

29th May 2020

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For the attention of the members of the Voluntary Strategy Partnership Board

Volunteering Strategy for SA: Beyond 2020

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, it is my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* (the Act) to promote and advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia.

Under the Act, State authorities must seek to give effect to the rights set out in the CRC. It is part of my role to ensure that the State, at all levels of government, satisfies its international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Article 12 of the CRC gives children the right to be heard in decisions and matters that affect their lives. Ensuring that young people have opportunities to express their views freely and to have their views taken seriously requires a significant shift in how society views children and young people in our community. Rather than simply being the focus of care and protection, children and young people are capable and active citizens who are experts in their own lives.

Since becoming Commissioner, children and young people's voices have shaped my decisions, including my five year strategy and the issues I address. I have spoken with thousands of children and young people about their hopes and dreams and the issues that are important to them. Overwhelmingly, they tell me that they want to help others, be involved with community, try new things, meet new people and have a say on issues and matters that affect their lives.

Children and young peoples' primary motivation to volunteer is to help others, especially to help others who are more vulnerable. This has been a consistently raised theme for children and young people. Helping others, doing something positive and being an active member in their community rates in the top ten things children want to do.

Many young people appreciate the benefits of volunteering both at a personal level and at a broader community level. These benefits range from learning and experiencing new things, meeting new and like-minded people and feeling a real sense of purpose to the knowledge and satisfaction that comes from contributing time and energy towards a cause that is bigger than oneself, that helps others, “makes a difference” or “gives back” to the community in some way.

“Seeing what positive results your work brings, a sense of purpose, learning skills that help you give back better and meeting like-minded people”.

Young people also see volunteering as a way to develop life skills that can prepare them for work and help them feel prepared for adulthood. They want to be equipped with skills to help them be active and informed citizens and plan for the future.

However, there are significant challenges – including structural and cultural barriers – that make it difficult for young people to start or to continue volunteering. These challenges include a lack of information and awareness about the opportunities available, the costs of volunteering in terms of time and money, issues with transport and misconceptions, and stigma that undermine the capacity and commitment of children and young people.

These concerns and issues need to be recognised so that South Australia’s Volunteering Strategy (the Strategy) can be developed to meet the needs of these young people. This will result in a win-win situation: with organisations experiencing a potential increase in young people recruited to volunteering and young people developing the skills they need to be active citizens.

Young people want adults, schools and governments to be more innovative and proactive in connecting primary and secondary school education with higher education, industry, and other education and training opportunities, to support the development of “real life” skills and knowledge that young people see as relevant and important to their futures.

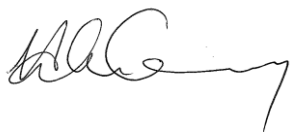
“Better prepare those in/leaving high school for the workforce and life after school. Teach more about modern life skills.”

"We don't learn about real life things, therefore when situations occur we are unaware and more vulnerable"

It is clear that children and young people have thought a lot about the key issues that affect them and it is clear that they have ideas and solutions. It is our responsibility to listen to them and to actively engage them as key stakeholders in the governance and implementation of this Strategy. I hope you find their insights useful.

If you have any questions or if you would like to discuss anything further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People

Addressing the barriers to volunteering: What children and young people say

Including children and young people as active stakeholders in the development and implementation of this strategy

The Student Volunteering Working Group appears to be a positive initiative that engages children and young people in the development of this Strategy, but thought should also be given to those children whose voices are not normally heard. The best way to value young volunteers is to value and actively listen to the voices and contributions of young people themselves. Indeed, a lack of voice appears to be a barrier to volunteering for young people. As one young person put it organisations should:

“Design volunteering programs in a way that suits the needs of volunteers rather than just the needs of the organisation.”

To successfully achieve this, there needs to be a greater understanding of the motivations and experiences of young people and young volunteers, including the challenges and barriers that they face. This must begin with children and young people being actively engaged as key stakeholders in the governance of this Strategy.

Engaging and empowering children and young people as key stakeholders in this Strategy will lead to a better understanding of young people’s motivations and experiences of volunteering. This deeper understanding will enable schools, governments and organisations to address the barriers that young people face, as well as the myths and misconceptions that reinforce these barriers. It will also provide the right support and the kind of inclusive and safe environment that not only fosters motivation and participation but also promotes the rights, wellbeing and best interests of children and young people in line with the CRC.

