children about what they have to say.” (11 years)

» “Government coming to poorer schools to hear what people actually think.” (14 years)

» “Something that engages young people and allows them to speak with fellow peers for discussion.” (14 years)

» “An annual forum where representatives of each school attend to have a say.” (15 years)

» “Through visits to schools by politicians.” (15 years)

» “Video and media online is not as appealing to students as you think. If your message is short and sweet, our opinions on whatever your point is will be more positive.” (14 years)
"Talking to other people your age about the same situation because this creates a better atmosphere for the people with problems knowing they are not alone or are not the only one in that situation." (14 years)

**Which children and young people should an advocate work for?**

Respondents differed in their views on which children and young people need an advocate.

Some said that all children and young people in NSW need someone to stand up for them, while others believe that while all children and young people need an advocate, there should be a particular focus on preventing disadvantage among children and young people.

Respondents were asked which of the following three groups of children and young people need someone to stand up for their rights and interests:

- All children and young people in NSW
- All children and young people in NSW, with a focus on preventing disadvantage
- Only disadvantaged children and young people.

Overall respondents were evenly split between all children and young people in NSW (48%) and all children and young people in NSW with a focus on preventing disadvantage (48%).

"All children need someone to stand up for them as children generally do not get a say in what should be done." (14 years)

"Put people with disadvantages first (disabilities and mental health) also people being bullied then make sure the other kids are okay." (14 years)

Very few respondents felt that only disadvantaged children and young people need someone to stand up for their rights and interests. Only 7% of 10–11 year old respondents felt that only disadvantaged children and young people need an advocate, and even fewer 15–17 year olds (2%) agreed.

All five homeless young respondents felt that the focus of a child advocate should be on all children and young people in NSW, with a focus on preventing disadvantage:

"You need to start with more disadvantaged children and young people, but that does not mean that you don’t put effort into children who have their basic needs covered. Sometimes children can have a steady home and school life but still need someone else to give their opinions to."

"Everyone is equal and even though some are disadvantaged we all need the same rights."

Respondents were also asked for any other ideas they had about which children and young people need someone to stand up for their rights and interests. Respondents from all age groups emphasised groups of vulnerable or disadvantaged young people as most needing an advocate, such as children and young people with a disability, Aboriginal children and young people, homeless young people and those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

When it comes to the age group of children and young people that an advocate should work for, respondents were asked which of the following age groups need someone to stand up for their rights and interests:

- Children and young people 0–17 years
» Only children 0–12 years
» Only young people 12–17 years
» Children and young people 0–25 years

0–25 years

Approximately 40% of respondents and all of the homeless young people consulted said that 0–25 year olds needed someone to stand up for their rights and interests.

“Just because you are 18, it doesn’t mean that you are automatically an adult and don’t have to worry about anything cause you still do have problems in your life.” (14 years)

“I think the age group 0–25 has the right to say although I think the age group 12–25 will understand more about this topic.” (12 years)

0–17 years

Over a quarter of respondents said that 0–17 year olds are the group that most needed an advocate.

“Only 0–17 mainly because they can’t look after themselves but when you reach 17 you would want to look after yourself.” (11 years)

“0–17 because once you are 18 you can vote and people listen to you because you are counted as an adult.” (14 years)

0–12 and 12–17 years

Less than a fifth of respondents said that the focus should be on 12–17 year olds only, but some felt that this focus was justified because this group is the most misunderstood.

“With more focus on 12–17yr olds. Everyone needs to be listened to and stood up for, but a lot of the time assumptions are made about teenagers and although some are true others are not. This age group is the most misunderstood and they need someone to help them stand up for themselves.”

Very few respondents (7%) thought that an advocate should focus only on children aged 0–12 years.

