



Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26

Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia



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Acknowledgement of country

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands, waterways and plains on which we live, work and play. We extend our respect to Elders, both from the past and those who guide us today, and we embrace this connection with all young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who we work alongside of.

About YACWA

We are the peak non-government youth organisation in Western Australia. We operate primarily as a human rights organisation that seeks to address the exclusion of young people in a rapidly changing society. Our continued vision for Western Australia is one that celebrates and engages young people in all aspects of the community. Our role is to strengthen the trust, cooperation, collaboration; professionalism and voice of the non-government youth service sector to better serve the young people of Western Australia.



Foreword

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia is proud to present our 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission to Government. This submission outlines eighteen (18) recommendations based on consultation with young people and the sector that supports them in Western Australia.

This year's Budget presents an exciting opportunity for the incoming Government to support and empower young people across WA by listening to their voices, recognising their value, and actively meeting their needs through targeted initiatives. Times are tough for young people across WA right now, but they do not have to be. Government can choose to invest in and activate progressive policies and programs that ensure all young people have access to the supports that they need to dream big and thrive in 2025-26. We are calling on the Government to make a historic investment in supporting young people and the youth sector this year to ensure no young people in WA are left behind.

Acknowledging Wins

The Western Australian State Government has invested in a range of significant initiatives to support young people in response to sector advocacy in recent years, including several important commitments made as part of the 2025 State Election campaign:

- \$89 million to fund student support payments,
- The new \$2.80 public transport fee cap,
- \$26 million towards youth mental health services in Bunbury,
- New youth justice initiatives including a full-time therapeutic Children's Court sitting in Armadale, a new Night Space program in Kununurra, and boosted funding for PCYCs across WA,
- \$92.2 million boost to homelessness services,
- \$22.4 million towards the establishment of Acute Care and Response Teams across Perth and the Great Southern, and \$19.5 million towards the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service's Crisis Connect service.
- \$9.7 million for a two-year funding extension for the Kimberley Juvenile Justice Strategy,
- \$8.2 million for In-Roads and \$5.1 million for Dandjoo Bidi-Ak at Perth Children's Court,
- \$2.4 million to fund a Ruby's pilot program

- A new WA LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy, and
- A new WA Youth Action Plan 2024-27.

Each of these much-needed initiatives is welcomed by YACWA and WA's youth sector as crucial social infrastructure that will provide meaningful support to young people across WA. However, young people and experts tell us that young people across the state continue to experience debilitating pressure caused by Western Australia's ongoing housing and cost of living crises.¹ Lack of affordable and community housing options tailored to the unique needs of young people leave this cohort excluded from secure access to housing across Western Australia, and improved data collection infrastructure is required to inform scale and scope of investment required. Our hard-working youth sector is inadequately funded to meet demand for services, WA's youth justice system continues to fail to therapeutically support young people, and the voices of young people continue to be undervalued by decision makers at all levels of Government. This submission responds to these bleak realities by outlining a roadmap of eighteen recommendations for Government to activate in 2025 in order to meet unmet needs and invest in the foundations of young people's wellbeing now and into the future.

The 2025-26 State Budget represents an opportunity for Government to invest in WA's young people. YACWA is calling on Government to deliver a State Budget that centres the needs and wellbeing of young people and the communities that support them by expanding supports across housing and homelessness, mental health and suicide prevention, family and intimate partner violence, and youth justice sector services. Consultation for this submission demonstrated that young people from multicultural and migrant backgrounds and living with experiences of neurodiversity such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are cohorts that require significantly upscaled support from Government. This year's Budget should utilise public spending to drive social change and equitable outcomes for young people by drawing on wellbeing-focussed economic modelling from other jurisdictions applied in a uniquely Western Australian context, aiming to ensure that all young people are empowered to feel secure and confident about their futures.

With a strong mandate to take robust action following this year's State Election, now is the perfect time for the Cook Government to invest in the structural changes that will ensure our young people can thrive today and into the future.

¹ See Sophie Hantz & Emily Hull, Cost of Living 2024, Western Australian Council of Social Service (Report, 2024).

The 2025-26 State Budget should:

1. Provide relief and support for young people in crisis,
2. Create a strong, connected and sustainably funded youth sector that can support young people effectively, and
3. Invest in forward-thinking solutions and systems that recognise young people's value and prioritise stability.

Ensuring that all children and young people are supported in our communities is the right thing to do. Government must commit to giving young people a fair go in 2025.



Figure 1: Young Changemaker Workshop in the Town of Victoria Park, 2023



Our Vision

To work towards this vision in 2025, we are asking Government to:

1. Provide cost of living and housing support to young people,
2. Prioritise prevention and early intervention for young people,
3. Create a strong and sustainable youth sector,
4. Commit to a total overhaul and reformation of WA's youth justice system, from community to detention, and
5. Embed and amplify the voices of young people with lived experience in government decision-making and service delivery.

