

27 March 2019

The Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Email: preventative_policy@health.gov.au

Re: National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People

Dear Minister

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* (the Act) is to advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also my role to ensure that the State, at all levels of government satisfies its international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Under the Act each State authority must, in carrying out its functions or exercising its powers, protect, respect and seek to give effect to the rights set out in the CRC.

To undertake this role, over the last 23 months I have spoken to thousands of children and young people on issues that are important to them. Over this time, they told me how important health and wellbeing is to them. In one survey, children and young people told me about aspects of their lives in relation to their hopes for the future; it is interesting to note that health, fairness, education and environment were amongst some of the most prominent issues they considered.

The National Action Plan For the Health Of Children and Young People (the Plan) provides a vision for a South Australia that includes many aspects of the things that children and young people have told me are important to them. However, this Plan does not appear to fully implement its own principles, making its foundation weak. Important principles include "prevention and early intervention" and "environment", which is what children I have talked to say are very important in respect to their health.

In light of this I would like to make the following recommendations, based on a contemporary understanding of rights and some of the thoughts and views from children and young people.

1. The Plan should recognise the fundamental rights of children and young people

The Plan should ensure that it protects, respects and gives effect to the rights of children and young people. Under the CRC children and young people have:

- A right to develop healthily and live a full life (Article 6)

- To be heard and considered in matters that affect them (Article 12) and a right to receive and share information (Article 13)
- To live in a clean environment free from the dangers and risks that environmental pollution poses, including from climate change (Article 24)
- A right to relax, to play and to participate in community culture (Article 31).

It is important that the Plan accurately reflects and gives effect to these rights by articulating them in the document.

2. The partners and stakeholders that will be used to implement the Action plan makes no mention of the voice of children and young people

Children and young people are being effectively excluded as a stakeholder in decisions that affect their lives, in violation of the CRC. The executive summary of the Draft Action Plan notes that “the improvement of health outcomes for children and young people is something which can flourish only through effective collaboration made by a wider range of partners”, none of these include children and young people.

Children and young people have a right to be heard and considered in matters that affect them (Article 12), otherwise implementers will not get children’s buy-in or trust and they simply will not use the services that will be provided to them. Children and young people have repeatedly told me how important it is for their voices to be heard and respected.

“Being listened to – having a continuous (continuous) discussion on issues involving young people.”

“Change: Improve ability of youth to affect gov (government) policies that affect their future – state and national.”

Children and young people can be at the forefront of leading improvements in their own lives and to not include them will be an opportunity missed in the implementation of the Plan. To be successful, it is imperative that the Plan includes focussed strategies on how children and young people will be engaged and how they will be able to contribute and participate in its implementation ensuring their buy-in.

There are examples of this type of child-led engagement and participation in the health domain happening around the world. One highly successful example of children and young people leading a health education and prevention program is from Denmark called “Lekepatruljen” (Play Patrol). The program was developed by experts with the input of children and young people to reduce obesity and cancer risk by encouraging those not normally active to become more active during break times at school. The program is led by children and young people in their environment utilising peer to peer learning which has also resulted in other health benefits. Due to its immense success it exceeded the target population by 130% and has been a feature in a large number of Danish schools since 2005.

3. The Plan should have an understanding of what health and wellbeing means for children and young people

If this plan is to be successful adults must understand what health and wellbeing means to children and young people and that it is much more than the provision of health services.

In 2018, I spoke to 61 children and young people aged between 3 and 22 years about what healthy means. In these consultations children and young people recognised that health was connected to how they felt (feeling safe, happy, strong), what they had access to (sports, being active) and having access to healthy food, all social determinants:

“A healthy kid is rich, rich means having a family that loves me, everything I need, a roof over my head, friends that care about me.”

“A healthy kid makes good choices, good choices for themselves, be in control of themselves, choose to be active”

“Keeping a positive mind set, thinks positive, believing you can do it”

What is important to note is that children’s understanding of what health is, is backed up by evidence and is somewhat aligned to the Plan’s “Healthy, Safe and Thriving” principles. There are many social and environmental determinants to mental and physical health.¹ A child’s “social position impacts upon daily living conditions and individual health-related factors, ultimately resulting in differences in health and wellbeing outcomes such as life expectancy, mortality rates, morbidity rates and self-rated health status²”.