Other comments suggested all children who need assistance should have someone to stand up for them and others felt that everyone not just children should have that option:

» “Children just need to have someone there to stick up for them if they are not comfortable with doing it themselves.” (14 years)

» “People of all ages may need someone to help them stand up.” (11 years)

» “Anyone that wants or needs someone to stand up for them should have somebody.” (11 years)

» “Everybody should be standing up for children and their rights.” (11 years)
Some positive feedback

- “Thank you for taking your time to create this.” (11 years)
- “There should be more of these surveys and children should be able to share their opinion more often.” (11 years)
- “Thank you for helping us kids have the opportunity to have our say, means a lot to be heard.” (14 years)
- “Thank you for letting us have a say on what we think.” (13 years)
- “I think this online survey was a good way to learn what young people think and it’s good because you are actually listening to what we have to say. I find this doesn't happen often enough and that it definitely needs to occur more.” (14 years)
- “It’s a lot harder for a young person’s voice to be heard, particularly a society which cannot decide whether or not they actually want young people to speak their minds or to stay silent and in the shadows.” (14 years)
- “It’s nice to have an opportunity to express my concerns and ideas about making the world a better place for young people.” (16 years).
- “I really got to talk about issues that affect me as a child in our community as I think it is super important that kids get a say in what happens.” (11 years)

An ongoing challenge

- “I still don’t feel that anyone ever actually listens to what young people say. They claim they do, they pretend to but in the end, everyone’ll still take the word and ideas of an older and more respectable adult. But look at what great ideas young people can have, how we can change the world. I feel we need easier ways to express our voice.” (14 years)
- “Young adults or anyone over the age of 18 don’t give a care about what young people have to say.” (14 years)
- “This is pointless, because we all know nothing is going to change!” (13 years)
Appendix 2. What is important to children and young people in NSW today?

The community roundtables held in Wollongong and Cabramatta in August gathered a rich range of views from children and young people on the issues of importance to them. Forty young people and sixteen adults took part in the Cabramatta Roundtable and thirty nine young people and fourteen adults took part in the Wollongong Roundtable.

This selection of quotes is drawn from written notes and discussions at the roundtables. The quotes are indicative of the breadth and depth of issues affecting children and young people and the insights of children and young people on how to make a difference.

Bullying and Cyberbullying

Children and young people highlighted the prevalence of bullying both online and in person, its harmful effects and the difficulties in addressing this issue.

» Bullying is a problem for everyone because it puts people down. It makes people sad. It even sometimes makes people commit suicide.

» It affects everyone in every minority group.

» Bullying is despicable because you can hurt people by action or even by words.

» Kids go to school to learn and not get bullied.

» For the person being bullied it breaks my heart. Makes me feel upset. Makes me feel like I have no friends.

» Friends told the teacher 50 times and they don’t STOP.

» Many students across the country face bullying in school. As a result, many of them would feel unsafe and intimidated.

» Someone in my family was being bullied and it affected his life at home and school but now he is being left alone because he stood up for himself.

» Some young people drop out of school because of bullying so they are not getting educated as well.

» Bullying and peer pressure are age old issues that no one seems to have the answer for. It’s hard to control things in the schoolyard but something needs to change. We can’t have generations of children who have been bullied all their lives.

» Can lessen bullying but it won’t stop.

There were also varying views about the needs and motivations of the bully and the reluctance of others to intervene.

» Some people who don’t know they are a bully are stigmatised – they don’t see that they can be a bully.

» Bullies are usually insecure about themselves.

» Often the bully is also being bullied and has a severe amount of self-hate and needs help.
A bully is a power hungry beast.

Kids get bullied because other kids are jealous.

A bully might be dealing with problems with a person or at home and take it out on the keyboard.

People try to impress their friends for popularity – if you are a bully you are cool – peer pressure.

The peer pressure among students has allowed them to say nothing as they may be labelled “weak”, “suck” or “uncool” these labels made them feel out-casted.

This is a problem because teens get influenced by people to do bad things. We should cut bullying and let people be themselves.

Some participants talked about technology providing a new platform for anonymous bullying online. There were comments about parents and teachers not understanding the online world enough to be able to help and a call for monitoring around some of the more harmful content.

It is only getting worse with technology.

Social media is a new thing – no one really knows how to deal with it.

For us it’s much harder because social media is so new, our parents and teachers never grew up with social media, so they don’t know what to do – they haven’t experienced it.

It’s complicated when it happens online, school don’t know how to deal with bullying that doesn’t happen at school.

Social media companies should monitor more. Some of the content is really bad.

Teenagers are most victimised and insecure online. Authorities could monitor more pages and sites so not victimised.