We urge Government to commit to increasing meaningful support for young people in this year's State Budget.

Overview of Recommendations

Housing and homelessness

1. Reform WA's rental system to better protect young renters by ending no grounds evictions and introducing rent caps.
2. Resource and implement a Housing First for Youth model in WA.
3. Establish three (3) new Youth Foyers in WA at Albany, Bayswater and Broome locations.
4. Address the service availability gap for young people under 15 by developing a suite of specialist accommodation services targeted at 12 to 15 year olds.
5. Increase public, social and affordable housing stock specifically available to young people across all regions of WA.

Balancing the Budget towards prevention and early intervention

6. Rapidly increase investment into prevention and early intervention services and programs for young people.
7. Resource and establish a Western Australian Early Intervention Investment Fund budgeting mechanism.
8. Establish more place-based youth service hubs across WA.

A stronger youth sector

9. Commit to sustainably funding WA's youth sector.
10. Resource youth worker positions in every school across WA.
11. Increase housing stock specifically for youth sector workers in regional areas.
12. Fund mental health crisis response training to upskill and support youth workers in WA, starting with investment into WA's regional workforce.

A total overhaul and transformation of WA's youth justice system

13. Immediately implement a therapeutic service delivery model in WA's youth detention facilities,
14. Rapidly increase investment into community-based programs for young people across WA based on justice reinvestment modelling to prevent engagement with the justice system, and
15. Resource a long-term, strategic vision for youth justice system transformation in WA where no children end up in prison.

Valuing young people's voices

16. Actively include and value the voices of young people at all levels of Government decision making, starting with adequately resourcing all Local Government areas to deliver youth strategies, youth centres and youth advisory groups in their communities.
17. Commit to ongoing funding for the Youth Pride Network.
18. Commit to ongoing funding for the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council.

The difference it will make

By committing to implementing YACWA's 2025-26 State Budget Submission recommendations, Government will support a bold vision of a Western Australia in which all young people feel supported and empowered.

Our Recommendations

Priority 1: Provide cost of living and housing support to young people

In February 2024, a group of 80 young people shared their current experiences of WA's housing and cost of living crises with YACWA, describing a wide range of impacts on different areas of their lives. Young people told us:

"I can't afford to move out of home, which is critical for my disability, and I am not eligible for any of the NDIS housing options."

"Rent prices have increased so fast. I do not have family in Perth I can rely on if I lose my rental."

"Often I do not eat properly due to food costs."

"I don't go to the doctors now that bulk billing is gone."

"(The cost-of-living) has made me feel pressured to work over doing anything social or fun with friends and my partner. I feel like I have to be working constantly to get anywhere with savings."²

In 2025, Perth is Australia's least affordable capital city for renters,³ and the affordability of basic necessities continues to deteriorate.⁴ In December 2024 alone, 1,687 young people sought support from a Specialist Homelessness Service in Western Australia.⁵ Better policies and systems that ensure everyone has access to a secure home are required urgently in our State to ensure that all young Western Australians are protected from experiencing homelessness today and into the future.

"Unstable housing can be a precursor for homelessness, and the impacts of homelessness can be long lasting. Young people aged 12-24 are overrepresented in the

² C. Carles, *Submission to the Senate's Select Committee Inquiry into the Cost of Living*, Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, (Submission, 2024).

³ Rental Affordability Index, SGS Economics and Planning, (2024).

⁴ Hantz & Hull, *Cost of Living 2024*, Western Australian Council of Social Service (Report, 2024).

⁵ Specialist Homelessness Services: monthly data, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (web report, February 2025) retrievable at <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-monthly-data/contents/monthly-data>>.

homeless population in Australia. Close to a quarter (23%) of those experiencing homelessness are aged 12-24, compared to 16% in the general population. These figures are widely acknowledged to be an under-representation of the true number of young people experiencing homelessness due to some forms of homelessness - particularly couch-surfing - *being difficult to accurately count in the Census.*⁶

Government must choose to stand with young people and the community services sector in 2025-26 by investing in sector-led solutions to ensure that no young person is left without a safe and secure home in Western Australia.

Our recommendations

Recommendation 1: *Reform WA's rental system to better protect young renters by ending no grounds evictions and introducing rent caps.*

Simple changes to Western Australia's tenancy legislation have the potential to deliver massive relief to young renters and families.

No grounds evictions must be abolished in Western Australia to protect young renters from homelessness and housing instability. No grounds evictions exacerbate vulnerability and undermine access to justice for young people navigating an unprecedentedly hostile rental market.

