



Submission on the Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy 2022-2026

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft SA Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy 2022-2026, Discussion Paper. I welcome the breadth of the Discussion Paper, with its comprehensive goals and focus on population health and the social determinants of health. This Strategy is an opportunity for South Australia to again take a lead in developing and investing in evidence-based strategies to prevent and reduce the impacts of drug and alcohol-related harm across metropolitan and regional South Australia.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People my mandate is to promote and advocate at a systemic level for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also my role to ensure the State, at all levels of government, satisfies its international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

This includes giving effect to a child's right to the highest attainable standard of healthcare (Article 24) and taking 'all appropriate measures, including legislative, administrative, social and educational measures, to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as defined in the relevant international treaties' (Article 33).

Since 2017, I have engaged with thousands of children and young people across regional and metropolitan South Australia about the issues affecting their lives and what matters most to them.

Children and young people have a range of views about drugs and alcohol, which are shaped by their own experiences. As they navigate adolescence, it is generally considered age appropriate for young people to be curious, to experiment and take risks. Many young people view trying alcohol or drugs as part of life and growing up or as a coping mechanism to feel 'different' or 'better'. Others grow up in communities or home environments where substance use is 'normalised' from a young age. While others may never try drugs or alcohol for a range of reasons; including having seen the significant disruption to their own social life, home life and engagement with school and the community because of family member or peer use.

While drug and alcohol use among most young people in South Australia has been in decline over recent years, there are numbers of young people who continue to develop problematic drug and alcohol use or dependency at a level with negative health consequences.

In relation to my interactions with children and young people conversations about problematic drug/alcohol use have been more common for children and young people living in regional communities. They more frequently report the need for 'something to be done about drugs', including the need for more support and rehabilitation services to be accessible locally.

With regards to the draft strategy the priority in reducing the impact of alcohol and other drugs on children and young people is commendable. To be successful, the strategy will require an investment in developmentally and age-appropriate primary, secondary, and tertiary level services across metro, regional and remote communities.

It is also important that these services are integrated with other youth-specific service systems, such as primary and mental health services, homelessness services and services that address violence. Strategies also need a joined-up approach across child protection, education, primary and mental health and youth justice.

I am hopeful that the final Strategy will make material change in the lives of children and young people in South Australia. This will require sufficient funding and leadership from the South Australian government.

This submission highlights the Strategies that children and young people say should be prioritised to ensure their rights, safety and voices are embedded in a more cohesive and consistent way across the five proposed goals: prevention, harm reduction, early intervention, engagement, and evidence.

I have recently had contact with a group of young people associated with the Specialised Assistance School for Youth (SASY) who in partnership with St Johns Youth Services and Connected Self and Australian Drug Foundation produced a podcast for young people on harm minimisation and their real-life experiences with substance use and life. The podcasts are on Spotify and Instagram under the title The PuffnPass Podcast. They are uncensored, authentic and local, and could be a useful resource for the project team to consider as part of the strategy development.

If you have any queries or would like to discuss anything further, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People SA

1. Goal One: Prevent - Prevent and delay the uptake of alcohol and other drugs

Recommended strategies to prioritise:

- Educating and upskilling young people on how to get support, and how to support their friends and peers.
- Better support for parents and families to support children.
- Investing in child-friendly and youth-friendly infrastructure and accessible activities to increase young people's connection to their community.

It is commendable that the Strategy proposes to increase 'awareness of alcohol and other drug risks among children and young people through evidence-based school education'.

However, this strategy should go beyond highlighting the risks and integrate harm-reduction initiatives and practical information and skills to support help-seeking behaviour. This will ensure that when young people do experiment with alcohol or drugs, it is done safely. This will also encourage young people to ask for help and ensure they receive the right help at the right time.

"Children and young people want adults to talk about alcohol and drugs openly and offer practical support and information about safe use. They say that when the adults in their lives only tell them to abstain or to try and scare them through scare campaigns or threats of criminalisation, this risks pushing young people away, negatively impacts trust and increases likelihood that young people will drink or use drugs in unsafe ways. Teach adults not to turn down the topic of alcohol, sex, drugs because they push us further away and we rebel against them and do it."

- Year 10 student, Port Lincoln

Education programs should steer away from fear-based, abstinence-based approaches, or approaches that only address ethical or moral decision-making. Research and input from young people also says one-sided communication like lecturing are less effective than those that acknowledge and seek to minimise risks by building resilience.

