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Office of the Advocate for
Children & Young People

The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People

2022-2024

Annexure 1

What children and young people have said

Since 2015, the Advocate for Children and Young People has heard from over 41,000 children and young people in different settings and through various methodologies, including speaking to more than 12,300 children and young people in face-to-face consultations and engaging with over 28,700 through surveys and other participation activities. In the past 12 months alone, ACYP has engaged with over 5,000 children and young people. Collectively, all of these voices have informed the development of *The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024* (the Plan).

In order to develop the Plan, ACYP began by undertaking a macro-analysis of this existing consultation data. ACYP considered what issues had remained important for children and young people over this period and what new issues had emerged. We then synthesised what we heard from children and young people into six core themes and also undertook further consultations with children and young to further refine and develop the six commitment areas.

What we've heard from children and young people is a brief summary of the main themes raised by children and young people during our consultations. Findings are drawn from specific consultations conducted with children and young people throughout 2021 and are supplemented by existing consultations conducted over the past six years. The recent 2021 consultations included a series of face-to-face and virtual group discussions where children and young people had an opportunity to comment on the themes of the Plan as outlined above.

Broad themes from the findings of these consultations have been presented in order of how often they were mentioned however, we note that the burden of some issues is more acute for a small number while other issues are less acute, impacting a larger cohort. We note that where findings are qualitative in nature (that is, drawn from group conversations and interviews) they should not be considered statistically representative.

How children and young people are tracking at the moment represents findings from the 2021 ACYP Strategic Plan survey. ACYP will undertake this tracking study each year throughout the Plan to determine whether the input and efforts from NSW Government have made a difference to these over-arching commitments to children and young people.

The survey was fielded by a professional market research firm using a representative sample such that findings at a state-wide level are statistically representative with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of +/-3.4%. Quotas were set for age, gender, and metropolitan and regional representation.

Hope for the future

Children and young people's individual learning and interests are fostered through education, training and skills development which supports them to grow and prepares them for their future.

They are supported to be independent, engage in society and to join the workforce.

What we've heard from children and young people

Education is a key source of hope, but also of concern and stress for children and young people. In a 2020 Youth Week survey, we asked just over 1,000 young people what the biggest issues that young people in NSW faced were. Unprompted, stress related to their education was second only to mental health concerns. However, we also asked what the best parts of life were for young people in NSW and the opportunity to get a good education was among the top three responses. In a 2021 Youth Week survey, 1,000 young people selected the biggest issues young people faced from a list and 60% nominated stress related to study – making it the number one issue.

Young people can also see the clear link between school and their future work opportunities. When children and young people have spoken to us about school, they have often discussed how it could or should prepare students for the future. In the 2020 Youth Week survey, unemployment and the lack of job opportunities was mentioned, unprompted, at the same rate as stress about school and study. It remained a theme in recent research conducted in mid-2021.

In both Strategic Plan consultations and in engagement over the past six years, we have asked children and young people to unpack their ideas about education and employment.

Education

As outlined above, stress related to school and broader study is a major concern for children and young people. This has been raised by those in primary and high school as well as in tertiary education across many consultations conducted by ACYP. The pressure to do well at school impacts the every-day lives of many students. For some this is about the pressure of the HSC and the implications for their future career. Other young people have mentioned the pressure of exams and assignments throughout their schooling – particularly where they have multiple assessments due around the same time. Stress was also an issue raised in the context of NAPLAN assessments as students feel the pressure to do well at every age. Some students felt this could be addressed if schools put less focus on exams, while others felt a more flexible timetable at school would help them to manage their workload.

> *'Too much pressure at school, everything is busy and fast and it is hard to find quiet time.'*
> *Male, 12 years old*

Young people also felt poor mental health could act as a barrier to success in school. While we note this is a slightly separate issue to that of school stress, young people often highlighted the connection between the two and felt school could be a key source of support.

Children and young people frequently mention the need for schools to teach practical life skills in addition to the current curriculum. Students raise examples such as taxes, renting accommodation and applying for jobs. Young people want the curriculum to be relevant for their future and they see an opportunity for schools to meet that need. In the same 2021 survey where 60% of young people said school stress was one of the biggest issues children and young people face, 34% nominated the need for practical life skills to be taught at school. This was higher among those who were working (39%) and those who were unemployed (49%) indicating that many felt this was important retrospectively and wished they had learnt more during their schooling years.

Indeed, many young people have noted that schools often do not accommodate the needs of a diverse group of students. They felt that all young people have a great deal of potential but that not all young people can access that potential through the academic processes of schools. Young people often call for opportunities to allow those who are not academic to follow their strengths, interests and abilities in order to reach their goals.

> *'Cos like, you get the kids that are really good at [school]. And then you get the kids like us, who lack the concentration and then we get in trouble for that or, we get suspended for that, you know what I mean? So it's like, what's the point of going if I'm not going to get help at school.'*
> *ACYP Juvenile Justice Report*

For some, this is about opportunities to integrate apprenticeships and work experience into their learning experience. Others hope for a more tailored learning experience so that those with different academic abilities can progress in a class at their own pace. Still others note the need for alternatives to the traditional schooling pathway and raise concerns for those who disengage from school.

Children and young people are acutely aware of inequity when it comes to educational opportunities, both when they have experienced disadvantage themselves and when they can empathise with other groups experiencing disadvantage.

Children and young people in regional areas raised the impact of poor access to transport, noting this limits their ability to access education and training opportunities and those in both regional and metropolitan areas are aware of the disparities many of those in regional areas face when it comes to secure, stable internet access. Many also raised the difficulties faced by those experiencing low income or from areas with low socio-economic status. Beyond the impact on their schooling years, they pointed to a need for tertiary education scholarships and noted that cost can be a major barrier to university entry.

Many young people said they were eager for careers advice, and particularly for this to be provided throughout their schooling. Some said they wanted more advice about alternatives to university as they feel there is a bias towards this as the "best" option after school, though it may not suit all students. They would like to see less emphasis on university and hear more about opportunities through TAFE and stepping directly into the workforce. Others seek clearer information about different career pathways, including current and future industry demand and information about salaries.