Accessible information that is child and young people friendly

Many children and young people find it hard to access information about the kinds of volunteering opportunities that are available and suitable to them, let alone how to feel confident and informed enough to get involved.

“I am someone who would love to volunteer and try to make a difference except I don’t have the courage or knowledge to”

“they [young people] don’t know where to go or what to do”

Children and young people want to know “where to go” and “what to do”, and they talk about having a place they can visit – either offline or online – to learn about options and opportunities relevant to them.

“make it easier to sign up”

“Have a government website with collated info about places to volunteer, maybe with filters like location, interests of the volunteer and skills of the volunteer”

It is important that this information is targeted, relevant, easy to find and easy to understand. Young people have highlighted the usefulness of being able to filter information to find options that are relevant and suitable for them and their interests rather than information that is too general and vague.

Children and young people tell me that there is a lack of awareness of the benefits of volunteering and that efforts to promote volunteering should highlight the multiple short-term and long-term, personal and community benefits of volunteering.

“Show them the benefits of it - what they can get out of it and what those they help get out of it”

Efforts to promote and sustain volunteering would benefit from emphasising the link between individual interests and volunteering opportunities, as well as where volunteering opportunities might lead, including the link to paid employment. Children and young people have consistently told me that they lack clear information about how particular interests and skills are linked to different education and employment pathways.

“Other benefits like positive job references and training opportunities also help.”

Time, transport and costs: the need for flexibility and clarity

In addition to the difficulties of finding opportunities that are accessible and suitable, children and young people also struggle to find time and energy for volunteering in between their commitments to study and homework, family responsibilities, paid work and other activities.

“Time which most feel they don’t have enough of between school, family, friends, extracurricular, jobs, etc. Also, lack of knowledge and understanding about where they can easily volunteer near them”

For many young people, the financial cost of volunteering and the prospect of a loss of income is a barrier to participation. Issues with transport, including access to and the cost of getting to and from volunteering opportunities, are also significant.

“Wanting to work to save for a car or to move out”

These issues highlight the need for flexibility and clarity around time commitments and role expectations, meaning and boundaries. Children and young people want opportunities to be creative, to lead and to “have fun”. They also want to know what support is available, including from other young people, young leaders and role models.

If the barriers of cost and access in relation to time, money and transport are not understood and adequately addressed, these challenges can fuel misconceptions and age-based discrimination, which further impact the participation and wellbeing of children and young people.

Treating each child and young person as unique and not labelling or discriminating the because of their age

Children and young people are often defined by their age rather than their diverse identities, for example, interests and roles as leaders, creatives and makers, athletes and coaches, friends, family members and/or carers. Misconceptions about the capacity of young people to participate and engage in their communities and a lack of trust between institutions and young people has a very real impact on the actual participation and engagement of children and young people.

“Age restrictions, legalities, people just generally not trusting in our abilities”

“places need age requirements and previous knowledge. it is difficult to get around and too and from in time”

Age restrictions, a lack of experience and stigma about being “too young” lead some young people to fear that some volunteer-involving organisations would not welcome them or that their efforts would be rejected or unappreciated.

“Lack of opportunities available and also lack of qualifications. Stigma around younger people not being suitable for volunteering.”

“a lot of places or people only accept people who are 18 or older, and it needs to have time to mix in with school life and not be too much.”

Clarifying the difference between volunteer and paid work

I support this Strategy’s priority to clarify the difference between volunteering and paid employment. Young people are concerned that the line between paid and unpaid work can be blurry. They fear that this may lead to being taken advantage of.

“Unpaid work experience/internships/clerkships. Students are expected to do them to gain employment but many can’t afford to give up this time for unpaid experience or even afford to travel to the required location. Even subsidised or honorary amount would be better than nothing”

Clarifying this difference requires information and training provided to all volunteer-involving organisations on rights, including the rights of all children and young people. Young people and young volunteers themselves also need to feel like they know their rights, have a voice and are being heard.

Recognising and respecting young volunteers

While many young people cite the altruistic nature of volunteering as a positive motivating force, others describe how a lack of recognition and respect can make them feel as though their voices and contributions are insignificant, and this can ultimately have a negative impact on the participation and engagement of young volunteers.