Other indicators of successful education programs are those that:

- incorporate active learning and student-to student interaction. Specifically, the most effective programs involve substantial amounts of interaction between instructors and students, supporting them to develop social skills and providing opportunities to practice these skills with other students
- normalise the non-use of alcohol and drugs
- use data and information to counter misconceptions that drug use is widespread
- actively address perceptions of risk associated with substance use
- include a series of sessions reinforced over time, as children mature and encounter different environments

- are delivered by trained facilitators rather than ex-drug users or police officers.

“when told “no” you have the urge to do it, more drug and alcohol rehabs, more therapy groups, stronger support systems, confidential centres? TED talks and counselling”

- Year 10 student, Port Pirie

Beyond raising awareness, education should also upskill young people about how and where to seek help for themselves and their friends without stigma or judgement. This is particularly important because young people report that they are more likely to talk to their friends before they talk to a trusted adult (if they have one) and are more likely to rely on informal support network before they seek professional support. In addition to education in schools, community and other youth friendly organisations are also appropriate options.

Education and prevention strategies also need to include and upskill parents. Evidence from the Icelandic preventative drug program, Planet Youth shows that one of the factors to prevent drug and alcohol misuse is positive engagement between parents and children, as well as many other factors connecting families with the local community¹. This program is being piloted in a few towns in South Australia which is commendable. However, if successful it is important that pilots are expanded to full programs, as well as extending these programs to other areas of the state.

Strategies to prevent or delay use of drugs and alcohol should also invest in child and youth-friendly opportunities and spaces for young people to ‘hang out’ and be themselves without fear of being ‘judged’ or ‘moved on’. Ideally these spaces should be attached or close to support services. Community infrastructure is often designed by and for adults or for younger children, leaving few spaces and opportunities for those under 18 but over the age at which playgrounds are fun. Young people talk about the lack of opportunities for play and recreation for under 18-year-olds and the lack of alcohol-free options for young people over 18.

Children and young people, in regional and remote areas, often report the link between drug and alcohol use or issues and the lack of youthful infrastructure in their communities. They describe ‘turning to drugs or alcohol for fun’ because there’s ‘nothing else to do’ and they are ‘bored’.

“People turn to drugs/alcohol for fun because there’s nothing else to do... [Young people need] More things to do in Port Lincoln for kids so they don’t just fall in to the habbit of just doing drugs and drinking alcohol because they are bored.”

*“(Drugs) a lot worse here than where lived in Adelaide”
- FLO Student, Whyalla*

2. *Goal 2: Reducing risks and harms associated with alcohol and drug use*

Recommended strategies to prioritise:

- *Programs that encourage harm reduction and provide opportunities for education.*
- *Amnesties at festivals and similar events to promote young people's safety.*

Education alone is simply not enough to reduce the risks and harms associated with drug and alcohol use. Strategies to meet this goal should invest in evidence-based harm reduction programs, especially in places where young people consume alcohol or drugs. This could include the use of amnesty bins, peer education programs and accessibility to medical care and properly trained security staff.

Children and young people want support to stay out of trouble with the law if they are caught with substances on them. One strategy to address this is the introduction of amnesty bins, alongside health services at festivals and other venues. This would reduce the harm and potentially lethal outcomes that can arise when young people consume drugs in their possession to hide them from the police.

In 2019, a NSW coronial inquiry looking into the deaths of young people found significant evidence that 'intensive and punitive drug policing operations' at a festival increased 'drug-related risks and harm'ⁱⁱ. The Coroner made recommendations to introduce amnesty bins, alongside with pill testing and the removal of sniffer dogs could have prevented those deaths.

A subsequent review on amnesty bins at a music festival in ACT backed these findings where the pill testing was located alongside medical services that had access to other services. The review found that patrons who used the service viewed it positively and valued the information that was provided and the fact that they could talk to services in a non-judgemental way.ⁱⁱⁱ

3. *Goal 3: Early intervention for alcohol and other drug problems*

Objectives should also include:

- *Investment in developmentally appropriate health services and drug and alcohol services for children and young people, separate from adult services to address the chronic under-servicing of young people in South Australia.*
- *Supporting integration of drug and alcohol services with other youth-specific service systems, including mental health services, homelessness services, and education services.*

Although the Strategy's goals seek to "intervene early to support children at risk", there appears to be no plans on how this will be developed or even resourced specifically for this group. For real change in this area there needs to be more services tailored specifically to children and young people.

Currently, there is a dearth of services for children and young people – especially in the younger age group – to access services when they require it. Children and young people are asking for greater investment into health and related services for children and young people so that they have the support they need, when they need it. Many services are designed for adults and are therefore ill-equipped to support children appropriately or leave children ineligible without adult consent.