Students often raise work experience as an important opportunity to learn about different occupations and to develop the social and soft skills needed to operate in a work environment. Some feel work experience should be incorporated sooner and more frequently throughout their schooling years.

Young people also want to be supported in the years after school. A frequent comment in consultations is the need for an ongoing support service to help young people with careers advice, navigating the workplace and managing the transition to independence.

Work and employment

When it comes to their hopes for their careers, views among young people were mixed with some displaying confidence and hope for their future, and others expressing concerns about job availability. Many young people were optimistic about their career prospects – 45% according to an ACYP survey conducted in Youth Week of 2021, though more than a quarter (28%) felt somewhat or very pessimistic.

This survey demonstrated young people's ongoing concerns about their careers in that 75% felt it was hard for young people to find a well-paid job, 70% felt it was hard to find a permanent job, and 68% felt it is hard for young people to find a job doing what they want to do. 58% were confident that they would be able to pursue a career in their chosen field, indicating more than 4 in 10 were either not sure about this or did not expect to be able to pursue their career goals.

> *'Finding a job, it's hard to get a job at times because many employers are looking for a person with experience or certifications, it's hard to start somewhere.'*
>
> *Female, 20 years old*

This concern was exacerbated for those in regional areas. According to the same survey, those in regional areas were more likely to take any job offered to them, even if it were not in their field of interest (51% vs 40% of those in metropolitan areas). They were also more likely to feel that in the future, there would be fewer jobs for young people (56% vs 46% in metropolitan areas).

In consultations, some young people spoke about their struggle with wanting to pursue one career, while feeling forced into another by their parents, guardians or carers. For these students, their parents' desire is for them to choose careers affording a degree of income stability, though some note preference for some careers over others based on perceived social status.

In the 2021 survey designed to inform the Strategic Plan, when asked what Government could do to make life better for young people, the second most frequent answer – after mental health support – was to create more job opportunities for young people.

How children and young people are tracking at the moment

Most young people feel optimistic about their future. However, there are some groups who are consistently less hopeful such as those who have had contact with the justice system, those feeling financially insecure and LGBTQIA+ young people.

Young people were asked to rate how hopeful they felt about a few aspects of their lives on a scale of not hopeful at all to extremely hopeful.
- Regarding their "future in general", 71% were optimistic (rating of 7 or more out of 10), while 10% were not as hopeful with lower scores (between 0-4 out of 10).
- Hopelessness (with scores between 0-4) was highest among:
    - Those who have had contact with the justice system, with almost a third (29%) giving scores indicating they were not hopeful;
    - Those in the LGBTQIA+ community (28%); and
    - Those who were financially insecure (23%).
- In rating their ability to get the education and training they needed to achieve their goals, 74% were hopeful but 7% were not. Scores indicating hopelessness were highest among:
    - Those who have had contact with the justice system (21%);
    - Those who were financially insecure (20%); and
    - Those not currently working or studying (19%).
- Young people were less optimistic about their ability to get a job in a field they were interested in; 67% were hopeful but 13% were not. Those most likely to give scores indicating they were not hopeful were:
    - Those in the LGBTQIA+ community (31%);
    - Those who were financially insecure (28%); and
    - Those with a disability (21%).

Students (across primary, secondary and tertiary study) were asked about the extent of their stress or anxiety related to their studies.

- 23% said they experienced a lot of stress or anxiety, and 41% said they experienced a moderate amount.
- Levels of stress were higher for high school and university students compared to those in primary school or studying at TAFE.

Love, connection and safety

Children and young people feel safe, loved and nurtured.
They can connect and build friendships with others.
They feel that they belong to a wider community, social or cultural group.
They are free from neglect, abuse and violence.

What we've heard from children and young people

Relationships are incredibly important to children and young people and are central factors in their perception of their individual health, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Friends and family

The strongest theme to emerge from consultations with children and young people was the importance of positive and healthy relationships. Children and young people highlighted the importance of friendships when it came to feeling connected, both with their peer group and their wider community.

Children and young people spoke about how their friendships made them feel safe, both at school and in public, and provided a level of protection against some negative peer experiences such as bullying and cyberbullying which they saw as the inverse to good, healthy relationships.

> *'Each Wednesday we go to the youth group and we can meet our friends from different schools...it really helps us to find new friends.'*
> Female, ACYP Refugee Report

Children and young people also stressed the importance of having a supportive person in their lives who could serve as a role-model and support when needed. For many children and young people these role models were seen as 'wiser' or 'more experienced' within their family and peers, who could help them with a variety of issues and advice.

Relationships

Whilst in general children and young people said their relationships were positive and healthy, children and young people also emphasised the critical importance of learning what makes a healthy and respectful relationship and strategies for identifying when a relationship may become

> *'Having a role model to look up to and that's what young people need when they are trying to figure out who they are.'*
> Male, 10 years old

unhealthy or coercive. Children and young people said they felt that schools had an important role to play in providing objective information about how to engage in healthy, safe and supportive relationships.

Some acknowledged that healthy relationships are not always experienced at home. They recognised that the more a child or young person witnesses or experiences unhealthy behaviour, the

> *'Present more healthy relationships lessons into schools so that everyone knows.'*
> Female, 17 years old

harder it is to unlearn, potentially creating much larger intergenerational concerns.

A key aspect of this broader question around how to promote healthy and respectful relationships concerned the topic of sexual consent. In our consultations, young people felt that education about relationships and consent should be taught earlier in schools.

Social media

Many children and young people across our consultations raised the increasing importance of social media when connecting with their peers and wider community. Some recognised that social media presented opportunities for those who may find face-to-face interaction more challenging, however they also said that this needed to be balanced with the potential for the more negative aspects of social media such as cyberbullying.

> *'Make resources and technology more readily available for people.'*
> *Male, 15 years old*

When discussing connection on social media, children and young people also highlighted that technology was not accessible for all of their peers. This was a perspective that was strongly held in our rural and regional consultations, where young people spoke about not having the same access to technology or the internet and the importance of finding alternative ways to keep those young people connected.

