

2022–2026 Infrastructure Priorities to Improve Outcomes for South Australia's Children and Young People



As Commissioner for South Australia's children and young people, I have heard firsthand how many of our children and young people lead happy, active lives. They feel respected by the majority of adults with whom they regularly interact. They value school, education and learning, family relationships, their culture and communities, their opportunities to participate, and their friendships and pets.

I have also heard, however, that our children and young people are genuinely concerned for those who they see as less fortunate, less included, less mentally well, less financially secure, and less prepared for the future. They have told me they would like to make life better for all children and young people, including those they see doing it tough. As experts in their own lives, they want to have their opinions heard, be treated with respect, and taken seriously by adults.

As future participants in Australia's democracy, our children and young people rely upon our political parties to be focused on future-proofing their lives through development and implementation of policies and practices that will enable them to not merely survive, but to thrive across our communities.

I call upon leaders and decision-makers to make it a priority to listen to and address the critical areas of infrastructure development that will directly impact on the lives of South Australian children and young people now and in the future.

1. Invest in a comprehensive digital literacy agenda.

Equality of access does not translate to equality of opportunity; it is clear there is a strong need for education and empowerment to ensure children and young people have the digital skills and digital literacy expected and required in the twenty-first century.

Limited or no digital access currently presents a significant barrier to education, work, safety, and citizenship. While experiences vary widely across different socioeconomic, cultural, and educational contexts, the social and economic benefits of addressing data access are significant.

South Australian government, councils, and libraries, shopping centre management authorities, the fast food industry, energy companies and internet service providers should invest in industry led collaborations that will bring together people with lived experience of data poverty and innovators capable of developing sustainable solutions that will put an end to their data access issues.

Strategies could include solutions that use excess renewable energy to power a free, high quality, state-wide Wi-Fi network for the benefit of young people and communities. Local authorities and community organisations can leverage existing public Wi-Fi networks, set up new networks, or incentivise individuals and communities to share their Wi-Fi networks with vulnerable neighbours.

"I feel like adults are always putting down young people for using technology but if they had technology when they were our age they would have used it too. Technology has become a much more important thing in society and we are using it for many more things."

16 year old – Metropolitan SA

"Technology is not the problem ... it's the way you use it, and technology can help kids get ready for the future."

18 year old – Metropolitan SA

"We get information + news about things that happen everywhere, just like they do with the news. It informs us of stuff we never knew about so we can help change it. It helps us make more connections with others who like the same stuff as us. Not everyone we meet online is pretending to be someone else (eg. pedfiles, groomers, sex traffickers)."

16 year old – Metropolitan SA

2. Expand sports vouchers to extracurricular non-sporting activities to support children of all ages participate and reap health and participation benefits

Most SA children play a sport, or participate in an extracurricular activity like dance, drama, or Scouts or Guides on a regular basis. These activities provide both health and academic outcomes. Children in low-income suburbs participate at much lower levels than their peers, yet research shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to benefit most from taking part in extracurricular activities. Many children who live outside major cities or in poorer suburbs face major barriers to their participation. These include the costs of participating, poor public transport access, and a lack of clubs and facilities in which to run extracurricular activities.

Costs range from membership and registration fees to those associated with purchase of specific uniforms, shoes, musical instruments, and other 'essential' equipment. These interests are not only linked to children and young people's relationships and wellbeing in the present, but also to their hopes and dreams for the future.

Currently, all SA primary school children can receive up to a \$100 discount per calendar year to put toward the costs of sports or dance membership and registration fees or a learn to swim program. In 2022, the Sports Voucher program has been expanded to include students in years 8 and 9.

While this government initiative eases part of the financial burden for a season or semester, there are costs beyond the voucher program that are not covered, particularly those for students who want to play more than one sport or activity. In addition, depending on which region of the state a child is located, there are discrepancies between fees and costs that must be re-examined.

Many children and young people have raised what they see as significant inequity when government assistance provided for formal sports, but not for other outdoor and/or physically active recreational pursuits such as Scouts or Guides.