Solutions proposed ranged from counselling and supporting victims in confronting bullies to promoting awareness of the problem, stronger advertising of anti-bullying programs and harsher penalties.

Victim and bully both need counselling.

Label bullies like alcoholism – 12 step program for bullying behaviours.

Bullying is a lot different nowadays. People don’t even realise they are being a bully. [We should] educate people in how to react to bullies. Verbal and social bullying should be more something you react to. [Others] intervene when it gets physical.

Need to be smart enough to be safe.

I make it better by not going near the person who is bullying. Getting strong in my heart and head.

They could stop it by telling the teacher and helping people to become strong.

... flipping the emphasis to focus on the bullied.

Bully awareness day.

Create awareness “it’s not ok” – advertise the idea.
I would make it better by strongly advertising anti-bullying programs.
Greater education to reduce stigmatisation; bigger, better anti-bullying programs.
This problem could be solved by laying down much more serious consequences for offenders.

Proposed solutions also targeted schools and teachers, with suggestions for better education in schools and more effort to provide a friendly school environment.

School are assisting – however it’s done in a very boring way.
Schools and parents need to attend intervention programs.
Attitudes for teachers need to change.
There needs to be support - I was bullied online and the school wasn’t supportive they didn’t see what I was seeing – my mum supported me.
Providing a friendly environment is much more important as it would build trust bridges between the adults (teachers and staff) and students. In this way students may feel safe, supported and welcomed in any situations they are facing.

Using drugs and alcohol

Young people spoke about the dangers of drugs and alcohol including dependence, harms to physical and mental health and the likelihood of risky behaviour.

It’s a problem because it can affect a person’s mentality and body negatively.
It is very addictive. People go insane from too much drugs and alcohol.
I think it is extremely bad for your health and they make you drowsy so you can’t think straight.
Using drugs and alcohol can be very addictive because of all the things that it may contain. It can trick you to doing really stupid and silly stuff.
When you take drugs you believe you can do anything such as jump off a building and survive. You believe you can fly like a bird.
I chose using drugs and alcohol because it also relates to physical and mental issues. If you have too much drugs and alcohol you will commit crimes without thinking. That is why you have to turn 18+ to have drugs or alcohol.
Using drugs and alcohol is, has, and always will be a problem. Being addicted to drugs and alcohol is as bad as it gets. Everyone has seen the ads and knows what happens.
Drugs are not a nice thing – it messes with you.
A lot of my friends do it and it changes who they are.
This is an issue because poor use can ruin people’s lives.
It doesn’t lead to anything, like it doesn’t lead to the future.

The young people also voiced concern around the easy availability of drugs and alcohol, such as:

Too many youth are under the influence, as it’s not hard to get your hands on. Brings a lot of issues to the community.
It's just too easy to get this even though we have tough restriction laws on it. Too easy to access, like asking people over 18 to buy drinks. Some shopkeepers are selling single cigarettes to under 18s. People shouldn’t sell drugs to under 18s, but it is already illegal and still happens.

There were a range of motivations discussed relating to drug and alcohol use among young people including disengagement, peer pressure, media representations and lack of appropriate education. It’s mostly about youth and people who don’t feel safe and happy. Young people often feel the pressure of having to conform and experiment. My community’s youth struggle with day to day life after school or struggle to adjust if they had dropped out early-usually in my community drugs and alcohol come in handy when it comes to forgetting the pressures of life. It’s a problem for teens who take it because of peer pressure. Some people are a part of drugs and alcohol because of bullying. Movies make drug use cool. I can safely say at least 90% of the people I know have tried drugs/alcohol more than once. Movies like ‘The Breakfast Club’ make drugs look cool. We need to stop doing so. But in saying that, the education we get at school isn’t very beneficial.

However, celebrities with well publicised addictions or unsuccessful attempts at rehabilitation were criticised and, particularly among younger children, viewed as poor role models. There were also comments about moderate use of alcohol and a transition to drinking in adulthood. There were some concerns about adult drinking as well. As long as you don’t have too much it’s ok. If you drink alcohol you can get drunk if you drink too much. When you are drunk you do unusual things and can’t control yourself. Alcohol is not frowned upon by society. Alcohol is less of a problem if you are closer to 18, but if you are 10 that’s a problem. People go insane. People drinking alcohol e.g. Mum. No solution.

