

Commissioner
for Children and
Young People

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Our approach to participation & engagement

A young woman with long, wavy brown hair is smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a blue and red striped tank top and a large silver hoop earring. The background is a lush, out-of-focus green garden with white flowers. The text 'Our approach to participation & engagement' is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font on the right side of the image.

Our approach to participation & engagement

Commissioner for Children and Young People

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an **independent statutory position**, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* 'the Act'.

Our approach to participation & engagement

South Australia is making good things happen for children and families, and thinking about how to best support children to learn and develop, realise their talents and take their place in our community. We know that by improving our children and young people's participation in decisions that impact on them is a great way to build a strong state.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) says children and young people have a right to have a say on all issues that affect them and for their views to be taken seriously. By improving our children and young people's participation in decisions that impact on them we can strengthen our democratic institutions and structures and build a strong state for the future of all children and young people.

Whilst we probably all agree with the sentiment of Article 12; implementing a change to enable the mainstream participation of children and young people in decisions about their lives involves a profound and radical change. This change is about the status of children in our community and the nature of relationships between adults and children. For adults it requires us to move beyond thinking of children and young people as simply the focus of our care and protection. We need to start believing in children and young people as capable citizens who are able to meaningfully contribute to the decisions that impact on their lives.

To create this change we need to work at many levels. Changing the way systems are governed, managed and implemented is complex and no single action will drive the change. What we need are a number of smaller changes that result in the empowerment of children and young people across many areas including laws, systems and services.

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Mostly however it is a values shift to put children and young people front and centre in our thinking, and to **include them in shaping and contributing to the services that impact on them**. It seems logical that systems and services that directly impact children and young people should involve them in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of those services intended to meet their needs. In many other areas this is now the norm, e.g. health carers give feedback on health systems and companies invest in market research and focus groups before any product launch. So what would it take to think of children and young people as stakeholders and put in place similar mechanisms for them to actively and meaningfully participate in decisions in the areas of health, education, protection and justice?

Involving children and young people in the design of services and systems makes sense for individuals, services and the community as a whole.

Individually children and young people benefit from active participation by developing greater awareness of their rights, improved self-confidence as well as heightened self-esteem and leadership skills.

Services shaped by the people who use them are more effective, efficient and responsive. Building in the participation of children and young people is therefore more likely to deliver better and more sustainable outcomes.

At a community level, participation is the building block of democracy. By empowering children and young people to make decisions about issues that affect their lives, the lives of others and the environment, this reinforces children and young people's roles as stakeholders and citizens who deserve to be heard. Participation creates active citizens who are part of thriving civil societies.

Together we need to work on a range of actions to address the social and cultural changes needed to improve children and young people's participation including:

- **Changing** attitudes towards participation of children and young people
- **Identifying** champions of participation across the community
- **Developing** ways to internalise systems within institutions and organisations so that children's voices are heard
- **Supporting** community to embrace a culture of participation.

In order to design a way to build in the participation of children and young people across business and community we need the support of our young community leaders and advocates.

By encouraging decision makers to understand the values and views and experiences of young people, there can be genuine dialogue and the creation of pathways for ongoing discussion. What better way to respect young South Australian's than by valuing and including their input today to provide ongoing platforms of engagement so they can be flourishing and active citizens able to design and enjoy the benefits of a creative and exciting State.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and create opportunities to experience authentic participation in the adult world. The Commissioner is working with a number of groups on this agenda and is developing ways of including children and young people in their workplace processes and practices.

To do this in a meaningful way we have identified a model supporting engagement and participation of young people through direct engagement with existing youth organisations and programs. The principles underpinning our work is a commitment to:

- **Strengthen** structures already established by young people
- **Develop** new representative models in partnership with young people based on mutual interest and needs
- **Respect, acknowledge and amplify** the advocacy agendas established by young people.

A direct relationship with youth organisations and leadership programs is a critical part of how the Commissioner directly seeks the voices of children and young people on policy process and practice and represents their diverse voices.

Through these partnerships and relationships the Commissioner:

- **Engages** more children and young people than would be possible through a traditional advisory structure
- **Creates** new mechanisms for children and young people who have been unrepresented to have a voice and influence
- **Supports** youth led organisations to meet their youth engagement and empowerment objectives.

The Commissioner is working with a number of organisations to support their capacity to engage directly with young people.

Specifically we:

- **Provide resources** to organisations that are youth led, have a youth participation and empowerment approach to programs and services and/or provide youth leadership programs to extend their reach.
- **Support groups** of young people with a shared interest or issue to build representative participation structures and act as a broker with groups they seek to influence.
- **Partner** with existing youth leadership development programs and advocacy groups to reach decision makers.
- **Connect** organised groups of young people together to build networks and alliances, share resources and expertise.

The Commissioner is working with a number of organisations to support their capacity to engage directly with young people. This includes developing a youth governed and managed grant funding program in the creative arts industry, coaching community leaders on connecting to young people and including them as stakeholders, and developing a social media platform to showcase young thinkers, makers and doers.

Our current work includes:

- **Working with UN Youth SA** to extend their reach into regional areas and working collaboratively on understanding issues of mutual interest
- **Supporting Regional Advisory Groups** including Goyder, Barossa and Mt Gambier to directly connect to other local communities and advocate for issues of significance
- **Partnership with Carclew** in a participatory arts administration project for 12 – 15 year olds to develop skills in commissioning public art and administering an arts funding round
- **Get Around It** – a social media platform to showcase young thinkers, makers and doers
- **Children's Disability Services Collective** – in partnership with the children's disability sector the Commissioner will engage directly with children and young people with a disability to inform the sector on what they want from services, and how they want to participate in an ongoing way
- **Aboriginal Youth Advisory Project** – a feasibility project to determine the need and desire for an Aboriginal Youth Council in SA from the perspectives of Aboriginal young people.

Provide

- Space to gather
- Views sought
- Listened to
- Acted on



Participation



Outcome

- Engaged and valued children and young people

Giving young people a significant role in exercising community leadership by influencing decision making recognises that young people are not only our future leaders, they are leading today.

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