As the Victorian Youth Support and Advocacy Service in Victoria has shown, 'merely being "youth-specific" does not guarantee developmentally appropriate service delivery'.^{iv}

"I think we've got to priorities getting young people continuity of care when it comes to mental health problems incl, substance abuse... this is because y can present to EDs, GPs, go through psychiatric wards, be in the system but not care for in between. This is what turns these problems that could be helped with a period of intense therapy into lifelong battles. So you have to make access easier, encourage practitioners to make long term plans with all who see them, subsidise mental health further. Some people only get a certain amount of appointments a year, you have to really deteriorate to receive quality care. Young people deserve better care, Continuity of Care, more info, more funding. This will save and transform lives."

- 22 year old female Metro Adelaide

Services should be therapeutic and trauma informed, and 'combine treatment with experiences that promote young people's progress towards developmental tasks, such as exploring their social and vocational identity, developing their skills and learning to make mature judgments'.

Services are most effective when they are:

- voluntary
- community based with assertive outreach and capacity for follow up including delivery of services in the home or a range of community settings
- affordable
- provided in non-stigmatising and respectful environments
- tailored to children and young people
- appropriate to different developmental stages, and
- able to provide tools to respond to triggers and address challenges in real life conditions.
- place-based, including located or present in local hubs across metropolitan and regional areas and have flexibility to engage young people in youth-friendly waiting rooms and places, and
- support longer term support and continuity of care.

Stakeholders have reported a lack of therapeutic medically based withdrawal services for teenagers affected by alcohol or drug dependency.

Children and young people often report their use of drugs and alcohol to mental health concerns and disengagement from school or family. Therefore, it is imperative that this strategy supports further integration of drug and alcohol services with other related youth-specific service systems. Further, relevant government departments working with these children should be communicating with each other, including child protection, youth justice, health and education.

The Strategy should also clarify how this Strategy overlaps with state and federal mental health plans and services.

“Take incredibly seriously young people presenting with mental health / drug problems – appoint them psychiatrists committed to seeing them regularly.”

- Young Homeless Person, Metro Adelaide

4. Goal 4: Engaging communities – Engage across workforces and communities to address alcohol and other drugs

Objectives should also include:

- Explicitly including children and young people as active stakeholders.

The strategy should explicitly refer to children and young people as stakeholders in the community to ensure that their voices on this issue are heard. Children and young people have told us that part of prevention is providing opportunities for children and young people to become engaged with the community, as well as a place where they feel welcome, can hang out and have things to do, including playing sport and going online (with free wi-fi).

For the stated goals to have real impact for this priority group their voices need to be front and centre in implementing the goals. This is especially so when looking at how local communities can reach the stated goals. In particular, the strategy should consider the unique experiences of children and young people in different areas, both between regional South Australia and the metropolitan Adelaide area and between regions. It is also important to listen to children and young people with disability and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

“If I could I would get back into footy. More help, more money, more friends. No drugs in the world. Stay out of trouble. If I had a job I wouldn’t steal money or things. Someone helping us get a job. Justice system, I would make it harder.”

- Aboriginal Young person Youth Justice

5. Evidence: Policy, programs and services are evidence-based

It is commendable that this Strategy points to evidence to implement programs, programs and services. It is critical that evidence-based reforms and services are implemented despite political or ideological pressures from different stakeholders.

ⁱ Planet Youth. Accessed at <https://planetyouth.org/>.

ⁱⁱ State Coroners Court of NSW. Inquest into the deaths of six patrons of NSW music festivals. Accessed at https://coroners.nsw.gov.au/documents/findings/2019/Music_Festival_Redacted_findings_in_the_joint_inquest_into_deaths_arising_at_music_festivals_.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Olsen et. al. ACT Pill Testing Trial 2019: Program evaluation. Australian National University. Accessed at <https://medicalschoo.anu.edu.au/files/ACT%20Pill%20Testing%20Evaluation%20report.pdf>.

^{iv} Youth Support and Advocacy Services Victoria, Youth Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Treatment in Victoria. A ten point plan for improving the lives of victorian young people and families experiencing aod-related harm. Available at <https://healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/healthinonet/getContent.php?linkid=613063&title=Youth+alcohol+and+other+drug+%28AOD%29+treatment+in+Victoria%3A+A+ten+point+plan+for+improving+the+lives+of+Victorian+young+people+and+families+experiencing+AOD-related+harm>.