“Just knowing that the landlord has the option to evict them without any reason results in huge insecurity and uncertainty for tenants, with the fear of eviction leaving a large number of tenants too scared to assert their rights.”⁷

New South Wales abolished no grounds evictions in October 2024.⁸ Western Australia can do it too. Alongside fellow peak bodies and WA's community services sector, YACWA is calling on the Western Australian Government to abolish no grounds evictions in 2025.

⁶ Filia, K., Teo, S.M., Gan, D. et. al, Counting the cost of living – the impact of financial stress on young people, Orygen (Report, 2024).

⁷ *WA Renters' Survey: The Impact of No Reason Evictions on WA Renters*, Make Renting Fair (Report, October 2022), page 5.

⁸ *NSW ends 'no grounds' evictions: historic win for renters*, Tenants Union of NSW (Media release, October 2024) retrieved at < [Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26](https://www.tenants.org.au/reports/media-release-nsw-ends-no-grounds-evictions-historic-win-renters#:~:text=Ending%20'No%20Grounds'%20Evictions&text=Under%20the%20new%20rules%3A,relating%20exclusion%20period%20may%20apply.> .</p></div><div data-bbox=)

The State Government should also implement a rental cap mechanism⁹ to help stabilise WA's rental market and support young people to access and afford rental homes. Anglicare's Rental Affordability Snapshot found that not a single property across Australia was affordable to someone living on JobSeeker or Youth Allowance in 2024.¹⁰ Rent caps are a crucial lever that Government must pull to relieve the rental crisis pressures young people are experiencing in 2025.¹¹

Recommendation 2: Resource and implement a Housing First for Youth model in WA.

YACWA urges the State Government to consider the unique needs and preferences of young people as a distinct priority cohort within Housing First policy development, employing an approach that centres the choice and control of young people experiencing and/or at risk of experiencing homelessness. YACWA's 2023 Housing First for Youth Report (HF4Y)¹² canvasses what a Housing First for Youth approach could look like in Western Australia based on the following principles:

- A right to housing with no pre-conditions,
- Youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination,
- Recovery and wellness orientation,
- Client-driven supports, and
- Social inclusion and community integration.¹³

⁹ See Cost of Living calculations 2024: potential savings from rent stabilisation 2020-2024, Shelter WA (2024) retrieved online at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q7jBAGkIG6_Y2lgpbgwxF3UgaoF-SiR/view>.

¹⁰ See 2024: Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot, Anglicare Australia (Report, 2024) retrieved at <<https://www.anglicare.asn.au/publications/2024-rental-affordability-snapshot/>>.

¹¹ See Elias Visontay, *Could rent controls ease Australia's housing crisis?* The Guardian (Web article, 2023) retrieved at <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jun/28/could-rent-controls-work-to-ease-australia-housing-crisis>>.

¹² S. Bruce-Truglio et. al, 2023: Housing First for Youth Project Report, Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (Report, 2023).

¹³ Ibid.



Recommendation 3: Establish three new Youth Foyers in WA at Albany, Bayswater and Broome locations.

The Foyer model provides a supportive pathway to independent living for young people aged 16-24 who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

The evidence-based Foyer model provides housing for young people for up to two years, alongside supported engagement with education, employment and life skill development. Recent modelling¹⁴ demonstrated that within two years, 80% of young people living at a Youth Foyer had exited into safe and stable housing,¹⁵ and 65% had gained secure employment.¹⁶ Foyer Oxford in Leederville is currently WA's only Foyer site – we need more Foyers to support young people experiencing homelessness to transition into independent living. We urge Government to deliver on FoyerInvest's request for investment to deliver four new Youth Foyers across different regions of WA in the 2025-26 State Budget.¹⁷ \$116 million in capital funding will deliver:

- 214 new homes to support 1500 young people over the coming decade,¹⁸ and
- \$134 million in benefits to Government due to reduced costs across health, justice and housing.¹⁹

Recommendation 4: Address the service availability gap for young people under 15 by developing a suite of specialist accommodation services targeted at 12 to 15 year olds.

The government should invest in the development of a suite of specialist accommodation services targeted at 12-15 year olds to address the service availability gap for this age cohort across WA. Most emergency housing providers for young people in WA provide services to young people starting at ages 15 or 16. Young people under 15 have specific needs and may

¹⁴ Accenture, Under One Roof: The Social and Economic Impact of Youth Foyers, Foyer Foundation (Report, 2022).

¹⁵ Ibid, p 11.

¹⁶ Ibid, p 7.

¹⁷ Foyer Invest, New Youth Foyers to break the cycle of youth homelessness, Foyer Foundation (Submission, November 2024).