Connection to community

> *'Continue pushing out support for young people (such as focus groups, support groups and more fun activities for local communities). These activities can be done by local councils, but something to connect a suburb together, and make new friends to socialise with.'*
> *Male, 16 years old*

Children and young people were interested and eager to engage with their broader community, but did not always know how to connect. They wanted more opportunities to participate in events and activities, which bring children and young people together and foster connectedness and community cohesion. Children and young people spoke positively about local youth groups which allowed them to share social connection, talk through problems and support their peers. They also spoke positively about interschool events and other activities which brought together schools and groups of young people that may not otherwise know or interact with each other and gave them the opportunity to meet people with different backgrounds and life experiences.

Some children and young people also often reported feeling connected and safe in the broader community when they came from a large family which facilitated cross-community connections. This sentiment was especially strong for those children and young people who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or who were from other culturally diverse communities where families are defined more broadly than those who you are biologically related to.

> 'Sydney is very expensive so there are very few activities I feel I can participate in without financial hardship.'
> *Female, 24 years old*

Children and young people who had a refugee or migrant background said further support was needed for them to feel connected to community, as the transition to life in Australia brought with it additional challenges. One of the key barriers they spoke about was racism. This issue is discussed further in the *respect and acceptance* commitment area. One positive aspect that they spoke about was how sport and recreation helped them to connect to their community and make friends. However, many reported not being able to afford the membership fees. Young people said that it would be helpful if they could get some financial assistance to be able to engage in sporting activities.

Cultural identity and awareness

Cultural awareness and inclusivity was centrally important to children and young people. While this theme was most prominent within consultations with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, across a broad range of consultations, participants raised the need for more cultural awareness opportunities for young people to share their culture and learn about others.

> *'As a proud Wiradjuri woman I had no family follow-up or family finding done for me whilst in care. So I was also placed with non-Indigenous carers, which then led to the fact that I had a piece of me missing for most of my life until I actually left care and did cultural finding and understanding and practices by myself, without that support.'*
>
> *Female, 21 years old*

Aboriginal children and young people often spoke passionately about the importance of their connection to culture. Specifically, they reported enjoying cultural and community events and gala days that foster a close knit community where everyone is friendly and gets to know each other.

Some children and young people further shared that they liked the cultural support they received at school as Aboriginal students, such as having a safe room specifically dedicated to their wellbeing at school.

Linked to this, Aboriginal children and young people with experience in the OOHC system spoke about the need for more Aboriginal caseworkers who understand the importance of connection to culture and cultural identity.

Aboriginal young people in youth justice spoke about the positive impact of cultural programs in relation to promoting a sense of identity, pride and connection to their culture and community. Some Aboriginal young people said that not everyone knew about their family or background. They wanted to see more programs which involved Elders

> *'A lot of us boys who come in doesn't even know things about our culture, we just know the name but we don't know what we stand for... how to become a man.'*
>
> *Male, ACYP Juvenile Justice Report*

teaching traditional skills and knowledge. In our consultations, we have also heard from both children and young people and service providers of the importance of Aboriginal owned and controlled organisations, wherever possible, delivering services and supports to those who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

How children and young people are tracking at the moment

Most rated the quality of their relationships with their immediate family and friendship groups highly. While many still had good relationships with extended family and the broader community, there were fewer children and young people giving these a high rating.

- 81% reported having a high quality relationship with their immediate family and 78% felt they had high quality friendships (rating 7 or higher out of 10)
- Many still had positive relationships with extended family (64%) and the broader community (56%), though these were not rated as highly.
- Children and young people reported the most positive scores for the people they live with, with 84% giving a high rating and only 6% giving a poor rating.
- Those aged 10-13 years were most positive about all of their relationships.
- Those aged 14-17 years were least positive about their relationship with immediate family members, with 12% rating 0-4 out of 10.

- Groups more likely to say they have poor relationships (rating 0-4 out of 10) were those who have had interactions with the justice system, those who were financially insecure, those not currently working or studying and those who identify as LGBTQIA+.

While the vast majority of young people (93%) have someone in whom they can confide, some do not have friend or family support networks they can speak to.
- 62% felt they could confide in a friend.
  - The group least likely to have a friend they could confide in were those aged 10-13 years (51%).
- 59% felt they could confide in a family member.
  - The group least likely to have a family member they could confide in were those who have had contact with the justice system (28%).
- 17% felt they could confide in someone else.
- 7% did not have anyone they felt they could confide in.
  - This was highest for those aged 14-17 years (13%).

Health and wellbeing

Children and young people's mental, physical and emotional health is nurtured and supported to enable them to flourish.

What we've heard from children and young people

Children and young people are passionate about mental health. While this commitment area is about a broader view of health and wellbeing includes physical, mental, and emotional health, the central importance of mental health in young people's minds cannot be understated. In almost every conversation ACYP has with young people, there is a clear and consistent call for better, ongoing mental health support.

Mental health

In research undertaken by ACYP in 2021, mental health came up unprompted as the most frequently mentioned issue children and young people face and further analysis indicated it had the single greatest impact on how children and young people felt about life overall. The following themes about mental health were extremely strong in strategic plan consultations but have also been consistently prominent across ACYP's consultations over the past six years.

Many young people were concerned about the ability to access professional support for their mental health. Children and young people raised frustration with the wait times associated with seeing private psychologists, as well as wait times to access mental health support services, such as Headspace.

> *'[Government should] recognise the need for far more mental health services. I haven't been able to find a clinical psychologist because they are far too booked up.'*
>
> *Female, 17 years old*

Children and young people were concerned that those seeking help for more moderate mental health issues are sometimes unable to access support as those who are facing more acute challenges are prioritised. Young people said it is often while waiting for support that those moderate concerns become more serious and young people are left feeling they are unsupported during a period of crisis. Many young people were frustrated with this cycle and expressed concerns that they should not have to wait "until breaking point" to access the help they need.