Smoking was viewed as harmful, distressing and expensive, with concerns for parents and family members as well as children and young people. There is still a lot of peer pressure to smoke. I get so stressed out. I want to quit…the amount of times I’ve tried. My uncle gets paid and spends it all on cigarettes and he can’t afford anything else. Putting up smoking taxes just gets more money. Parents try to give up but it is addictive and if you can’t stop you are just paying more money. Smoking affects other people. It is hard to give up but smokers need to think about other people. People thinks it makes them look cooler but it makes them look stupid’.
» There are areas at school where all the kids go to smoke and everyone knows including the teachers – they turn a blind eye.

Proposed solutions to problematic drug and alcohol use included government bans, more awareness raising and education, less media promotion, addressing peer pressure, alternative activities and programs to support young people with problems.

» I think the NSW government should ban drugs and alcohol because they can have serious and affective side effects on the human body.

» Media stop promoting drugs and alcohol.

» Try and find alternatives for those who have drug/alcohol problems.

» Replacing them with other good activities.

» More publicity about the uncool side of drug and alcohol abuse – death, mental and physical illnesses.

» Educational programs for schools and community.

» More awareness around the effects but also what help is out there if you’re having a problem.

» There needs to be more community awareness and services which help young people who suffer addiction.

» Campaigns needed for young people to feel reassured that it’s okay to “say no”.

» School should get money to support students that have drug problems.

In relation to alcohol there was some discussion about addressing binge drinking and promoting responsible use of alcohol through awareness and education; as well as suggestions for harsher penalties for supplying alcohol to young people; compulsory product warnings and positive role models.

» Educating people about the risk and perhaps trying to turn drinking into a more cultured thing, rather than binge.

» Raise awareness. Don’t suppress just advise.

» Positive role-models. Harsher penalties for supplying alcohol to young people.

» I think to make drugs and alcohol better would probably be to sign a form saying that you will be having drugs and alcohol at a party, place and you might have a lot of it.

» Responsible use of alcohol. Zero blood alcohol is not teaching responsible use of alcohol.

» Should be warnings on labels of alcohol bottles like they do on cigarette packs – people don’t know the effects of alcohol like they do for smoking – e.g. effects on developing brains.

**Access to a good education**

Children and young people talked about the importance of education as a foundation for life – some felt pressured to achieve while others noted lack of parental support or difficulties with managing schoolwork at home. They also raised issues in relation to the content and relevance of the options available to them and the environment in which they needed to learn.

» A good education sets you up for life.
» Getting a good education is one of the pathways to lead a better future to live a happy life in living in a good environment and working on something in daytime to achieve something and getting paid for the hard working and effort you put in.

» There is always pressure to get 100%.

» Parents have very high expectations of their child and will force them into doing the subjects they dislike – parents try to live through their children.

» It would be good to do assessments and assignments in class instead of home. At home it’s noisy with a big family. I don’t know how I do it.

» Hard to get an education when you have no family support.

» We have 32 people in our class. It’s a bit crowded, makes it hard.

» Biggest problem is we need a fun learning environment where students are allowed to speak.

» This is a problem because some people learn different ways to others.

» Kids don’t have enough say in what we learn about. We have to choose electives too early.

» Careers advisers and teachers don’t give the right information.

» When you first start your job you don’t really know what to do and you can stuff up. When you’re at school you should be able to tell the teacher when you want to learn and they can teach you so you can be good at it.

» Now day’s teenagers are too distracted with the net, media, Facebook, taking drugs, getting pregnant, and love which is a major issue in their education. Some doesn’t care about their education and thinks it’s not going to be useful in life when in general it’s a big effect.

» Children and young people had a sense of the different outcomes for different kids and some made pleas for greater efforts to help those who are disadvantaged or disengaged.

» Different children and young people don’t get the same opportunities.

» The schools aren’t putting in the effort for teenagers; there is a gap in their education especially in public schools. Better programs for teens that want to learn.

» There’s too many kids not getting degrees, diplomas, certificates. Lots of jobs in the future will require these.