¹⁸ Ibid, p 6.

¹⁹ Ibid.

require tailored, intensive support depending on their unique circumstances.²⁰ Further investment is needed in this year's budget to:

- Establish specialist services for young people aged 12-15 and,
- Expand the capacity of existing services to support and respond to the needs of young people in this age cohort.

Recommendation 5: Increase public, social and affordable housing stock specifically available to young people across all regions of WA.

Government must include young people as a priority cohort across all levels of housing planning and development in 2025-26 to ensure that young people are equitably supported to access public, social and affordable housing stock that is tailored to meet their needs.



Figure 2: Members of the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council, October 2023

²⁰ Cooper, T, Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 years: *Young People's Voices*, Commissioner for Children and Young People and Edith Cowan University (Report, 2018), p 48.

Priority 2: Prioritise prevention and early intervention for young people

We welcome the significant funding commitments for acute services made by the State Government in the 2024-25 State Budget:

- \$92.2 million boost to homelessness services, and
- \$22.4 million towards the establishment of Acute Care and Response Teams across Perth and the Great Southern, and \$19.5 million towards the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service's Crisis Connect service.

In addition to these initiatives, Government should develop and resource a prevention and early intervention oriented approach to mental health service delivery across WA to reduce the load on acute services and ensure that a range of supports are available to young people at all stages of their journey with mental health and wellbeing. Government should ensure that the 2025-26 State Budget is adequately balanced towards prevention and early prevention based initiatives to achieve improved outcomes for young people across housing, mental health, justice and family and domestic violence beyond crisis level care. Investing in prevention requires whole-of-government coordination to address the interconnected drivers of mental health challenges, family and intimate partner violence, homelessness and justice system engagement. Investment should be tailored to ensure that the unique needs of young people from diverse cohorts, including young people with disabilities and from multicultural backgrounds, are recognised and supported.

Focus area: Mental Health

We acknowledge and welcome the significant funding injections for mental health services delivered in recent State Budgets²¹ which have provided much-needed capacity increases to essential emergency response programs and hospitals. Preventative mental health support remains a crucial and under-resourced area for young people and the sector, who call for a

²¹ 'Record \$3.2 billion investment in WA's health and mental health', Government of Western Australia (Media release, 2024) retrieved online at <<https://www.wa.gov.au/government/media-statements/Cook-Labor-Government/Record-%243.2-billion-investment-in-WA%27s-health-and-mental-health-20240509>>.

meaningful shift in policy and budgeting approaches to shift WA's mental health system to deliver more prevention and early intervention focussed initiatives.

'There are gaps in supports available that address a holistic range of needs like social connections, financial security and physical wellbeing. Treating mental health in isolation, addressing symptoms only, and only providing crisis care without early intervention is not seen as appropriate or effective — especially in communities with high levels of stigma and low mental health literacy.'²²

Prevention and early intervention investment might look like ...

- Peer-support programs like Youth Focus' M8D8 for young men, which “encourages young men to take the time to talk things through with their mates - before problems get too big to cope with.”²³
- Place-based hubs to connect young people with peers, events and activities, like the Mayu-Mia Youth Hub in Carnarvon.²⁴
- Suicide prevention initiatives, like RUAH's Youth Sanctuary.²⁵

Our recommendations

Recommendation 6: Rapidly increase investment into prevention and early intervention services and programs for young people, prioritising:

- Youth mental health and community building, especially in regional areas,
- Young people at risk of entering the youth justice system,
- Young people at risk of perpetrating family and/or domestic violence,
- Helping young people gain skills, work, training, and other support to be independent adults.

²² L. Kaleveld et al., Going the Distance: Making mental health support work better for regional communities, Western Australian Association for Mental Health (Report, 2023), p 78.

²³ See 'M8D8: Look out for each other and be there for a mate's mental health', Youth Focus, retrieved online at <<https://youthfocus.com.au/get-help/m8d8/>>.

²⁴ See: 'Mayu-Mia Youth Hub', Shire of Carnarvon, retrieved online at <<https://www.carnarvon.wa.gov.au/services/shire-facilities/mayu-mia-youth-hub.aspx>>.

²⁵ See 'Youth Sanctuary: Early Intervention Support to Save Young Lives', RUAH, Telethon Kids Institute and Samaritans, (October 2023), retrieved online at: <chrome-extension://bdfcnmeidppjeaggnmidamkiddifkdb/viewer.html?file=https://www.ruah.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Final-Youth-Sanctuary-Information-sheet-June-23.pdf>.



Recommendation 7: Resource and establish a Western Australian Early Intervention Investment Fund budgeting mechanism.

