

Children and young people are missing out in SA

Helen Connolly

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In her final week as the Commissioner for Children and Young People, **Helen Connolly** writes that one minister must be accountable for the state's children and young people.



SA's Children's Commissioner Helen Connolly, with students from Callington Primary School collecting their Champion Schools Postcards Award last week. Photo Andy Steve.

Over the past eight years as SA's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People, I have had the privilege of travelling to every corner of the state to talk and interact face-to-face with tens of thousands of South Australian children and young people from all backgrounds, situations and ages to understand the detail of their lives.

My work has seen me sitting on the floor with children, engaging in drawing and creative activities, conducting interactive workshops, facilitating focus groups, hosting summits and designing campaigns and events with children and young people of all ages and abilities on a range of issues that matter to them.

My interactions have included many children and young people who have low or limited vision and/or hearing, as well as those using alternative communication systems. I've also used surveys, polls, and postcards to engage with more children and young people than it would have been possible for me to meet and talk with in person.

I have had eight years to consider South Australia's children and young people from all angles and it is clear to me that many South Australian children and young people are faring well. They're attending school, they're developing at the rates expected, and they are part of a loving, caring family with connections to friends, their schools and others within their broader community through participation in sports, arts or cultural activities.

It is also clear that there are also many South Australian children and young people for whom this is not the case, missing out on what others their age are able to take for granted. These

children and young people are virtually invisible, often demonised and held responsible for their disadvantage – shut out, left out and missing out.

In South Australia, more than half of all children and young people (53.6%) live in disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances.

Life for these children is tough. They are the SA children and young people who are experiencing participation poverty, living with chronic illness, living with disability, have a parent in prison, have carer responsibilities, and/or are experiencing homelessness.

Six groups of children and young people who are often invisible to policymakers and about whom little is known are being systemically discriminated against by omission.

We can't just treat their experiences as individual cases or anomalies, as this hides the shared experiences these children and young people are having. Some children and young people may fit into one or more of these groupings, which can make them particularly vulnerable to systemic disadvantage and invisibility.

It is not inevitable that these children and young people will continue to fare poorly now or in the future. Systemic change can be challenging, but it doesn't mean we should act as if it's impossible to achieve. The stakes are too high. Piecemeal action is taking place to make small changes, but there are system gaps in our understanding that create barriers to acting.

If we don't have data, it's hard to design services. If there's no policy, there's unlikely to be services, and if children and young people don't have a voice we don't know what's needed in terms of support. Without knowing more about these children and young people, effective change cannot be made.

An overarching approach would bring together and extend existing work, ensuring a holistic approach to children and young people from birth to 18 in South Australia. There is no multi-agency state-wide framework to cover vulnerable children and young people in South Australia, although there are some strategies and responses to some of these groups.

South Australia needs an overarching vision for all children and young people in the state. From this vision, we need a clear strategy, focused on a whole-of-government approach followed by measurable indicators and a mechanism to implement this.

Bold leadership is needed by the government to make real change for children and young people in South Australia, and coordinated efforts from multiple departments for those who are missing out the most. Without it, these children and young people often become invisible.

There needs to be high-level government thinking and cross-department accountability and communication. Currently, no minister has responsibility for all children in South Australia.

[Helen Connolly](#) is the Commissioner for Children and Young People.