

# Barriers to civic participation for children and young people

COMMISSIONER  
FOR CHILDREN AND  
YOUNG PEOPLE

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The Commissioner for Children and Young People promotes and advocates for the rights, development and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia, with a special focus to engage with and listen to children who aren't usually heard.



## THE ISSUE

**Children and young people care deeply about their communities and the world around them.** They are frustrated with institutions that do not include them or represent their views, and which fail to take action on public policy issues they believe should be prioritised such as inequality, future job opportunities, and climate change.

Many young South Australians have sought to engage policy makers and influence change through participation in processes organised by government and non government organisations and authorities (eg Youth Parliament) and through participation in social movements (eg Schools Strike 4 Climate). However many feel they cannot meaningfully influence government policy and decision making in any way.

Many young people have told me they are being denied opportunities to participate and are often excluded from public consultations, particularly in relation to those issues that matter most to them. They say this is because of their age and a perceived lack of life experience, leading to their opinions often being invalidated. This leads young people to conclude that policy makers lack the skills, mindset and support they need to be effectively engaging young people in policy and decision making.

## BACKGROUND

**Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) says children and young people have a right to have a say on all issues that affect them and for their views to be taken seriously.**

By improving our children and young people's participation in decisions that impact on them we can strengthen our democratic institutions and structures and build a strong state for the future of all children and young people.

Young people see themselves as a generation for change, and if given the chance, they could have positive impact on the world and its communities, including in particular their own local communities.

However, many young people do not know how to participate or where to look or hear about opportunities for their participation. They have also shared that they have a lack of trust in government because they don't know how it works and feel it is not transparent enough.

We know that young people are often critical of the present, and open to new ideas and hopeful for a future full of possibilities that they wish to see and help bring about.

Consequently young people are often front and centre in calling for social change. How they do this is often outside normative governance structures and formal policy and decision-making processes and separate from government.

School Strike 4 Climate is a good example of young people taking direct action. Due to feeling disempowered by existing decision making and because of an inability to affect change in government decision making processes, young people sought other ways to express active citizenship.

As such, an important component of any efforts to increase the participation of young people must be led by young people themselves. And it may need to sit outside the traditional participatory practices used by adults such as committees and councils.

After collaborating with organisations over the past few years, it seems we know why we should engage with children and young people but not how or when it would be best to do this, and in a way that can provide the kind of engagement that brings about the best outcomes for all.

In response to what I have heard from young people, I have explored possibilities for increasing participation in formal policy development and decision making. This brief provides an overview of current challenges and future possibilities this poses.

## OUR EVIDENCE

### 1. Document review

To ascertain the extent to which current state government policy processes directly involve South Australian young people, we undertook a desk top review of all publicly available documentation produced by State government departments and agencies.

This involved review of 170 discrete State government plans, frameworks, strategies, and policy agendas identifying just three agencies that had directly referred to young people as stakeholders in their public facing information. This strongly suggests that young people are not systemically considered as a source of relevant input or feedback in strategic engagement or policy making.

### 2. Consultation

We then sought to test the validity of our findings through direct consultation with ten key public sector engagement professionals. Their responses corroborated the desk top review with regard to there being both a lack of engagement with young people. Their responses also highlighted the importance of increasing young people's participation and the need to address barriers that make this difficult in practice. In particular, they discussed the challenges associated with reaching young people; the dryness and relevance of policy content, and; the short timeframes that don't allow for translation of policy material into more youth friendly content made available on more youth friendly platforms.

### Engagement Practitioners identified the following barriers:

- attitudes of adults that don't value contributions by young people due to the prevailing 'age equals competence' paradigm
- policy makers lacking skills or flexibility to customise processes to accommodate young people's input in ways they prefer
- lack of structure around youth participation and project based active citizenship
- fear of working with young people on engagement that is specifically related to child protection requirements; and
- a deficit of knowledge and skills when seeking to engage children and young people for the purpose of influencing policy.

“The Department is unsure how and when to engage with young people.”

“We are not really speaking their language in social media. We only use Twitter.”

“I think to engage in policy processes young people need to be trained on how to engage and supported to do this.”