Creating an Early Intervention Investment mechanism in WA

Alongside our friends at CEWA and WACOSS, YACWA encourages WA Treasury to create a Western Australian Early Intervention Investment Fund to:

1. Improve the lives of young people, and
2. Reduce demand for acute services.

Case study: Victoria's EIIF

The Victorian Early Intervention Investment Framework²⁶ is Australia's leading example of an investment framework through which Government can co-design, fund, and track early-intervention programs and their outcomes.

Purpose:

1. Improve the lives of young people
2. Reduce pressure and save cost of acute service delivery such as emergency health and mental health care, homelessness services, family and domestic violence services, and police and prisons.

Based on consultation with VCOSS, YACWA supports the development of a Western Australian EIIF model that includes:

- A clear and robust definition of 'early intervention' to ensure that funding is meaningfully targeted at high-need programs that genuinely intervene early to prevent exacerbation of adverse outcomes for young people,
- Strong incentives for whole of government approaches to utilising early intervention investment modelling to achieve strong social and economic outcomes for communities across WA,
- Meaningful co-design and collaboration with sector,

²⁶ See 'Early Intervention Investment Framework', State Government of Victoria, (webpage, 2024) retrieved online at: < <https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/early-intervention-investment-framework>>.

- Long-term vision and support for the continuation and strengthening of existing service delivery achieving strong outcomes (ie. avoiding repeated rollouts of new pilot programs).

Recommendation 8: Establish more place-based youth service hubs across WA.

Building on what works: success through prevention

Youth service hubs like Vinnies' Passages²⁷ hubs in Perth and Peel offer young people a one-stop access point to a range of support services and referral pathways. YACWA urges Government to invest in youth hubs as crucial social infrastructure that delivers prevention and early intervention outcomes for young people experiencing a range of vulnerabilities.²⁸

YACWA celebrates the Cook Government's recent election commitment of \$7.5 million towards a new Youth and Community Hub in Newman as an example of Government's commitment to young people in the Pilbara.

²⁷ See 'Passages Youth Engagement Hub', Vinnies WA (webpage, 2024), retrieved online at <<https://www.vinnies.org.au/wa/services-in-western-australia/passages-youth-engagement-hub>>.

²⁸ Youth Futures Foundation, Youth Hubs: What works? (Submission, 2020) retrieved online at <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Youth_Hubs_what_works_.pdf>.

Priority 3: Create a strong and sustainable youth sector

“Youth work is a practice that places young people and their interests first. Youth work is a relational practice, where the youth worker operates alongside the young person in their context. Youth work is an empowering practice that advocates for and facilitates a young person’s independence, participation in society, connectedness and realisation of their rights.”²⁹

Western Australia’s youth sector provides essential and invaluable support to young people across the state. However, the sector remains under pressure: years of inadequately indexed funding and rolled-over contracts, increasing demand for support services among young people, lack of regional housing for workers, and inadequate training and upskilling opportunities are making it harder than ever for the sector to retain workers and effectively deliver services at the scale required. Strengthening the youth sector should be a key priority for Government in the 2025-26 State Budget because:

1. Young people in WA deserve a strong, connected and well-resourced youth sector to meet their needs, support them through challenges and uphold their human rights.³⁰
2. Economic return on investment has been demonstrated in similar contexts. A Victorian report found that \$1 invested into youth work returns \$2.62 in benefits for young people and the community.³¹

Our recommendations

Recommendation 9: Commit to *sustainably funding WA’s youth sector*.

Government must commit to funding WA’s youth sector adequately and sustainably in 2025 to ensure that organisations are able to deliver procured services at required capacities, and to prevent the flow-on of harmful effects of an under-resourced sector to young people and their communities. Young people across WA deserve a youth sector that is adequately resourced to:

- Deliver services that are aligned to level and nuance of demand,

²⁹ Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, National Definition of Youth Work (2013).

³⁰ General Assembly Resolution 44/25, Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations (1989).

³¹ Deloitte, Youth Work Matters: Social Return on Investment Study, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (Report, 2022) retrieved online at <<https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Uploads/Youth-Affairs-Council-Victoria-Social-Return-on-Investment-Study-of-Youth-Work-Final-Report-V2.pdf>>, p 20.

- Cultivate strong and trusting relationships with young people, families and communities in an ongoing capacity, and
- Innovate over time to respond to the unique and changing needs of young people across different places and services.

YACWA echoes and supports sector advocacy for Government commitment to:

- Adequate and sustainable funding for community services providing vital support to young people and families across all regions of WA,
- A new and updated indexation formula that incorporates award increases and changes to expenditure inflation, and
- Recommissioned and updated contracts to finally end the cycle of contract roll-overs.³²

Recommendation 10: Resource more youth worker positions in schools across WA.