> *'Make mental health institutes such as psychologist and or therapists free. If the government cares so much they would show it more by not restricting people to go get help. Another way would be to allow free services online to see a psychologist or therapist. Additionally, to do checks on or create rules for psychologists and or therapists to make it less traumatic to see one since some aren't capable of giving out help.'*
>
> *Female, 21 years old*

In discussing various mental health services, Headspace was one service mentioned frequently and was viewed positively by many young people. Headspace was often described as the "go-to" service both for those who had a history of mental health concerns and those who did not. However, some who had experience accessing Headspace reported feeling "caught in the middle" in that by the time they were able to access support, their mental illness or concern had progressed beyond the level of support Headspace provides.

In regional areas, many young people raised issues with accessing local support. Children and young people were passionate about this issue and did not feel they should be required to travel long distances to access the support they need.

Across both metropolitan and regional areas, many young people spoke about the high costs associated with seeing a private psychologist and felt children and young people should be able to access free services without a limit on the number of sessions.

The need to increase mental health literacy among both adults and their peers is another major passion for many children and young people. Children and young people spoke about the importance of everyone in the community having a greater understanding of mental health, which they felt would work in part to diminish the stigma that children and young people often feel is associated with seeking help.

Young people with a culturally and linguistically diverse background often raised concerns that discussions of mental health are not common and not encouraged in their families and communities. Many would like to see this change.

Indeed, stigma about seeking mental health support was frequently mentioned as a key issue for children and young people across NSW. For those in regional and rural areas, this was compounded by fewer available services and gossip in small communities.

While young people in ACYP's various consultations have reported mixed views about the impact of counsellors in schools (such as frustration with confidentiality or experiencing social barriers to accessing help), many still felt this was an important initiative and would like to see more mental health support provided in schools. Some felt the role of the counsellor should be to both provide support but also to address the stigma associated with seeking professional help. For instance, young people regularly recommend in ACYP consultations that all Year 7 students should be encouraged to see the school counsellor at the beginning of their high school years, to provide an initial introduction and overcome the early barriers associated with seeking help.

> '*Improve mental health facilities for the young particularly in high school and make them more accessible and affordable i.e. build them into schools*'
> Male, 17 years old

In ACYP's consultations, young people often raised suggestions about changes to the types of supports they feel are currently available to them. Views about service delivery are mixed and, naturally, depend on the circumstances of the individual. Some hope to engage virtually or have an anonymous conversation, however, conversations with young people experiencing lockdown as a result of COVID-19 revealed that some young people would like to be able to seek support face to face and telehealth was not their preferred delivery mode.

Some young people raised specific mental illnesses throughout consultations, though we note that we do not encourage young people to discuss their personal health experiences in a group context. In addition to experiences of general anxiety and depressive disorders, some young people spoke about external factors exacerbating mental illness, such as the impact of social media. Many note the impact of social pressures on self-esteem and a healthy self-image and a few linked this specifically to eating disorders.

Physical health

Perspectives on physical health were much less passionately held for most young people. However, when prompted to discuss the physical dimensions of wellbeing, young people raised the importance of sport, nutrition and the need for a greater understanding of the healthcare system (such as understanding how Medicare works).

Some young people noted the impact of cost on their ability to be physically healthy, such as the fact that healthy food was not always affordable. Others noted young people were unable to access gyms or sporting activities without associated costs.

Throughout consultations, when young people discuss their experiences with GPs, some feel their doctor is not able to engage or communicate well with young people. This has flow on effects for the young person's ability to access the help they need.

> *'Making sure that doctors have some sort of professionalism in regards to when talking about mental health. I went to a [local] Dr and when talking about my anxiety he told me to "calm down" and that it's "just life".'*
> *Female, 20 years old*

COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a major impact on the lives of children and young people. ACYP conducted regular research throughout 2020 and 2021 to understand the impact of the pandemic and associated lockdowns, and young people were clear in the major disruption it had caused in their lives in terms of their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing.

While some young people reported fear about the virus itself, most focused on the impact of lockdowns and other restrictions.

For many, lockdown was characterised by feelings of boredom and isolation, while others experienced heightened feelings of anxiety and distress. Many young people reported increased mental health concerns and we note there have been record numbers of young people accessing support through Kids Helpline and Lifeline services.

Consultations conducted throughout the vaccine roll out showed that many young people were positive about receiving the vaccine, however this positivity was coupled with concerns from a small number about the safety of the vaccine and fears it had been developed too quickly. Misinformation about vaccines was a source of concern for some and frustration for others and some young people recounted stories of fear and conspiracy theories from their family and friends.

How children and young people are tracking at the moment

On the whole, most children and young people tended to rate their physical health more positively than their mental health. There are a few groups consistently reporting lower scores than their peers on attributes of physical and mental wellbeing such as those identifying as LGBTQIA+, those with a disability, those who are not financially secure and those who have had contact with the justice system.

Two thirds of young people rated their own physical health positively (rating 7+ out of 10) while one in ten (11%) gave a negative rating (rating 0-4 out of 10).
- Those most likely to be positive about their physical health were:
  - 10-13 year olds (83%);
  - Those who viewed themselves as highly resilient (77%); and
  - Those who felt they were financially secure (66%).
- Those most likely to be negative about their physical health were:
  - Those who have had contact with the justice system (35%);
  - Those who felt financially insecure (27%); and
  - Those identifying as LGBTQIA+ (26%).

Just over half of children and young people (55%) rated their mental health positively (7+ out of 10) while two in ten (19%) gave a negative rating (0-4 out of 10).
- Those most likely to be positive about their mental health were:
    - 10-13 year olds (79%);
    - Those who viewed themselves as highly resilient (68%); and
    - Those who felt they were financially secure (56%).
- Those most likely to be negative about their mental health were:
    - Those identifying as LGBTQIA+ (50%);
    - Those with a disability (40%); and
    - Those who have had contact with the justice system (39%).