**“Lack of experience engaging with young people and knowledge about who to contact.”**

**3. YourSAy platform**

The primary community engagement platform for state government agencies is YourSAy hosted by the Department of Premier and Cabinet. This platform is a centralised website in which state government departments upload their draft policies and programs to seek state-wide community feedback. This feedback can be delivered in the shape of polls, surveys, or invitations to be part of an upcoming focus group which community members are required to register to attend.

Young people under 18 years have the lowest participation rate on the YourSAy platform at less than 1% of registered users. This is not surprising given many of the opportunities for participation in community engagement, via a survey, poll, or community forum, preclude registration by those under 18 years.

When young people under 18 years do participate they are primarily focused on ‘youth issues’. The team in the Department of Premier and Cabinet who work on YourSAy and community engagement have recognised a lack of youth participation as an issue and are committed to addressing this.

**4. Data**

We also reviewed a limited range of secondary data sources about young South Australians’ engagement in policy making which revealed:



Active citizenship as identified by young South Australians includes “Being involved in my community” and “Having a say”<sup>1</sup>



67% of young people in SA indicated an interest in learning how the government makes decisions (compared to 61% nationally)<sup>2</sup>



In response to the question “do young people feel they have enough of a say on important issues?” in relation to “public affairs”: 49% of young South Australians felt they have a say none of the time; 44.3% some of the time; 6.8% all of the time<sup>3</sup>

**5. Workshops**

In order to fully understand the specific difficulties young people confront when seeking to influence policy and decision making we held a number of workshops. Using a detailed problem identification process, 20 young people were asked to discuss their understanding of what was inhibiting their participation and engagement in government-led policy and decision making processes. Some participants suggested ways to have more impact on policy and decision making and on perceptions that their voices were being heard.

**We identified the following areas as priorities for government to address:**

- low awareness amongst young people about opportunities to participate – processes that prohibit participation by those aged under 18 years
- low incentives for young people to participate as a result of prior involvement and having received no tangible outcomes or feedback
- processes that confine discussion to a set of “youth issues” predetermined by government
- young people not supported/equipped to participate effectively and therefore having a lack of confidence, skill and knowledge of government to have their say
- processes that don’t focus on solving a problem/ achieving an outcome; and
- a perceived lack of legitimacy in the ways that young people like to provide input such as via Instagram polling, Tik Tok and SnapChat.

## KEY MESSAGES



1. Young people have been vocalising their increasing concern about growing inequality, fragmenting societies, and the impact of climate change, particularly on vulnerable populations around the world for some time. When governments and leaders dismiss children and young people's concerns, and take limited or no action to address the issues they see as critical, it negatively affects intergenerational trust.



2. Young people want to be able to trust leaders and representatives, and have confidence in the effectiveness of government. They want leaders to show empathy, and see young people as critical stakeholders, and to be ensuring that their interactions reflect this view.



3. Young people consistently report that although they are often best placed to identify their own needs, they are not being taken seriously. They are rarely asked to provide ideas and opinions about what will improve their situations and their issues are not adequately addressed. They have limited opportunities to contribute to decisions that impact their own lives.



4. Young people report adults often underestimate their competencies, relying heavily upon adult representations and assumptions, instead of sourcing children and young people's perspectives and experiences direct.



5. Young people are not a priority 'demographic' for policy makers. Within state government consultation processes they are generally considered to be difficult to engage with. 60% of public sector professionals who responded to our survey believe that, as it stands, state government does not do a good enough job of actively engaging with young people. When asked whether they see increasing participation by young people as being feasible, 90 percent said yes.



6. Young people who are 'given a seat at the table' and an opportunity to influence policy and decision making are currently small in number, and there is a perception that they have in some way been required to 'earn their place.' They're often seen by adults as being the 'best and brightest'. These governance structures are largely seen by young people as replicating the very structures they do not see themselves being represented by (ie Parliament, Government Departments, Local Councils, etc).



7. Young people have an increased appetite for a participatory mechanism that has scale and that proportionately represents as many young people as there are in South Australia.

## BARRIERS TO IMPROVING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN STATE GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES

### **Low levels of participation due to restricted participation by those aged under 18.**

State government departments and agencies decide who and how the community can engage in influencing policy, often confining the scope of discussion with young people to youth issues. Youth engagement in other policies is limited by an underlying assumption that young people wouldn't be interested in policy. Most adult stakeholders, however, felt they did not have sufficient time to engage with children and young people in a child-safe way. The time it takes to engage with young people was seen by most policy makers as a significant barrier to increased participation in policy making by young people. As such, policy makers tend to limit their engagement with young adults to those who are over 18 years.