YACWA encourages Treasury to collaborate with the Department of Education and the Youth Workers in Schools network to fund additional youth worker positions in all WA public schools and to invest in increased professional infrastructure to support and retain workers in the profession, building on the State Government's ongoing commitment to improving education outcomes for young people across WA. We recommend the development and implementation of a centralised strategy to coordinate and resource youth work positions in schools, including a comprehensive review of current student service roles and best practice models.

This should include:

1. Providing centralised support for SSOs and SSCs,
2. Requiring minimum qualifications for SSO/SSC positions including eligibility for relevant professional association,
3. Reviewing SSO and SSC job descriptions, titles, and duties to better reflect the roles and recognise the roles of youth workers in schools, and

³² See 'Communities sector at breaking point as underfunding cripples capacity', Western Australian Council of Social Services (Media release, 2024) retrieved online at <<https://www.wacoss.org.au/news/communities-sector-at-breaking-point-as-underfunding-cripples-capacity/>> and 'Sustainable Services' Community Employers of Western Australia (Submission, 2019) retrieved online at <<https://cewa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/ero-fact-sheet-october-2019.pdf>>.

- d. Increasing funding for and incentivising schools to hire additional youth workers in schools.

Recommendation 11: Increase housing stock specifically for youth sector workers in regional areas.

“Finding staff with experience and training in the youth sector is difficult. Services want workers who are from the community, which is hard to do, but there is no accommodation in the regions for workers to come live there from the city.” - Youth worker, YACWA consultation 2024

The lack of housing stock and unaffordability of available housing stock across regional WA is severely impacting the ability of crucial youth services, such as youth centres, to function. Difficulty attracting and retaining staff due to lack of housing remains a key challenge of services. In order to address the specific impacts of the housing crisis on services, youth workers and young people, Government must urgently implement mechanism that delivers housing for youth workers across regional WA in line with demand.

Recommendation 12: Fund mental health crisis response training to upskill and support all youth workers in WA, starting with investment into WA's regional workforce.

Youth workers must be trained, accredited and paid to accurately reflect their workload and responsibilities. During YACWA's consultation process for this submission, regional youth workers repeatedly reported being required to act beyond the scope of their JDF in order to support young people, particularly when supporting young people experiencing mental health crises. Alongside other measures, Government should urgently roll-out mental health crisis response training to upskill youth workers in WA, focussing on investment targeted at our regional workforce, in order to upskill and adequately remunerate workers for their expanded scope of responsibilities. Investment will benefit workers, services and young people seeking support.

Priority 4: Commit to a total overhaul and reformation of WA's youth justice system

We welcome and recognise the Cook Government's recent commitments to improving youth justice initiatives in WA, including:

- A new full-time satellite Children's Court sitting in the old Armadale Court,
- A new Night Space program in Kununurra, and
- Boosted funding for PCYCs across WA.

While these commitments mark some positive steps, more needs to be done to support young people to reduce their engagement with the justice system. YACWA will continue to advocate for the total overhaul and reformation of WA's youth justice system, and we urge the Government to take further action to end WA's youth justice crisis.

Our recommendations

Recommendation 13: Immediately implement a therapeutic service *delivery model in WA's* youth detention facilities.

Recommendation 14: Rapidly increase investment into community-based programs for young people across WA based on justice reinvestment modelling to prevent engagement with the justice system.

Recommendation 15: Resource a long-term, strategic vision for youth justice system transformation in WA where no children end up in prison.

*"We believe that with policy shift towards diversion and care, investment in community based solutions, and legislative reform, we can end youth imprisonment and create safer communities at the same time."*³³

³³ M. Rothwell et al, Blueprint for a Better Future: Paving the Way for Youth Justice Reform in Western Australia, Social Reinvestment WA (Report, 2022), p 12.

WA's youth justice system continues to cause serious harm to young people

This year, the Department of Justice's failure to respond to community advocacy for a better, safer youth justice system could not be more evident: two children have died inside WA's youth detention facilities since October 2023. Cleveland Dodd (age 16) passed away in Unit 18 in October 2023,³⁴ and a young person³⁵ (age 16) passed away at Banksia Hill Detention Centre in August 2024.³⁶ Both deaths are tragedies that were preventable.

We need a total overhaul and transformation of WA's youth justice system now more than ever. The recommendations contained in Social Reinvestment WA's Blueprint for a Better Future³⁷ report provide an evidence-based map for this much-needed change.

Government must do everything in its power to ensure that no more children are harmed by WA's criminal justice system.