We also asked young people about some emotional measures. At that point in time, 59% described their level of happiness as 7 or more out of 10 while 17% rated between 0 and 4. Those most likely to give lower ratings were:
- Those who identified as LGBTQIA+ (38%);
- Those with a disability (30%); and
- Girls aged 14-17 (28%).

By contrast, levels of anxiety were much lower. 24% rated their level of anxiety as 7 or more out of 10 and 54% gave a rating between 0 and 4. Those most likely to experience higher levels of anxiety were:
- Those who identified as LGBTQIA+ (37%);
- Those who were financially insecure (35%); and
- Those with a disability (31%).

Young people were also given an opportunity to rate the extent to which they saw themselves as a resilient person. 57% reported high levels of resilience (7 or more out of 10) and 13% gave lower ratings (0-4 out of 10). Those most likely to give lower scores were:
- Those who identified as LGBTQIA+ (25%);
- Those with a disability (22%); and
- Those who have had contact with the justice system (19%).

A good standard of living

Children and young people are provided with the necessities they need to thrive.
Children and young people do not live in poverty and are provided with adequate services and resources to operate in society.

> *'Explore additional financial opportunities to get people into their own homes. Living in rental properties are expensive and cost of deposits for a home or unit to own is way too high for the majority of the population and what they are earning. This will help reduce homelessness also.'*
>
> *Female, 23 years old*

What we've heard from children and young people

Children and young people see the impact that a good standard of living has on different aspects of their lives, and even where young people had experienced a relatively good standard of living, they could empathise with those who had not and could see, for instance, the importance of a roof over their heads, a balanced and nutritious diet and access to comforts and amenities.

Our engagement included children and young people across the spectrum of experiences and each had unique insights into the importance of a solid foundation for a good standard of living. Key themes are outlined below.

Education, training and employment

Two elements of a good standard of living that children and young people felt were interconnected were the domains of education and employment. While these are explored in more detail in the *hope for the future* commitment area, children and young people often highlighted the importance of education, and future employment and paid work, as a stepping stone to achieving a good standard of living and being able to purchase the necessities.

Some young people commented that the cost of education can be expensive and at times prohibitive. They felt that young people needed to be provided with more access to the necessary resources to support their learning and education, such as textbooks, uniforms and laptops. They also spoke about needing greater information about the supports and scholarships available to them.

Young people also discussed the need for greater support to get a job and earn an income. This included practical skills around resume and cover letter writing, interview preparation and the softer skills around appropriate workplace behaviour and expectations. Young people also raised that they wanted to know what their rights were as employees and what was appropriate for their employer to expect.

Housing

> *'Financial issues: tertiary education and housing/renting is unrealistically expensive.'*
> *Female. 19 years old*

Children and young people often highlighted that access to safe, stable and affordable housing – whether it be for families, single parents, or young people living alone - is critical for a good standard of living. In a survey conducted in 2021 to inform the development of the Strategic Plan, most children and young people (92%) reported having a safe and stable place to live and sleep. Some children and young people that we spoke to in school consultations noted that this was not the reality for all children and young people in the community, and called for more housing options, crisis accommodation and support services for young people.

Young people who were transitioning out of the family home and trying to enter the housing market often said they were discriminated against because of their age, in comparison to those older people who might have higher disposable income or appeared to be a more preferable candidate. Many young people said there needed to be more information provided to support young people trying to enter the rental market. For example, in one consultation a young person highlighted that there was purpose-built affordable housing for young people built in some council areas, but many young people were unaware of it.

Young people who had lived experience of homelessness often spoke about the need for more wraparound and holistic supports to be available for young people. Examples of these services included; services focused on mental and general health, services supporting training and employment opportunities and supports around accessing government subsidies. They spoke about all of these aspects as being important to achieving a good quality of life and transitioning out of homelessness. They also spoke about the need for greater information in community about how to access these services.

Financial stability

Young people in our consultations commented that a good standard of living is sometimes dependant on their parents' social-economic status and that when families are struggling financially, this can put undue pressure on young people, even if self-imposed. As a result, some young people called for greater holistic support for young people and families who were struggling.

As young people looked to transitioning towards greater independence from family, many highlighted the need for supports to be available to young people living out of home.

The topic of financial instability was also raised in a number of our targeted consultations with children and young people who are socially excluded. For example, children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, felt stressed and anxious about their financial insecurity. Young people receiving social security payments reported difficulties covering their basic needs and said that meals were often skipped in order to pay for transport, school books or TAFE fees. Some young people also reported never having any money left over to "go to the movies or just do something fun." Young people reported the difficulties they encounter due to the inflexibility and ineligibility of the social security system, "if you miss an appointment with your welfare officer, your payment gets cut".

Mental and physical health

Children and young people discussed the importance of good physical and mental health, as central to a good standard of living. Whilst this is covered in more detail in the *health and wellbeing* commitment area, a number of young people spoke about the link between financial insecurity and reduced health outcomes.

Some children and young people spoke about the importance of proper nutrition and healthy living, and how this could impact wellbeing. For example, children and young people discussed the greater role that schools could play in providing nutritious food and breakfast programs, particularly for those who may not be able to afford it outside of school. Children and young people also expressed the importance of having access to green open spaces and other public spaces for recreation, exercise and play.

Children and young people also recognised that critical to a good standard of living was access to adequate healthcare. Some raised the issue of prohibitive costs of accessing some services such as mental health support plans, and this is further explored in the *health and wellbeing* commitment area. Within this context, some children and young people said that being able to access more youth friendly medical providers would make them feel more comfortable about seeking medical attention when they needed to, as there were often times when children and young people did not feel seen and heard by their health providers. One issue that was specifically raised was the need for GPs to be educated around how to work respectfully with young people who identify as LGBTQIA+.

The experiences of children and young people in rural and regional NSW

Children and young people from rural and regional communities had many similar experiences to those in metropolitan areas, but also spoke about additional challenges they faced in accessing a good standard of living.

