

Advocacy Priorities for South Australia's Children & Young People



Key Issues

1. Take action to address climate change and ensure Australia meets the commitments made under the Paris Agreement to reduce emissions by 2030, rebuilding hope and optimism in this generation of children and young people so they can feel confident they have a future.

Under Article 24 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, *for children to stay healthy they have the right to good quality healthcare, clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment.*

South Australia's children and young people are worried that pollution and plastics in particular are having a negative impact on their environment and their health.

They understand that renewable energy is an alternative that will minimise the impact of fossil fuels on global warming. They believe the federal government's current policies and practices are putting our environment at risk, contaminating food, air and water. They also believe this is placing an increasing burden on our health care sector.

They know that the cleaner and healthier the environment is, the healthier and more productive all people are.

"The government needs to address things such as climate change and realise this isn't science fiction; it's real life and if we don't do anything about it soon, it will be too late."

Male 17 – Whyalla

"I want coal industries to be replaced by renewables so children, especially the poor, are not affected by future climate change; so indigenous children can remain on country [...] The most affected by these industries will be the least privileged, ...it's vital."

Female 16 – Mannum

2. Create a representative body, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide solutions that build trust and respect.

Under Article 30 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, *a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.*

Data shows our 'Closing the Gap' targets have only marginally improved over the last 12 years, despite public support for this campaign remaining strong. Children and young people want all their peers to have the same opportunities and outcomes that they do. To ensure outcomes for the next generation are positive, innovative solutions involving this generation are needed now. Government needs to recognise the important role culture plays in shaping identity. By creating a national independent representative body, led by Australia's First Nations, we will cultivate positive relationships based on mutual respect and trust that will help to eliminate Aboriginal disadvantage from our society.

"More Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander education in our schools – we learn many things about the first fleet and Aboriginal culture, from non-Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people. I think more speakers could come to schools to talk about their personal experiences. Aboriginal culture is the oldest culture and should be treasured."

Female 13 – Adelaide

3. Stop criminalising childhood – increase the minimum age of criminal responsibility from ten (10) years to fourteen (14) years.

Many people across our community are not aware that in South Australia children as young as ten (10) can be gaoled. Being 'tough on crime' does not work.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that *'the minimum age for criminal responsibility be set at 12 years or higher'*.

Evidence overwhelmingly shows that locking up child offenders does not address the reasons for their offending. Although governments recognise children need to be protected – creating laws that prohibit them from smoking, drinking, driving, and signing contracts – locking children up in gaol is still deemed appropriate but it is well established that locking children up leads to adverse health, social and economic outcomes for individuals, their families and their extended networks. Statistics clearly show the majority of children who are gaoled become a burden to their community for the remainder of their lives. Our political representatives should be investing in solutions that support diversion and rehabilitation of young offenders in ways that do not involve them being gaoled, and certainly not prior to a minimum age of 14.

"[To] reduce [the] youth crime rate – [take a] different approach – a different way to talk to youth."

Male 18 – Port Augusta

"They forget you are human – we are all still people."

Male 17 – Murray Bridge

"More support for children with disabilities. Need more support to get into a job... find it hard to do simple things without [a] proper introduction. Really good at computers... if you can tell me [the] instruction[s] I will do."

Female 17 – Ceduna

"For children with disabilities to have very nice assistance and a special place at school to stay."

Male 13 – Port Pirie

4. Expand the NDIS to allow South Australia's children and young people living with disability to access education within our schools.

Under Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child *'children who have any disability should receive special care and support so that they live a full and independent life.'*

There are many children with disability currently falling through the gaps between federal and state systems, most of which tailor support that fulfils the needs of adults, retrofitting this inadequately to children. This approach results in delivery of substandard services that impact negatively on all concerned, but particularly on the child involved. No child should be excluded from school simply because federal and state policies and practices do not align with each other. Our NDIS should ensure schools receive the support they need to make "reasonable adjustments" that ensure every child with a disability can access the education they are entitled to.

“My best friend, she helped me fight my depression.”

Female 14 – Adelaide Hills

“[We need] more community youth groups/mental health services which are free and can be accessed easily.”

Female 17 – Whyalla

“Friends – keep me mentally happy [...] [they are] someone to lean on”

Female 15 – Riverland

5. Invest in the creation of resources that are co-designed by young people for young people living with mental health issues, which recognise the invaluable support their friends and family members provide.

With the growth in emotional intelligence occurring across our society, we are gaining a greater understanding of how our minds work. We now have a generation of young people who have the capacity to describe their feelings and experiences more adequately. They also show a willingness to share what they've learnt with their mates when they ask for help to manage mental health issues that arise. This means, however, that many young people are trying to support their peers whilst simultaneously dealing with their own health issues, leading these informal support networks to be overstretched.

Young people talk about the barriers they face in accessing professional help. They describe many situations where they are much more likely to turn to a friend or family member for help, rather than to their school or a professional. Friends and family need access to resources that have been designed by young people for young people that can assist when these informal yet vital 'first responders' are approached.

6. Make the family court more child-centred and friendly.

Governments should recognise that those most affected by a relationship breakdown between two adults are usually their children. Children often live across two homes and can become a buffer between their parents.

Recommendations from the Australian Law Reform Commission's 2017 review of Australia's Family Law system should be accepted and implemented as soon as possible, especially those around placing the interests of children first.