4. The Plan should detail how to engage with children and young people in regional and remote areas so that this plan can tailor services to wrap around children and young peoples’ needs.

I commend that actions to be undertaken in rural and remote areas including the expansion of counselling services and improving access for all Australia’s young people. However, the principles that are important to children and young people and contained in the Action plan appear to be neglected in this section, including “prevention and early intervention” and “environment”.

In my recent Hopes and Dreams consultation³ I spoke to 611 children in eight regions across South Australia about their hopes and dreams in their communities. Hopes and dreams are important for children and young people as it is imperative to their health, both physical and mental. Children who have hopes and feel connected to families and community are more likely to be productive citizens when they grow up.

But what is overwhelming for all children in all regions is wanting to belong to their community and to feel connected to their community and their peers. They want to be

¹ Including by the World Health Organisation, see https://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/

² Moore, T., McDonald, M. & McHugh-Dillon, H. (2014). Early childhood development and the social determinants of health inequities: A review of the evidence. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and the Royal Children’s Hospital.

³ Connolly H., Hopes & Dreams Report (2019), SA Commissioner for Children and Young People, Adelaide, South Australia

given opportunities to engage in their community, such as being able to play sport or be part of having places where they can be creative (in the arts, drama, etc.) and have the ability to get to these locations independently. Further, they want to feel proud of their community and be active contributors to it. Although your plan recognises that children and young people should be included, there are no actions as to how this could be done.

In respect to asks in relation to health services, the needs of children and young people differ from region to region and therefore the Plan cannot implement the same services for every regional area. Services need to be tailored to each region's particular circumstances. Children and young people will be important contributors to this process. In my conversations with these groups I found children and young people asked for different services in different regions, including:

- The Riverland - GPs that were experienced in working with young people and more female GPs.
- Yorke Peninsula - more doctors, private specialists and sexual health doctors and a better hospital so there was less need to fly to Adelaide.
- Eyre and the Western regions - more mental health services which are free and easy to access.
- Mid-Murray - to play more sports to stop obesity.

5. Expanding parenting support for families especially living with adversity.

I commend the expansion of early intervention programs to prevent adverse health conditions. Providing vulnerable families in need with better supports, if successfully provided, will improve outcomes for children and young people. However, children and young people have told me there are other opportunities for themselves and their parents to get the support they need earlier. This includes:

- Equipping parents and young people with information about mental health issues so that the young person and their friends can get the right help at the right time. In my conversations with young people they have observed that the increase in awareness in mental health has not helped to grow empathy towards people who are doing it tough. They talk about the normalising of everyone self-diagnosing, and use of language like depression and anxiety having the opposite effect. It is now a case of... 'well it can't be that bad if everyone has it'. Therefore, when you have serious mental health issues, people expect you to just get over it and cope like everyone else. That means those who need treatment are seen as weaker, which has a stigmatising impact.⁴
- Providing services for children and young people that are just not on-line services. Children and young people have told me that although they access some services online, it is still important to them talk to real people and have relationships with real people.

⁴ See my Medium Article, "Mental Health: what children and young people have told me they need from us", <https://medium.com/@ccypsa/mental-health-what-children-and-young-people-have-told-me-they-need-from-us-8ee68a14092a>.

6. The plan needs to recognise that environmental factors are as important as social factors in relation to their long-term health

Environmental factors are as important as social factors for children and young people's health and wellbeing and are a big concern to them. The plan mentions improving water and sanitation, but it does not articulate how or what actions it will take in relation to pollution and the adverse effects of climate change that impacts children and young people's health.

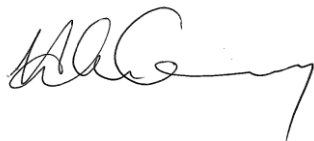
"The climate – I care about having a safe climate because I want communities to be safe from extreme weather events."

"Education on how to be environmentally friendly, without a healthy and clean environment future generations will not be able to live life to the fullest."

I understand that this is an intergovernmental issue, but it should be recognised and actions should be undertaken by the whole of government to address the multitude of negative impacts that climate change and pollution has on the community.

I hope that these recommendations and contributions are able to lead to the proactive involvement and participation of children and young people, and a plan that delivers the best possible outcomes for them. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People