Centring young people's wellbeing through justice reinvestment and early intervention

Disadvantage, trauma, and discrimination are key drivers of children's engagement with the criminal justice system in WA.³⁸ Overhauling WA's approach to youth justice means recognising the need for prevention and early intervention to ensure that children and young people are supported as early as possible to live healthy, happy lives. Comprehensive assessment of neurological conditions, disabilities and conditions including Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, hearing loss and vision loss must be easily accessible upon first contact with the justice system. Government should prioritise investing in young

³⁴ See Giovanni Torre, 'Advocates back Indigenous-led intervention in WA youth justice, renew call for closure of Unit 18', National Indigenous Times (Media release, December 2024) retrieved online at <<https://nit.com.au/posts/tag/cleveland-dod>> and 'An investigation into allegations of serious misconduct following the death of a young detainee in Unit 18 Casuarina Prison', Corruption and Crime Commission (Report, June 2024) retrieved online at < https://www.ccc.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/An%20investigation%20into%20allegations%20of%20serious%20misconduct%20following%20the%20death%20of%20a%20young%20detainee%20in%20Unit%2018%20Casuarina%20Prison_1.pdf>.

³⁵ Unnamed per family wishes.

³⁶ R. Shine and A. Mayes, 'Banksia Hill teenager becomes the second child to die by suicide in WA's troubled youth detention system', ABC News (Media release, 2024) retrieved online at < <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-08-30/banksia-hill-suicide-second-child-death-wa-youth-detention-/104290074>>.

³⁷ M. Rothwell et al, Blueprint for a Better Future: Paving the Way for Youth Justice Reform in Western Australia, Social Reinvestment WA (Report, 2022).

³⁸ Discussion Paper: Youth Justice in Western Australia, Commissioner for Children and Young People (Report, 2024).



people's wellbeing and promoting the rights of the child at every level, focussing on programs and supports that keep young people connected to their families, communities and learning opportunities.

Children belong at home in community – not in prison.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

- Uluru Statement from the Heart³⁹

Instead of locking children up, Government should invest in a new approach to youth justice grounded in:

- Community leadership and co-creation,
- Holistic and therapeutic approaches,
- Data and evidence-driven proactive interventions,
- Accessible supports,
- Aboriginal Self-Determination,
- Justice Reinvestment, and
- Transparent, accountable and anti-discriminatory systems.⁴⁰

Government must listen to young people and experts:

“Western Australia and other jurisdictions should undertake comprehensive reviews of their child justice legislation and associated policies to ensure consistency with child rights. In particular, reviews should consider provisions relating to the best interests of the child, isolation and separation in detention, bail restrictions and mandatory minimum sentencing.”⁴¹

- Letter to the Premier August 2024 from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Katie Kiss, National Children's Commissioner, Anne Hollonds

³⁹ Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017) retrieved online at <<https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>>.

⁴⁰ Principles from Blueprint for a Better Future, Social Reinvestment WA (2022).

⁴¹ K. Kiss et al, 'Letter to the Premier' (August 2024) retrieved online at <<https://nit.com.au/30-08-2024/13440/childrens-and-human-rights-advocates-wrote-to-wa-premier-to-urge-reforms-days-before-death-of-child-in-custody>>.

and Official Representative to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Dr Hannah McGlade.

The positive impact of intervening early

In 2024, new Australian research found that early interventions targeting preschoolers can halve the rate of juvenile offending. The 20-year study⁴² of a cohort of 543 children living in a socially disadvantaged region of Brisbane found that increased support for families with young children such as at-home supports including access to counselling and family management support for parents corresponded with decreased rates of offending among young people once they reached teenage years.⁴³



Figure 3: YACWA staff gather at a rally at Parliament House, September 2024 (Image by ABC News, Courtney Withers)

⁴² J. Allen et al, 'Family support, enriched preschool and serious youth offending' Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice (Griffith University, 2024).

⁴³ Ibid. See also James Taylor, 'Preschool intervention can reduce youth crime, Queensland study finds', ABC News (Media release, December 2024) retrieved online at <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-10/intervention-stops-children-from-becoming-juvenile-offenders-qld/104692558>>.

Priority 5: Embed and amplify the voices of young people with lived experience in government decision making and service delivery

Our recommendations

Recommendation 16: Actively include and value the voices of young people at all levels of Government decision making, starting with adequately resourcing all Local Government areas to deliver youth strategies, youth centres and youth advisory groups in their communities.

The right of children and young people to have their voices heard and to participate in making decisions that impact their lives is embedded in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. To address systemic inequality and promote the inclusion of young people in Government decision-making processes, Government should invest in:

- Recognising the expertise and needs of diverse cohorts of young people, including young people living with disabilities and young people from multicultural and migrant backgrounds,
- Providing supportive, fun and accessible environments for young people to connect with peers and mentors, and
- Strengthening opportunities and infrastructure to support meaningful engagement and connection between young people and decision-makers.