» Breaking poverty thru education.

Other possible improvements proposed by young people included:

» More practicals. More discussions. Less learning just off the teacher, like pen to paper type learning.

» Providing them with good books and support with school fees and places in universities.

» Letting parents know that they should not pressure their children into doing something they don’t want to do – become a doctor, lawyer etc. Inspiring teens to go for their dreams.

» Better sex education for everyone (mainly high school students). Give better class that involves terminology, alternatives, access to certain items and resources, documentaries.
Physical and Mental Health

Young people talked about the importance of both physical and mental health. They focussed on the added difficulties of addressing mental health problems, the prevalence of mental illness, the lack of appropriate services, and links to bullying.

» Physical and mental health overshadow all the other issues.

» It’s an issue that’s there …not all of us know what to do about it. Mental health is not nearly as obvious as physical health…so many people find it hard to get to the doctor’s to get the piece of paper to get the help you need, for access to special services.

» Lots of young people are alone with their mental health issue.

» They’re put into services not catered to them.

» Counselling is expensive, or it’s hard to find a counsellor.

» Depression and anxiety ruins people if it doesn’t get noticed.

» This is a problem because all people of all ages are being bullied. This affects their mental health… When people are depressed they can harm themselves physically which is horrible for physical health.

The solutions put forward focussed on awareness raising, testing and accessible programs.

» There should be mandatory testing for mental illness.

» Programs should be more accessible for youth because it usually is hard for the youth to approach someone for help.

» Organisations such as Headspace are great but we need more awareness. Teenagers are thought to be ‘too young’ to understand mental illness but they are amongst the most common sufferers.

Being different (race, cultural, disability, sexuality)

Young people were very aware of issues around difference, stigma and prejudice and were strong advocates for equality and acceptance. Issues of sexuality, cultural background, disability and race were all raised by the young people.

» Being different is so hard especially when you are young. People are always willing to stigmatise someone rather than help them.

» We’re given so much pressure on studying and responsibility early on but never enough time to explore who we are.

» We’re encouraged to be different but immediately looked down upon when we do so.

» Being different is OK if you have the confidence and personality to engage people. But people who don’t have the confidence to overcome being minority will find it very hard to fit in.

» People get bullied because the colour of their skin or the food that they eat, I think we should all be equalled as one.

» Marriage equality is a huge issue, makes us feel like our relationships are not as worthy. Love is love – why shouldn’t I be allowed to marry the person I love? I’m just the same as everyone else.
In response to this issue, the importance of education and awareness was stressed as was the need for young people to develop confidence and a strong sense of identity.

- There needs to be more awareness programs where young people can interact with one another to experience other cultural traditions; gain understanding and minimise the gap between cultural communities.
- We just need to be more open minded and supportive of difference.
- Promoting inclusion for young people of all cultures, races, sexuality will lead us to creating a fair, socially just society that is based on acceptance rather than fear.
- Being accepted for who you are is essential and impacts your confidence, self-esteem and self-image.

Feeling safe on the streets

Young people discussed fears in relation to public safety, especially at night. Particular problems noted included risks to girls and lack of access to refuges.

- All young people should feel safe on the street. However it is not always the case.
- It’s hard to go out for a walk at night or take a cut through a quiet side street without feeling like your safety has been compromised.
- Being a female, generally feel insecure walking around the streets in case of getting attacked, assaulted, robbed, mugged. Females, female youth are the largest targets.
- People get raped, bullied or killed – It could happen to everyone when they are alone at some places or at night.
- Although there are some really nice people, some are NOT. They may seem like nice people; well some are actually nice except some may be strangers or someone who has been in court or even goal.
- There are kids sleeping in Maccas, on the train, on the streets – Refuges only take a small amount of people – When a young person calls (a refuge) and they get turned down, they don’t call back. That’s it. They leave. They have a mentality, the streets are the place for me.

Possible solutions included more police presence, more CCTVs, better adult supervision and safer communities including lighting and community responsibility. For example:

- Keeping paedophiles, rapist, sex offenders off the streets.
- Having more police on the streets.
- Need an increase in CCTV, community/neighbourhood watch groups.
- Always go with a parent/caregiver.
- Not enough street lights – Would feel safer with light.