### **Opportunities for consultation are almost exclusively advertised through Facebook posts that link to a YourSAy survey.**

A significant issue is that most young people who are on social media are not active on Facebook but do actively use Instagram or TikTok as their preferred platform. Although during the COVID-19 outbreak, young people were getting news about lockdowns and restrictions from SA Health's social media pages, this is an anomaly. Most young people don't follow state government social media accounts to see opportunities that are open to them. Being able to reach young people where they are, and advertise opportunities to influence policy in ways that appeal to young people, was outlined as being especially challenging for policy makers.

### **Policy makers are deterred from engagement due to concerns related to child welfare risks and fears about complex processes.**

A considerable factor impacting youth participation in state government engagement processes is the assumption amongst policy makers and engagement officers that consultation with young people is too difficult and the process too complicated, particularly those processes related to child welfare considerations such as working

with children checks for staff, and parental permission to participate. This 'too hard' mindset often means policy makers simply chose not to engage with young people. Policy makers have said that the combination of creating child safe environments, working with risk averse gate keepers, and the pressure of completing extra steps for time poor officers is often just a step too far.

### **Disregard for children's rights to participate.**

Rather than being considered as citizens with rights equal to adults, young people are often considered as a 'demographic' that may or may not be a priority group depending on the policy being consulted upon.

Whilst a few young people are 'given a seat at the table' and an opportunity to influence policy, they are generally small in number and have in some way 'earned their place' or are being rewarded by adults for being seen as the 'best and brightest' young people in their community. Most have been involved in a Youth Advisory Committee or Student Representative Council.

However, for many young people these formal participation structures are not necessarily attractive to them, in much the same way as they are not attractive to many adults. That doesn't equate to not wanting a chance to influence policy. It is more about not seeing themselves in Parliament, within government departments, or sitting on local councils. What young people want is a mechanism that has scale and which proportionately represents as many young people as there are across South Australia.

### **Young people view state government engagement processes as tokenistic and pointless because prior involvement has not made a difference.**

Adults dismissing young people's views has been raised by young people. How genuine and open the process of consultation is important to young people, including how their voices are being accurately recorded and conveyed.

Young people can easily identify processes where parameters are set by the government department and where strict conditions apply to what adults allow young people to influence.

This is often at odds with what young people think they can influence and results in young people feeling as though their opinions don't matter and that the consultation they've been asked to contribute their views to just isn't worth their time or energy.

In discussions with young people, they raised examples of State government consultations which they believe didn't have much impact on addressing the issues they had identified. They said this was mainly because the agenda was set by leadership and that they were not informed about the parameters of the conversation and the limitations of their influence on decision making.

Being misinformed impacts on young people's ability to understand why decisions they don't necessarily agree with have been made. This in turn impacts on the value they sense is being placed on their opinions and contributions. It leaves them feeling invalidated, disregarded, or worse, as though they have been used. Having impact is important to young people. They want to see change occur, and if it doesn't, they want to know why. When no change and no explanation is given, young people can feel as though the engagement process used was tokenistic.

#### **Young people are seen as “apathetic” or “incapable”.**

This attitude can lead policy makers to enter into community consultations thinking that young people won't or won't want to engage. This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and lead to less effort being placed into reaching young people, or finding young people who may be impacted by or just generally interested in a particular policy. Different priorities and different values that exist between adults and young people, with an inability to see each other's point of view, can be a significant issue and barrier to engagement. This can often manifest as adultism and be seen by young people as adults not taking them seriously, being disengaged from the reality of their lives, or that they are simply being seen as naïve.

#### **Unrealistic expectations of young people's contributions.**

Young people want to ensure the context and the reality of their lives, their opinions and perceptions, are all being considered. At the same time, they understand they don't have the content knowledge necessary to create policies.

Effective participation brings together the context and knowledge of their own lives that children and young people bring, with the content expertise of adults in policy making.

Young people have reported that when they are expected to bring specific content knowledge that they don't have then they can feel ignored or patronised. When adults are willing to hear from young people about things they know about, then engagement and participation becomes a genuine exchange.