Many spoke about needing access to reliable and affordable transport options – to enable them to get to education and training, employment, support services, places and opportunities to socialise, and sports and recreation activities. Children and young people recognised that access and affordability to transport for each of these domains had a specific connection to their standard of living. Through accessing education, training and employment, children and young people are gaining the necessary skills and experience to pursue a career in their chosen profession.

Children and young people appreciated the challenge of distance for those living in rural and regional NSW, which was especially apparent when it came to accessing support services to ensure their standard of living is adequate. For instance, where reporting for Centrelink and other social security payments specifies in person attendance is required, a lack of transport can significantly impact an individual's ability to meet these requirements.

> *'To provide more opportunities for young people to find jobs in the workplace and by increasing small regional towns and upgrading/ making it more modern by building new infrastructure or providing more jobs in the area.'*
>
> *Male, 15 years old*

Children and young people noted that the ability to partake in sport and recreation was critical for both their physical and mental wellbeing which directly impacted on their standard of living. For those in rural and regional communities, having the capacity to access these opportunities can be further complicated by a lack of transport and affordability around accessing this.

Another reported challenge was access to shops and services, both in terms of distance and delays in getting goods and products. These issues were particularly highlighted in consultations with children and young people following disasters. Whilst some noted an increased focus on supporting communities after these events, they also said that support quickly dissipated after communities appeared to recover – leaving long-term issues unresolved.

Access to good technology and internet is a challenge in rural and regional communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inequality of this digital divide. Those with outdated technology and limited data sources, reported that online learning and being able to socialise with peers during lockdown was a significant problem.

How children and young people are tracking at the moment

A quarter (25%) of the young people surveyed reported experiencing some financial difficulties (either just getting by or struggling to do so)

- Those living independently (31%) were more likely to be struggling financially than those dependent on parents (or guardians) (19%). This includes 8% of those living independently who were facing a lot of difficulty covering basic living expenses.
- Groups with higher rates of financial difficulty included those with a disability (39%), those who identify as LGBTQIA+ (38%), and those who have had interactions with the justice system (34%).

Most young people reported having a decent standard of living:

- 92% agreed they had a safe and secure place to sleep;
- 89% felt they had enough clothing and other day-to-day items;
- 85% said they were able to eat a healthy and balanced diet; and
- 85% reported having access to essential services and support.

- Those who were financially secure rated all of these 'standard of living' indicators significantly higher than those experiencing financial pressure. Among those struggling financially:
  - 80% agreed they had a safe and secure place to live and sleep;
  - 66% felt they had enough clothing and other day-to-day items;
  - 65% said they were able to eat a healthy and balanced diet; and
  - 67% reported having access to essential services and support.
- Those living independently rated each of these 'standard of living' indicators lower than those dependent on parents or guardians.
- Those most likely to give lower ratings for one or more of these indicators included:
  - Those who have had interactions with the justice system;
  - Those who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
  - Those who were neither studying or working.

Environments for joy and fun

Children and young people have spaces and opportunities to engage in activities for recreation and leisure.
These spaces are enjoyable, welcoming and safe.

What we've heard from children and young people

Children and young people value opportunities to play, have fun and enjoy themselves – whether that be going to cafes, concerts, galleries or movies, spending time in parks, playing sport or enjoying nature. In a 2020 ACYP Youth Week Survey, young people in NSW reported that three of the best parts of their life were 'having lots of activities to do and events to go to' (24%), 'access to outdoor and natural spaces' (17%) and 'having a good social life and connecting with friends' (29%).

Children and young people regularly told us that they wanted more spaces and opportunities to engage in fun activities and things to do. Whilst this is a theme that comes up across most consultations, including both metropolitan and regional areas, it was particularly prominent in consultations with children and young people which focused on the experience of disasters. In addition, children and young people who have a disability of any kind, are in youth justice, in OOHC or have recently arrived in Australia, often highlighted specific challenges and barriers in accessing activities and opportunities. Overwhelmingly, children and young people want safe spaces to have fun, to play, to study, but also just to be.

Activities and opportunities to have fun

> *'Improving opportunities to engage in fun activities and strengthening community bond.'*
> *Male, 20 years old*

In our Strategic Plan consultations, children and young people told us that they wanted more community events and a more diverse range of activities to be available. Some young people said they wanted more funding for local sports clubs so they can run more youth-focused programs, whilst other young people wanted more activities (other than sport) such as music, art, cooking, school holiday programs and school camps. Young people in regional areas reported that there were often lots of sporting activities available but not as many other options.

> *'More opportunities in our community for positive youth events and safe spaces for meeting friends.'*
> *Female, 12 years old*

When we spoke to children and young people about their experience of disaster, including bushfires, floods and drought, many spoke about the impact of disaster destroying facilities and cancelling events, and the desire for activities to be made available to them. Children and young people in youth justice, in out-of-home-care and experiencing homelessness have also told us that they want more access to programs and spaces to hang-out after hours and on the weekend. Some children and young people have told us that they want culturally tailored activities and programs. For example, Aboriginal young people said they would prefer programs to be presented by Aboriginal workers with a focus on connection to culture. Other children and young people have told us they want more opportunities to engage in activities with children and young people who are different to them. For example, young people from refugee backgrounds have told us that whilst they enjoyed activities and opportunities to socialise with young people like them, they also wanted to socialise with other young people.

Youth friendly and safe spaces

Children and young people have also told us they want spaces that are enjoyable, welcoming and safe.

In our Strategic Plan consultations young people told us that they often feel unsafe on public transport, in shops, in parks and other public spaces. They said this was, in part, related to infrastructure – such as poorly lit pathways and empty public spaces. They also felt unsafe because of other people in the community – for example they spoke about people being under the influence of drugs and alcohol in public spaces.

> 'Have more open and green spaces… and better connectivity – i.e. better transport, better walking tracks, safe places – even if that is more lights on pathways.'
>
> Female, 23 years old

Young people said they wanted more youth-specific spaces. They suggested that there should be more youth centres and spaces that were open for all young people to be able to relax and have fun in a safe space. For example, some young people said there should be more outdoor event spaces that offered a range of different initiatives aimed at young people – such as music, sport, art activities and cinemas. Others spoke about the need for services and youth-friendly spaces that were open at times that met the needs of young people in the community – such as being open later into the evening.