The internet and social media

Young people discussed both the benefits of the internet and social media in terms of communication as well as the dangers of cyberbullying and risks from paedophiles and crime. They also pointed to problems with information staying online forever and personal information being misused.
Too many people are using social media incorrectly and it’s ruining it for everyone. I’ve made friends online but as soon as I tell someone that they assume I’m friends with a paedophile.

The internet can be good but also can be bad; anything you post stays on the internet forever. The internet is one of the best ways to communicate (talk to your friends).

It depends on what type of person you are...if you’re an idiot...or you’re reckless...depends how you use it. You’re supposed to view it, not take a screen shot - it’s a real dilemma.

Social media. It’s half and half - not just a negative thing...if you have friends overseas.

Facebook is cool as everyone is on it and I am on it everyday...but cyberbullying is a problem with all social sites.

Social media opens up a gateway to cyber bullying.

You can also get hacked.

We are more connected with people across the world than in the same room.

It’s a problem because people can be victimised and harassed by anonymous people. It is most evident in teenagers as they live in a digital age and are the most insecure.

It’s scary how much control social media have over the mind of youth...they place focus on how youth should behave in a certain way and if they don’t they are socially rejected.

Some of the possibilities put forward for addressing this issue included regulation and oversight as well as education. For example:

- More oversight is needed as there is a lot of anonymous insults, victimisation and bullying.
- You could make it better by building self esteem.
- Have the authorities monitor pages and sites.
- Have better education in schools regarding internet use and misuse.
- There should be sites or pages that value individuality over societal conformity.

Making kids too sexual, too young

Young people raised issues about the sexualisation of children and young people in music videos, the media and in society.

- Have you seen music videos lately? Even the music we listen to? Almost everything these days is about sex. Why can’t they tone it down? Even though I guess sex sells!
- I feel the media does the wrong thing. Children should worry about their ABCs, not birth control and contraception.
- Advertising and sexualisation of younger children means that children grow up too quickly, they don’t have the ability to enjoy a childhood.
- It’s the exploitation of innocent minds to make a profit – should be illegal.
- Because young children are exposed to so much and are doing things that they probably don’t even understand. There is a huge amount of pressure to be like the ‘older girls’ and be ‘cool’.
Some of the proposed solutions included:

- We should form groups that say its fine to place less emphasis on these things, desexualising everything in modern society. We should teach young children to value other things over sex appeal.
- There should be more filtering.
- Legislation is required to restrict what is appropriate.

**Getting around using public transport**

On public transport, the issues raised included, costs and affordability and fare parity for regional and rural areas.

- Getting around using public transport is way too expensive. Hard to navigate.
- Public transport is expensive if you are using it every day, especially if you don’t have a job.
- Public transport doesn’t take you everywhere.
- Little public transport in the Shoalhaven. The transport that is available is not affordable.
- Is very expensive to get around [where I live] – all buses are private contractors.
- Getting around in transport like trains can be very nerve racking because you don’t know whose gonna be there, some drugo that’s very scary. So go sit with some friends.
- It is so scary walking home from the train station at night.
- I was only allowed to start catching the train this year because my mum was concerned about my safety (Year 9 or 10 student).

Proposed actions included subsidies, reduced fares, free public transport for children and young people and more regular services.

- Make fares less expensive.
- Subsidised public transport.
- Free transport for minors.
- Need more regular bus services at a reasonable price.
- Cheaper, more free buses covering larger area.
- Public transport for rural areas – affordable – more regular buses!!! Ensuring that people aren’t isolated in their area.
- Fare parity in rural & regional areas.

**Access to local facilities**

Young people raised issues in relation to availability and awareness of local facilities and services, barriers including cost and location and problems with boredom where there is a lack of suitable activities.

- Not all youth get access to opportunities in different areas. One area is different to another area – Schools, sports and jobs especially.
» For me I didn’t know about youth health services until I was 17. I didn’t know about home based. After I talked about it (health services) at assembly, so many students came up to me and asked me about it.

» In the west the facilities aren’t there but the minds are! So government should build more stuff.

» The local community is boring – there is no programs widely advertised for youth and those that run have low attendance rates.

