

The voice of experience; the young people asking for change in SA's Youth Justice system

Young people aged 14 – 21 years, all with a lived experience of South Australia's youth justice system, have recommended eight key changes to significantly improve the system from their point of view.

The recommendations form part of *Making Change in Youth Justice – A User's Guide to building a better South Australian youth justice system*, launched today by South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly.

The young people's recommendations include addressing cell hygiene, reducing court waiting times, supplying easy to understand information about the people and procedures young people will face, and arrangement of the courtroom to be less intimidating. They say implementing these changes would go a long way to achieving better outcomes for young people in the State's youth justice system.

They also said unrealistic bail conditions that set them up to fail and fines being issued to young people with no source of income were key areas of concern. These need to be seriously re-examined by those with the power to make positive change, as a part of an improvement plan for youth justice.

Commissioner Connolly worked closely in collaboration with the young people through a 'proof of concept' project undertaken over a nine month period that placed them front and centre throughout, providing them with opportunities to advise on system change while also being supported to develop leadership skills.

The Australian Red Cross supported the young people to participate. Working alongside the Commissioner and her team, they provided the practical supports essential in allowing participants to overcome real and present social, emotional and financial barriers to participation.

Those involved had experienced significant periods of detention as juveniles and young adults, and were well placed to share their views on what needed to change. All participants had faced considerable challenges throughout their lives. Few had ever been given an opportunity to have their views heard. None had been asked for ideas about ways to improve the youth justice system or to have input into decisions being made about them.

Young people said that because of the circumstances that led to their offending behaviour they had been 'written off'. They felt adults had assumed they had nothing to contribute of any value, and that their rights didn't matter as much as other peoples. Being involved in the

Making Change in Youth Justice project, gave them hope that they could make change for other young people who might come into contact with the Youth Justice system so they did not have to experience what they went through.

A video summary of the project is available here: <https://youtu.be/9PqEXUD5uec>

Quotes attributable to Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly:
I have seen the power of young people collectively coming up with solutions to complex issues they face. When young people can participate in designing solutions to problems they face, they feel empowered to make a difference. Implementation of the recommendations they've made will help to restore their confidence in the system. It also sends a strong message that they can contribute to making real change that will have a positive impact on the lives of other children and young people; the main reason the young people agreed to participate in the first place.

Quotes attributable to South Australia Chief Justice Chris Kourakis

The Making Change in Youth Justice (MCYJ) project trialled a concept which promises to be a powerful tool for change. In the voices of the participants it shows that "teamwork" and a passion to "make a difference" shared by youth with a "lived experience of the justice system" can produce practical recommendations for change which make the justice system a "safer and fairer" place for children. It is time for those of us who manage and administer the system to listen and to engage in the MCYJ process.

Background: South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly, is responsible for promoting and advocating for the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people across South Australia.

For more information about the work of the Commissioner for Children and Young People and to download a copy of the Making Change in Youth Justice user guide visit: www.ccyp.com.au/reports/ccyp-reports

Media Contact

Sharon Cleary, Senior External Relations and Communications Advisor

M: 0407 990 983 | E: sharon.cleary@sa.gov.au