**“ We feel that adults are not interested in hearing from us, and when we do speak they ignore us.”**

There's also a perception amongst young people that adults and policy makers always oppose their positions regardless of what policy is being discussed. In reality, we know this is not the case, but such perceptions and assumptions are damaging to the trust that is necessary for effective community engagement with young people.

## **NEXT STEPS**

**We know that democratic ideals and values are not created by osmosis, but rather through learning and practicing them.** For young people to understand the importance of democracy, they need to have opportunities to participate in it. At a community level, participation is the building block of democracy. By empowering children and young people to influence policy and be involved in decision making about issues that affect their lives, we reinforce their role as key stakeholders and citizens entitled to have their voices heard and their ideas acted upon.

**“ Participation creates active citizens who by their involvement become part of a thriving civil society.”**

More often than not, young people have expressed frustration with the exclusionary governance structures they see associated with policy making, and how this inevitably leads to decisions that do not represent their

views or life experiences. It is this sentiment that requires us to explore different ways of increasing young people's participation in policy and decision making.

We want young people to feel empowered and included in policy making in ways that will lead to them having higher levels of trust in government and the decision making processes it uses.

Key to this is developing innovative, impactful and scalable approaches that will increase youth participation in policy and decision making processes. Contemporary youth enfranchisement beyond the existing governance structures of councils, advisory groups and committees largely alludes us, as does active citizenship for those under 18 years.

Our next steps must involve more youth-led initiatives with access to resources and involvement in decision making processes that include 'participatory budgeting' and project-based active citizenship to empower teenagers and address their current dissatisfaction with formal government processes.

We must also build the confidence, skills and knowledge of both young people in the process of government, and of the people working with young people. This includes teachers, health and youth workers in particular, alongside those who don't ordinarily work with young people directly but whose work impacts their lives. This group includes policy officers and public service personnel working behind the scenes to deliver services.

A new and different approach must be taken to help young citizens access government engagement opportunities more easily. In this way we can start to develop a dialogue with policy makers that encourages young people's participation in the design of policies, laws and even budgets. Providing multiple pathways and touchpoints for young people to engage with adult decision makers in the physical and digital places and spaces they frequent, would see services tailored to meet their identified needs, rather than making assumptions about what these are.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

To create change we need to work at changing the way systems are governed, managed and implemented. No single action will drive the change. Rather we need a number of smaller changes that result in the empowerment of children and young people across many areas, including our laws, systems and design and delivery of essential services.

Mostly, however, it is a values shift that is needed to put children and young people front and centre in our thinking, and to include them as key stakeholders because we recognise them as being the experts in their own lives. This means putting in place mechanisms that actively and meaningfully encourage them to participate in policy and decision making in the areas of health, education, transport, protection, and justice, to name a few.

Actions to address the social and cultural changes needed for children and young people's participation includes:

1. Identifying champions of participation within government agencies, supported to develop ways to build representative participation structures and act as a broker with the groups young people seek to influence.
2. Working in partnership with young people to acknowledge and amplify their advocacy agendas and strengthen the structures already established by young people themselves that meet their youth engagement and empowerment objectives, and/or provide youth leadership programs and greater participation overall.
3. Providing resources to youth led organisations that enable them to extend their reach and to connect organised groups of young people together to build networks and alliances, share resources, and exchange and develop expertise.

**“ Values of confidentiality, transparency, openmindedness, trust, integrity and respect are the values that underpin how young people view their community, how they judge leaders, which ‘causes’ they choose to support, who influences them, and how they want to be in the world.**

**Young people want leaders who are listening to them and decision makers who are taking their needs seriously, and communicating with them effectively in ways they can easily understand and access. Most importantly they want genuine opportunities to participate in improving processes that affect their lives and to be involved in the design and delivery of services aimed at them. Encouraging decision makers to understand the values, views and experiences of young people via a genuine dialogue is what will lead to the establishment of pathways for their ongoing engagement.” – Helen Connolly, Commissioner for Children and Young People**

### Endnotes

- 1 [Strong Futures: SA Youth Action Plan, 2020, p24.](#)
- 2 [2019 Australian Youth Representative Consultation Report, UN Youth, p151.](#)
- 3 [Mission Australia Youth Survey 2019., p150.](#)