Children and young people often said there should be better utilisation of existing community spaces near them for a range of activities. They suggested that schools should be open during the weekend and in school holidays so young people could use those facilities, rather than having to build new ones. Children and young people also told us that more community centres and libraries should be used to run activities and have youth specific times for young people to come and relax in the space.

Improving accessibility

Some people said they were frustrated that even when spaces exist, they are still inaccessible for a variety of reasons. Children and young people said that transport, cost, lack of information and advertising, as well as the physical inaccessibility of some spaces were issues of concern.

Young people in regional areas said that the further you go out from a main town or city, the less transport options there were. When there were still some transport options available, children and young people reported that transport services needed to be more frequent and that they did not always feel safe.

Children and young people also told us that cost was sometimes a barrier to them being able to access a program or activity. They wanted more low-cost opportunities for young people and families. They spoke positively about government initiatives like the Creative Kids and Active Kids' voucher programs, as they allowed them to do activities that they wouldn't have been able to do previously.

Children and young people also raised their frustration that they didn't always know what events, activities and services were available in their local community. They wanted more information around what services and programs were available. They suggested that schools could play a role in communicating this information, and that there should be more posters and advertising on social media.

In consultations with children and young people who have a disability of any kind, regularly said they feel excluded from spaces and activities – often because of the inaccessibility of physical environment and other barriers. Young people said they wanted spaces to be designed in a way that was more inclusive and enabled all children and young people to participate.

Caring for the environment

While many of the conversations we had with children and young people are framed around their immediate experiences and needs, many young people also commented on the bigger picture and referenced issues that take a broader social lens. Children and young people often speak about the importance of caring for the environment and the natural world. When asked what advice they had for government, children and young people regularly said that they wanted the government to protect the environment, including by responding to climate change. Young people also report wanting more access to nature, including increased access to green public spaces including parks and walking trails.

> *'Take care of the environment and more outside places for kids in cities to play.'*
>
> *Female, 11 years old*

How children and young people are tracking at the moment

A majority (62%) of young people surveyed were satisfied with their ability to participate in fun activities.

- Satisfaction (rating 7 or more out of 10) was highest among:
    - Those aged 10-13 years (76%);
    - Those who consider themselves highly resilient (74%)
- Dissatisfaction (rating 0-4 out of 10) was highest among:
    - Those experiencing financial pressure (29%)
    - Those who identify as LGBTQIA+ (29%);
    - Those not working or studying (27%);
    - Those who have had contact with the justice system (24%);
    - Those with a disability (23%); and
    - Those who viewed themselves as having low resilience (23%).

However, young people were less satisfied (rating 7 or more out of 10)with the variety (44%) and quality (48%) of funactivities available to young people in their local area.
Those who were financially struggling, not working or studying, those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and those with a disability were least satisfied with both of these attributes.

Almost all young people surveyed reported taking part in sport or physical activity with some regularity with 79% doing so at least once a week.

- Those aged 10-13 years were most likely to exercise weekly, though this decreased with age.
    - 94% of males aged 10-13 exercised weekly, while 78% of males aged 18-24 exercised weekly.
    - 83% of females aged 10-13 years exercised weekly, while 70% of females aged 18-24 exercised weekly.
- Aside from age differences, weekly or more frequent exercise was highest among:
    - Those who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (88%); and
    - Those who also rated themselves as highly resilient (84%).
- Those most likely to say they only exercise every few months or less frequently included:
    - Those not currently studying or working (29%);
    - Those struggling financially (22%); and
    - Those who have had contact with the justice system (22%).

- Children and young people appear to have an awareness of the importance of exercise, in that those who exercise most frequently were also the most satisfied with their level of participation in sport or physical activity, while those who exercise infrequently were significantly less satisfied.

When we asked children and young people how safe they felt in particular spaces, most young people reported feeling safe (rating 7 or more out of 10) in education (university, TAFE or college, 81% and school, 79%) and work (81%) settings. Views varied slightly more in public spaces, though most still felt safe in online environments (70%) and around the local community (63%) and.

- Those who identify as LGBTQIA+ were more likely than other groups to feel unsafe (rating 0-4 out of 10) in public areas (22%); at school (18%) or at work (16%).
- Females aged 14-17 were more likely than other groups to feel unsafe online (17%).

Respect and acceptance

Children and young people are part of a community that supports them to be proud of their culture, diversity and individual identity.
They are free from discrimination, racism and structural violence.

What we've heard from children and young people

Children and young people told us they want to live in a community where children and young people of all ages, cultural backgrounds, religions, abilities and gender and sexual identities, are made to feel like they belong and have access to the services and supports they need to flourish.

In our consultations, children and young people told us about the far-reaching impact of discrimination on their lives - including a loss of trust, impact on education and employment, feeling unsafe and unwelcome. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, as well as young people who have had refugee or migrant experiences, and those who identify as culturally and linguistically diverse, have often spoken about the impact of racism and discrimination on their everyday lives – including the flow-on impact this has on their feelings of belonging and trust. Whilst children and young people with a disability have told us that discrimination can impact their education, training, employment and ability to navigate services and activities. Young women have told us that they often feel unsafe in public spaces, whilst young people who identify are part of the LGBTQIA+ community have spoken about feeling unwelcome. Overwhelmingly, children and young people have told us that discrimination has a detrimental impact on their lives and wellbeing.