The voices of young people are excluded from civic engagement in many ways: young people under the age of 18 are excluded from the voter franchise, and young people are under-represented in elected-member positions at all levels of Government. Localised programs such as youth advisory groups provide an important pathway for young people to engage in their local community, contribute to political processes and hold decision makers accountable for representing their interests.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People's Participation Guidelines emphasise the importance of the following principles in practices of youth engagement:

- Choice: empowering young people to understand and choose what activities and processes they want to be involved in,

- Diversity: young people should be recognised as a diverse group with a range of perspectives that are actively sought out,
- Understanding Aboriginal cultural contexts: organisations and workers must engage with young Aboriginal people in culturally appropriate ways grounded in understanding of the unique needs of different communities.

Government should actively seek to increase the inclusion of the voices of young people with lived experience of homelessness, mental health challenges, family and intimate partner violence and/or justice system engagement in order to address systemic inequalities.

Youth advisory groups

Local Government youth advisory groups provide an impactful and important forum through which young people are able to connect with peers in a fun and supportive environment, connect with decision makers in the electorates in which they live, and hold elected members accountable to meet their needs.

“It’s extremely important that elected members represent young people” - LGA YAC Coordinator

In practice: Cockburn

Cockburn’s Youth Advisory Collective is a group of twelve young people who meet fortnightly at Cockburn’s Youth Centre. Ages of members range between 12 and 24 years old, and most members attend the evening meeting after a day at school or university.

“We have a very intelligent, motivated and passionate group of young people who want to participate in the system. It’s about giving young people a platform to ask for what they want ... and requiring adults to listen to them.” - Cockburn Youth Advisory Collective Coordinator

The Collective’s Coordinator described witnessing a range of positive impacts in the lives of the young people involved with the group, including increased political engagement, empowerment, peer support, fun, and belonging.



Figure 6: Youth Advisory Group workshop with the City of Swan, 2023

In practice: the Shire of Ashburton

The Shire of Ashburton's Youth Strategy has achieved several positive outcomes for young people and their families in the region since its launch in 2023. The Strategy provides structure and guidance to the Shire of Ashburton to increase its youth engagement across four towns. The Strategy has supported regional team members to commence building relationships with young people, families and schools, and run programs for young people including arts and life skills workshops, gym entry for under 16s, a regular gaming event at the local library and free access to the Onslow Aquatic Centre for young people on Friday nights.

"Young people need to be able to access support services that are separate from their families. They deserve the best kind of support." - regional youth worker

Recommendation 17: Commit to ongoing funding for the Youth Pride Network.

The Youth Pride Network (YPN) is a group of LGBTIQ+ young people passionate about using systemic advocacy to create a Western Australia in which all LGBTIQ+ young people are fully

included, accepted and celebrated by their community.⁴⁴ The State Government must ensure that the voices of young LGBTIQ+ people are heard by committing to ongoing funding for the Youth Pride Network in the 2025-26 State Budget.

Recommendation 18: Commit to ongoing funding for the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council.

The Youth Homelessness Advisory Council (YHAC) is a youth-led advocacy group for young people with lived experience of homelessness in Western Australia.⁴⁵ An ongoing funding commitment from the State Government in this year's budget will ensure that YHAC can continue to provide a crucial pathway through which young people with lived experience of homelessness and housing insecurity are able to harness their lived experience to advocate for change.

Our sector told us...

Youth engagement should be:

- Accessible
- Meaningful
- Adequately funded and remunerated

Some of the barriers to effective youth engagement include:

- Systemic exclusion of young people
- Discretionary engagement: no obligation for elected members to consult with young people means their voices are often not heard
- Lack of funding for remuneration and other supports for meetings like transport and food
- Exacerbated challenges in regional areas of WA due to a range of factors including: high cost of transport between towns, youth worker staff shortages due to lack of housing, and relationship-building challenges due to transient communities of workers and young people.

⁴⁴ See Youth Pride Network, 'About' (webpage, 2024) retrieved online at <<https://youthpridenetwork.net/>>.

⁴⁵ See 'Youth Homelessness Advisory Council', Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (Webpage, 2024) retrieved online at < <https://www.yacwa.org.au/youth-leadership/yhac/>>.



Conclusion

The 2025-26 State Budget presents an exciting opportunity for Government to support and empower young people across WA by listening to their voices, recognising their value, and actively meeting their needs through targeted initiatives. By investing in the foundations of young people's wellbeing, strengthening WA's youth sector and amplifying the voices of young people, Government can take meaningful steps to address systemic inequality and uplift young people across WA.

YACWA looks forward to ongoing collaboration with Government to action the recommendations outlined in this submission.

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