“I don’t understand why so many people are focused right now on trying to get kids to do more. Kids volunteer in their school, churches and local sports clubs but for some reason that doesn’t seem to matter.”

Some young people describe volunteering as something that is not only done without any form of payment but is also done “without any form of acknowledgement”. Not receiving financial compensation is one thing but not receiving recognition is another. The success of efforts to promote or sustain

volunteering will be inadequate without real actions that support young volunteers to feel valued.

“Place more value on the role of volunteers. Acknowledge volunteer work within activist circles”

This highlights the need to enhance programs that acknowledge and celebrate the positive contributions of volunteers. The Strategy seems to acknowledge this with its priority to “raise the status and profile of volunteers and volunteer management”. Valuing the contributions of the young people who already spend a significant amount of time volunteering will not only sustain their engagement but will also make volunteering more appealing to those not yet involved.

Acknowledging the disproportionate barriers and impacts

Unsurprisingly, the barriers to volunteering impact different groups of young people in different and unequal ways. Evidence suggests that young people who are already vulnerable socially or economically are less likely to have access to or belong to the educational, civic or political organisations or institutions that promote volunteering. They are also less likely to feel able to participate in the community and are less likely to believe that their participation is taken seriously when they do participate.ⁱ

I have heard from children and young people living with a disability, those living in regional SA, those from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and those who are not engaged in education or employment. The views and lived experiences of these young people must inform the next stages of this Strategy’s lifespan.

“Not being able to attend youth parliament due to the fact that Disabilities SA wouldn’t approve my trip to go to Adelaide, so I missed the application dates. It’s not acceptable. I am a young lady who is wanting to experience life but yet I’m being held back.”

“Coming from regional SA, we don’t have very much exposure to bigger, better opportunities and we have to travel at least 7 hours to get to the next major city which costs a lot of money so I think we should have more government help to fund learning opportunities etc, or just in general.”

“There needs to be parent information sessions in schools to explain the value of volunteering for getting jobs. Newly arrived parents don’t always understand this and ask why you are working without getting paid.”

They highlight the importance of adopting an “ecosystems thinking” approach, which recognises the shared interests that multiple stakeholders have in children and young people’s outcomes and explores how each stakeholder can improve these outcomes.

Supporting programs, research and advocacy that engages multiple stakeholders

We know that there are significant gaps in research about the scale, value and impact of volunteering in Australia, particularly among young people. I am pleased to see that one of the Strategy’s priorities is to support research and advocacy in this area.

Research should engage directly with children and young people, particularly those who struggle most to be heard including those living with disability, living in regional South Australia, and those who are not in education or employment. Research should gather insights from youth-led organisations and other organisations, and partner with young people themselves, families and carers, community organisations and businesses, sporting clubs and associations and other services that young people use and engage with, including education.

Formal feedback mechanisms for children and young people

Formal feedback mechanisms are one way of measuring the effectiveness of current practices and giving effect to the child’s right to be heard (Article 12 of the UNCRC), to express any concerns or make suggestions for improvement. Embedding feedback mechanisms into the culture of volunteer-involving organisations should also be encouraged in line with the obligation of State authorities to provide child safe environments. The increased participation and engagement of children and young people will strengthen the Strategy’s goals and build trust and accountability in the community.

However, there are many children who are disconnected from education. While students are an important group, there is also a need to focus on other young people who may not be students, who may be more vulnerable and who may face more barriers when accessing volunteering or employment opportunities.

For those children who do go to school, schools should be an enabler rather than a barrier to children and young people’s community participation and engagement. Many young people have emphasised the need for schools to provide more information about volunteering, suggesting that this is not currently happening in a consistent or widespread manner.

“have it as a lesson at schools where u can learn about it, do the volunteering courses even, and the teacher can help get us into places to volunteer.”

I note that some of the current and proposed school-based initiatives and resources that were developed in line with the current Volunteering Strategy aim to “enhance pathways to employment for young people through volunteering” and to “increase the use of volunteering base curriculum in schools in SA”.

These are commendable goals that recognise the important role that schools play in connecting children and young people to volunteering information, organisations and opportunities. However, there must be feedback mechanisms in place to monitor if and how these existing initiatives and school-based resources are being used and experienced by children and young people.

ⁱ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, 2015, “Youth volunteering in Australia: An evidence review”, Available at https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/youth_volunteering_evidence_review_0.pdf