> *'The main thing is that I am viewed as someone of equal status. That my background, my race, my religion doesn't affect who I am as a person.'*
> *Male, 21 years old*

> *'I want people to see me and not my physical limitations, not what I can't do. I want them to see what I can do.'*
> *Female, 20 years old*

Views on discrimination

Many young people told us that discrimination is not talked about enough, and that they sometimes feel as though adults don't listen when they raise issues. Children and young people often said that they feel as though their views are not taken seriously or considered because they are 'too young' and don't vote. Young people told us that they wanted adults to actively listen to what they are saying, and really respond to what is being said. Many young people also highlighted the importance of adults listening to the views of younger children as well.
Another key theme from the consultations is that children and young people want there to be less

bullying and to see more respect in schools. Children and young people have said they have a fear of being judged by their peers. In particular, they often reported feeling concerned about 'fitting in' and meeting a certain social status. Some young people said they felt as though they were being judged because of how much money their family had, or the postcode or area that they lived in. Young people who have a disability of any kind said bullying at school was a key concern for them, whilst young people who identified as LGBTQIA+ said they often felt discriminated against at school. Some people also spoke about bullying being broader than just peer-to-peer, and highlighted concerns about how they were viewed by teachers and the broader community. For example, some young people who identified as LGBTQIA+ spoke about fear of being judged and not accepted by some teachers and said this had a negative impact on their mental health.

Many young people raised the issue of social media sometimes being a space where discrimination occurred – however they noted that discrimination occurs in lots of spaces, with the digital world being an extension of their everyday physical environments (including school, community, transport and public spaces). In talking about the role of online spaces in relation to discrimination, many young people spoke about how social media platforms can often normalise bad behavior and bad language. Some also said there needs to be more attention focused on what information is being made available to young children in the mainstream media.

Children and young people also spoke about how young people's views can be influenced by several different spheres – including family, friends, school and broader community groups. A few young people spoke about the role of common interest clubs and groups (e.g. music, sewing, sport) in helping to build connections between different groups of people, and people outside of your family group. Others spoke about how particular cultural activities and groups which celebrated diversity in their community helped make them feel like they belonged and proud of their individual identity. Some young people also raised the issue of role models, and the need for young people to see examples of people being respected. Others said it was important that this generation of young people grew up with strong values around respect and acceptance, so they could be good role models for the next generation.

Importance of promoting diversity and inclusion

Another regular theme that we heard from children and young people is that beyond eliminating discrimination, there also needs to be a greater focus in both schools and the wider community on promoting diversity and inclusion. Children and young people acknowledged that there are some existing education and awareness raising efforts focused on these issues such as schools or communities holding regular events or days focused on celebrating diversity or highlighting a particular issue. Some young people spoke positively about these events, and said they helped them to feel safe and connected. Others raised concerns that events sometimes felt tokenistic. Young people's experiences of these events varied across schools and community, in terms of both the information provided and the amount of space they allowed for discussion of the issues. They suggested that awareness days would be more meaningful if schools and community groups provided more information and there was more space for open discussion about the meaning and background behind the day. Young people also said that, on a broader level, they wanted more focus on talking about the importance of respect and acceptance from a younger age.

Impact of discrimination on wellbeing

In ACYP's 2021 Youth Week survey, 34% of young people in NSW said that racism was one of the most important issues impacting young people. This figure was significantly higher amongst young people living in metropolitan areas (38%) and participants who identified as culturally and linguistically diverse (46%).

> *'Help stop discrimination and bullying as it effects people's well-being. My African friend was discriminated against and told me he want to kill himself. I stopped him and helped him...stand up to his bullies.'*
>
> *Male, 20 years old*

The link between discrimination, racism and overall health and wellbeing is an issue that is regularly raised by young people. For instance, in consultations with young people from refugee backgrounds, young people spoke about experiencing peer-to-peer discrimination and highlighted the impact that this behaviour has had on their mental health.

In ACYP's ongoing consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, discrimination and racism are also regularly raised as key issues. Some Aboriginal young people reported that peer groups at school are defined by race. Other Aboriginal young people spoke about homophobia, sexism and experiences of racism at school. Some Aboriginal young people also spoke about feeling as though they were targeted by police because of their race and said that some shopkeepers have stereotypes about Aboriginal young people. Many Aboriginal young people said that the behaviour and attitude of other people can often make them feel unwelcome. This included the person's tone of voice; being spoken down to; being excluded from activities and events; and simply negative attitudes towards young people.

Overall, children and young people said they wanted a greater focus on tackling discrimination, and ensuring that all children and young people feel respected and accepted.

How children and young people are tracking at the moment

Overall, a majority (around two-thirds to three-quarters) of young people surveyed told us that they felt respected and accepted in their everyday environments – although more so in workplaces and educational settings than in the general community.

However this was not the case for all young people:

- Only around half of females aged 14-17 years reported feeling respected and accepted at school and in the general community
- Those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and those with a disability and females aged 14-17 were more likely to to report not feeling respected and accepted (rating 0-4 out of 10) at school and in the general community. Those with disability also reported lower scores for the level of respect they receive at work.
- Those experiencing financial difficulties were more likely to report low scores for acceptance at work and also rated low scores for respect at university, college and TAFE and in their local community.
- Young people who had been in contact with the justice system also reported feeling less accepted in their local community.

One in three (33%) of those surveyed reported experiencing discrimination in the past year, with it occurring weekly for one in five young people. Appearance, ethnicity and gender were the most common reasons for discrimination.

- Discrimination was most likely to occur at school (70%), at work (45%) or in the community (42%)
- Overall, discrimination was most commonly related to appearance or weight (41%), ethnicity or skin colour (37%) or gender (30%)
- Those who identify as LGBTQIA+ (54%), those with a disability (47%) and those struggling financially (51%) were significantly more likely to have experienced discrimination
  - Those who identify as LGBTQIA+ who experienced discrimination said it was related to theirsexuality (72%), gender (52%), appearance (46%) or mental illness (35%)
  - Those struggling financially said discrimination occurred most often in relation to their appearance or weight (49%), ethnicity or skin colour (34%), mental illness (29%) or gender (26%).
  - Those with a disability said discrimination occurred most often in relation to their appearance (46%), gender (37%), mental illness (31%) or sexuality (29%). 24% said it was related to a disability or health issue (other than mental illness).
- Females (42%) were significantly more likely than males (17%) to experience gender-based discrimination, especially those aged 14 years or older