Children and young people with a lived experience of poverty spoke about how their family becomes entirely focused on 'the necessities' so that 'fun' or 'additional' activities are luxuries generally not available to them.

The rules of vouchers only tackle some of the barriers to participation. In SA, they exclude non-sporting activities, despite the health and wellbeing benefits these also offer. All children should have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities with access to a voucher scheme that enables them to participate.

“Understand that sport is not for everyone, and therefore...extend the activity voucher to...support nonmainstream activities such as Scouting, climbing, chess clubs, etc... you need to help the youth find their tribe. If that's sport great, but if it's not, don't abandon them.”

17 year old – Metropolitan SA

“Extend the sports vouchers for primary school students to all school students. There are many sports that I really enjoyed and would've stuck with but couldn't because the classes were too expensive.”

16 year old – Metropolitan SA

“I know that there is a sports voucher for primary students, which is supporting many people to stay in a sport. But parents may find it hard to pay for sports for secondary students, when competing at a high level. They should get a bit more support from the government.”

13 year old – Metropolitan SA



3. Ensure each local community has dedicated youth specific infrastructure.

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 through connection, confidence building and support of creativity amongst young people. Investing in youth specific infrastructure sends children and young people the clear message that they are valued and important members of their local communities.

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

16 year old – Barossa

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

15 year old – Riverland

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

17 year old – Adelaide Hills

4. Provide the resources to implement the Mental Health Service Plan in South Australia and provide children with accessible, appropriate, and timely community-based services.

Prioritising the treatment of children with mental health issues while they are still children is exceptionally effective both in reducing the incidence and severity of their mental health problems in adulthood and supporting them to experience a more positive and hopeful childhood.

Consultations with children and young people make it clear that, for them, tackling their mental health and distress is a top priority. They want support from kind adults who can listen and guide them, help them to problem solve, and support them to feel safe and hopeful. They want these adults to be in their schools and youth centres, as well as in their sporting and recreational clubs. Few, if any children and young people want to be accessing Hospital Emergency Departments.

What we all want is a service system that offers parents and their children a full menu of the best our education, medical health providers and social workers can provide. We want mental health supports for children and young people that can prevent mental ill health and emotional difficulties, particularly for those children who are displaying behaviours that tell us they are very distressed. This includes providing services tailored to meet the specific needs to children and young people with disabilities.

The kind of system envisaged, is less about a place and much more about an appropriate, timely and effective response. Avoiding hospital admittance should be our goal. Parents want to be able to care and support their child or young person at home with easy access to timely professional support from there. When children and young people are not well they want to be in safe and familiar environments with people they love and who they know love them. Clinicians too want children to be able to engage with all their protective factors, such as friends, school, sports and other groups that keep them connected.

We need to shift our attention from a debate about providing “more beds” and applying clinical definitions of mental health, to one that is much more about how we best support distressed, unwell, and connection seeking children and young people, so that they can access what they need to survive and develop.

The issue is not whether a child or young person has an acute or chronic illness, a trauma response, or symptomatic behaviours. At the end of the day, it is the child or young person who needs our help. Our job as adults, therefore, is to get them the help they need, where and when they need it.

We have a Mental Health Service Plan in South Australia which has been developed in broad consultation over many years. Let’s get on with providing the resources needed to implement it before we expose more children and young people to untimely, inadequate, and inappropriate mental health responses.

“There is not enough support for children with mental health issues. While I have support now, I waited for months and during this time I was falling apart and nearly ended it multiple times and I believe my mental health worsened because of no support.”

15 year old – Metropolitan SA

“I think we’ve got to prioritise getting young people continuity of care when it comes to mental health problems, including substance abuse, because you can present to Emergency Departments, GPs, go through psychiatric wards, be in the system but not be care(d) for in between. This is what turns these problems that could be helped with a period of intense therapy into lifelong battles.”