» When kids get bored, they start to do stupid things.

Proposed solutions included:

» Lower the costs of sports so more kids can get involved.

» PCYC free entry, free programs, free camps.

» Affordable recreation. People need low-cost things to do – for all people – reduce cost of leisure centres.

» Access to local facilities, this will keep young people out of trouble and stop violence…. bullying etc. For young people – high school & primary school.

The future of the natural environment

The young people who commented on environmental issues focussed on their importance and the environmental problems that they will inherit in the future.

» Societal fads come and go, people rise, governments fall, but Earth is forever. At the end of the day once taxes, strikes, rights and the boats are sorted, our environment is what we live in.

» Young people will suffer the pain that comes with environmental degradation.

» It is young people who will have to deal with the disasters and global warming.

» Because people are littering and it will result as a problem for the future generations.

» Politicians hijacking environmental issues is ethically wrong.

Where solutions were put forward, these generally focussed on greater prioritisation of environmental issues, for example:

» Help environment to the max for future generations

» We need to get the attention of people in high places so they can do something that counts.

» We need to acknowledge that short term pain is necessary to prevent global warming.

» Greater sustainability initiatives and education.

» It requires a generational charge.

Inequality facing disadvantaged kids

While this issue was not commented on in detail by the young people at the roundtables, there was a sense that disadvantage was unfair and that inequality needs to be addressed.
Simply it’s unfair. Those who can’t access the help they need.

People experience inequality and it creates a chain through generations.

Students who are disabled, LBOTE background aren’t educated on how to use facilities, often taught not to continue education.

They not only face specific issues at home but will be discriminated in the workplace by people outside of one community when leaving school.

Solutions proposed by the young people included:

- Opportunities and support for all young people.
- Outreach and awareness in the community.
- Provide more resources and info to young people in disadvantaged situations.
- Encouraging the younger generation to embrace their identity and be proud of their achievements.

**Having enough time to spend with friends and family**

Young people shared concerns about the busy lives of their families and the pressure they felt on themselves due to homework and other activities.

- Too much homework impacts on family time.
- School most days then homework in the afternoon so not much time to play.
- You have to go to school, do homework, do home reading have dinner.
- So much pressure when it comes to studying. Never enough pressure on rest and relaxation. Everyone becomes stressed etc.
- Because of schooling pressures to perform and other commitments like sport/ training.
- Adults these days are so busy at work because they need money, and there is no solution in my opinion for this problem.
- When youth get caught up with the crowds outside of home, they feel drawn to them subconsciously spending a lot of time with friends late at night….times that should be spent at home.

Children and young people proposed a range of ways to address this issue including adjusting school hours, limiting homework and finding a better balance.

- Birthdays should be on school holidays.
- Not going to school Monday and Fridays.
- There should not be homework.
- All kids go to school on weekends but each day shorter.
- Making it easier for kids to spend time with friends, balancing school work, school social events.
- Families need to draw the line for when their kids can come home and actually show they love
their children by showing they care for them by enforcing discipline.

Youth employment

Youth employment was an additional issue added by young people who had concerns about job prospects when they left school.

» At school you should be taught what you need to know for a job.

» We need more affordable housing for young people where the jobs are. If people are buying where they can afford but not near jobs there is going to be more unemployment and other problems like substance abuse.

» To build a better future for Australia it is important for youth to be able to get work experience and full time work.

» Hard to find jobs in this area. Many cannot cope with work and school. They are getting paid in cash – placed in dangerous situations or bad working conditions.

In terms of possible solutions, the young people put forward options such as:

» Incentives for businesses to hire young people. To give greater opportunities.

» Workshops are a good way to teach young people, and help them decide what they would like to do for a career.

» We should teach them time-management skills. Create jobs just for youth.

Pressure to have the latest brands/clothing

Many roundtable participants did not believe this to be a significant issue, and thought that affordable stores that cater to everyone were cool. However, there was still some acknowledgement of pressure.

» The pressure to have popular brands. The urge to stay/or become popular. BE YOURSELF.

» They (young people) fall in love with the brand. Even if the shoe is the same as another one.

» Teenagers are very elitist. They want the best, greatest, most expensive. They pretend to have money even when they don’t.