Much more needs to be done to ensure children have a voice in family law proceedings.

Governments need to invest in development and provision of more support services specially designed for children. We must provide children with the support and resources they need to work through what is usually a very difficult and unsettling time. This will reassure children that their feelings and opinions are valued and respected and that what they would like is being taken into consideration when outcomes that impact on them are being determined.

“Children are still seen as possessions [...]... they are seen as if [because] they are a child, they can't have an opinion. [...] they [do] have opinions and emotions which are very real.”

Female 17 – Mount Gambier

“When an agreement cannot be reached and the best interests of children are no longer at heart, it's just a competition. Someone who has no emotional attachment needs to step in and take charge.”

Male 17 – Mount Gambier

“Dear parlement (Parliament), I think that you should have more places for children to go when they are afraid or scared in the country.”

Male 11 – Barossa

“[Provide] more funds to help out less fortunate children with [a] license, housing, food and financial support.”

Female 15 – Adelaide

“Helping and supporting others to ensure they don't have to go through what I've been through.”

Male 16 – Riverland

7. Commit to programs that aim to break the cycle of disadvantage by helping young people within families who experience intergenerational unemployment, find meaningful work.

Under Article 26 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, *children have the right to receive assistance from governments if they are poor or in need.*

Many of our children and young people live in low socio-economic circumstances where their families are locked into entrenched, intergenerational disadvantage. In these situations no one in their family has, or is likely to be offered regular paid work.

To have any chance of change children and young people in disadvantaged families need access to mentors and resources that are tailored to their specific situation and needs. Government at all levels must commit to implementing programs that address the financial, behavioural and systemic barriers that exist for those who find themselves part of a disadvantaged family.

To allow families to break free of the cycle of disadvantage, incentives (not punishments) need to be introduced, particularly those that address youth underemployment and unemployment. Finding jobs for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will provide genuine relief in the short term while simultaneously cultivating ongoing opportunities for success.

8. Work with large industry and small to medium enterprises to create a career information hub specifically for young people (and their parents and carers) enabling them to understand where future job opportunities are likely to come from and what they need to do in order to attain them.

Industry and businesses are rapidly and radically challenging our traditional pathways to work. A central independent information hub that demystifies our future career ecosystem will enable our young people to navigate their career choices more confidently.

A career hub showing the myriad pathways, approaches and skills that can be attained will also provide better support for parents, carers and guardians, whom students often turn to for advice with career choices. This is particularly important at Year 9 and 10 school levels, when subject choices can either expand or limit access to future study and career options. Rethinking our approach to careers and job readiness in general, will enable

us to develop an entrepreneurial mindset that is less dependent on being offered a job and more dependent on creating a job that suits individual interests, circumstances and abilities. This will ensure our young people can adapt more readily to the changes that occur throughout various stages of their lives.

“There is not much information about apprenticeships in schools, and parents can’t give that information.”

Male 16 – Adelaide

“There is a lack of pathways from volunteering and internships into paid employment. We need to address this.”

Female 16 – Adelaide

“[We need more] clubs – chess clubs, technology clubs, gaming clubs, art classes/groups.”

Female 16 – Barossa

“[We want] a place for groups of kids to hang out without access to money.”

Male 15 – Riverland

9. Task Infrastructure Australia with developing a model that will deliver youth specific infrastructure to our regional communities.

Australia’s children and young people are proud of where they live. They feel good about what is around them and care about how visitors perceive their towns and regions. But they need more youth specific and friendly infrastructure that will support their development and inspire their career aspirations.

Infrastructure specifically designed to meet the needs of young people includes investing in creating places and spaces in which they can gather, express themselves and see themselves being positively reflected within their local communities. This kind of infrastructure helps support development of a personal identity while also contributing to building regional sustainability. Investing in youth specific infrastructure sends children and young people the clear message that they are valued and important members of their local communities.

10. Initiate a national innovation challenge focussed on finding new and creative solutions to affordable and sustainable regional transport options that children and young people can access independently.

The lack of public transport, particularly in regional areas, places a significant burden on families, limiting and restricting their lives in ways communities in metropolitan centres take for granted. Regional young people in particular are impacted by a lack of transport infrastructure and are well-known to be the highest cohort affected. Often their only option is to rely upon parents and carers to be available to take them where they need to go. When this isn’t possible they can’t commit to group or team activities that would benefit them in myriad ways.

If regional young people had greater access to affordable transport they would not feel as dependent, isolated or limited in their choices. It would also enable them to seek part-time work, enjoy recreation activities in their own preferred timeframes, and increase their overall wellbeing and sense of independence. This ‘connectedness’ with those of their own age across their community is vital for them to thrive.

“Need public transport [...] for people whose parents work or can’t get [to a] place.”

Female 13 – Barossa

“You can’t get a job outside of the [Adelaide] Hills unless you have your license (better public transport please).”

Female 17 – Adelaide Hills

WHO ARE WE? South Australia’s Commissioner for Children and Young People has a mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* to advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also the Commissioner’s role to ensure that the State, at all levels of government, fulfils its international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Please Note: All quotes appearing in this document have been selected from notes written by South Australian children and young people in documented conversations held with SA Commissioner Helen Connolly on ‘Listening Tours’ held throughout 2017 and 2018.

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