19 year old – Metropolitan SA

“More education on mental health to help get rid of the stigma and know how and when to seek help. Better School Counsellors. Professionals (should) take students seriously and be private.”

17 year old – Metropolitan SA

“There is a limited understanding (of) how to access mental health services among young people. Many resources such as a GP provided mental health plan are not made known to young people who want to access this type of service but are unsure how to.”

15 year old – Metropolitan SA

5. Co-design a career information hub with and for young people to understand where future job opportunities are likely to come from and what young people need to do in order to attain them.

Young people say they have few options to supporting them to explore career ideas and options in detail. They also say they have limited time with school career counsellors and virtually no time allocated to career exploration before subject choices are needing to be made.

A centralised independent career information hub that demystifies SA's future career ecosystem will enable our young people to navigate their career choices more confidently.

Existing websites lack an engaging user experience, show little understanding of a local school-aged audience and have poor linkages to industries based in SA. What is needed is a dedicated SA Career Hub website SA young people can explore with ease to find out what career opportunities are available and what pathways they can take to reach them.

A career hub showing the myriad pathways, approaches and skills that can be attained will also provide better support for parents, carers, and guardians, who students often turn to for advice with their 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.

“Having more than 5 minutes to discuss my future plans with teachers, knowing where to look up or ask about more information instead of it being told lots of irrelevant information, having people actively care about my future.”

17 year old – Metropolitan SA

“Information that is clear, concise, and accessible (preferably online). It would also be helpful if the information was organised, so it is easier to sort through different types of information and to more easily locate relevant information.”

16 year old – Metropolitan SA

6. Invest in keeping “at risk” children out of the child protection system.

The South Australian Premier should commit to no further growth in the number of children entering child protection in the next term of government. A focus on investment in services, resources, and practical assistance, must shift toward supporting families to create change that will make their homes more stable for themselves and their children.

Prioritising access for families so they can get the services they need when they need them, expanding the use of Family Group Conferencing and significantly increasing access to resources and supports before children are removed from their homes is what is required. In addition to long-term financial investment, we need incentives in the system that support investment in developing the capacity of parents to learn new ways of parenting and which can build strong family relationships and community connections. Building trust with families is at the heart of a new approach scaffolded by adjusting the settings in the system from mandatory reporting to mandatory action; from “doing things right” to “doing the right thing.”

Doing the right thing should be supported by legislative change and system level KPIs related to a reduction in the numbers of re-reported children, increased numbers of re-unified children and families, and no growth in child protection numbers. Investment in educational and therapeutic innovative practice that looks for the strengths and potential in families, and does all that it can to return children in out of home care to their parents, must become a core element of the South Australian Child Protection System.

7. Address structural and cultural barriers that restrict public access to and community use of school facilities.

Public access to and community use of school facilities has been an agenda pursued over decades by sporting groups, local governments, and the like. There is significant literature and evidence outlining the economic, health and participation benefits to communities who have such access. Supported in principle by the Department for Education, school leaders have been at the forefront of responding to and managing requests for use, but these arrangements have largely been ad hoc, relational, and reactive. Many operational barriers at the school level are often cited as the major reason as to why these community assets are not available outside of school hours.

Sporting and recreational infrastructure in local communities should be designed in partnership with sporting clubs, civil society groups, and local government, from the outset. Management and usage agreements could be established akin to the shared use and commercial arrangements planned for and then established once the facilities are built. The reality of schools as community hubs could then be realised.

8. Invest in 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.

“The Barossa Area needs more frequent, affordable and accessible (accessible) public transport for the youth so getting to Gawler train station is easier and getting [to] places in the city becomes less of a hassle.”

18 year old – Barossa

“A more consistent transportation system so youth and anyone for that matter can get to Adelaide or Gawler to shop, work, complete courses, hang out with friends and live, just live!”

14 year old – Barossa

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

13 year old – Barossa

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 (UNCRC).

**For more information
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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.

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 Commissioner
Y for Children &
Young People