



SUBMISSION

TO | **yourSAy - The Department of Human Services**

TOPIC | **South Australia's Youth Action Plan 2023 - 2026**

DATE | **06 August 2023**

CONTACT

E | advocacy@unitingcommunities.org

P | 08 8202 5111

Submission to the South Australian Government's Department of Human Services' yourSAy consultation on South Australia's Youth Action Plan 2023 - 2026

Key Recommendations

Uniting Communities thanks the South Australian Government for seeking feedback into the development of the 2023 - 2026 Youth Action Plan. We too believe that all young people in South Australia should have fair and equitable access to opportunities, resources and supports.

Uniting Communities recommends that the 2023 – 2026 Youth Action Plan:

1. Includes [initiatives](#) that raise awareness of loneliness and addresses the stigma associated with it.
2. Assists young people who are involved with, or at risk of becoming involved with, the child protection system by adopting our [six-point plan](#) to reframe the system.
3. Commits to better supporting young people access safe and appropriate housing by increasing resources to services like the [Ruby's Reunification Program](#) and by improving South Australia's [residential tenancy laws](#).

About Uniting Communities

We are an inclusive not-for-profit organisation working alongside more than 80,000 South Australians each year and have been creating positive change for South Australian communities for more than 120 years. We advocate for systems change across diverse social justice issues to shape public and social policy that delivers better outcomes for marginalised communities.

We help those in need find the courage to move forward through enriching their lives and uniting the communities in which they live. By tackling the deep-seated challenges that affect people's lives, we are working to create systemic change and brighter futures for all South Australians. We have a bold and unceasing commitment to social justice, advocating for change and improvement in the lives of those who need it most.

We deliver a number of youth focused services, including:

- Streetlink (aims to assist young people and their families with health support and counselling about alcohol and other drugs)
- Ruby's Reunification Program (aims to assist 12- to 17-year-olds who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness by supporting them to resolve conflict and improve relationships with parents or caregivers)
- Jo's – Therapeutic Youth Residential Care (aims to provides ongoing long-term residential care to young people aged between 10- to 17- years old who are under the Guardianship of the Minister)
- Bfriend (supports anyone who has questions about sexuality, gender identify and intersex variation, and their loved ones)
- Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault Counselling for young people (supports 12- to 25-year-olds with counselling services that aim to help the young person to heal and to move forward)
- Headspace Mount Gambier (supports 12- to 25-year-olds seeking assistance with mental health, physical health, work and study, and alcohol and other drugs)

Additional Comments

Please note that we have answered questions from the consultation paper that are most relevant to our expertise and experience of supporting young people.

ACTION AREA 1: Physical Health, and Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health

Young South Australians are physically, social, emotionally and mentally healthy

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Question 3: How can the South Australian Government improve the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of young people?

Uniting Communities [conducts twice yearly surveys](#) of the South Australia population to measure rates of loneliness. Consistently, young people (18-24) report the highest levels of feeling lonely 'often.' In our April 2023 survey 29% of young people (18-24) reported feeling lonely 'often' and 55% reported feeling lonely 'sometimes.' Our data found that those on lower incomes, unemployment benefits, or students, reported the highest levels of feeling lonely 'often.' Further, in our April 2023 survey:

- 30% of young people 'often' reported lacking companionship and 40% 'sometimes'
- 31% of young people 'often' reported feeling left out and 49% sometimes
- 28% of young people 'often' felt isolated and 44% 'sometimes'

Uniting Communities held an Overcoming Loneliness workshop in 2022 and we dedicated a session to the issue of young people and loneliness. Two young people from the [TACSI Youth Connections Project](#) presented at the event. The project offers valuable insights into the issue of young people and loneliness. The project involved young people living in Port Augusta and Port Pirie identifying, through a co-design process with service providers, opportunities that can create meaningful connections for young people experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

The young people identified a number of barriers including lack of money, mental health, family issues, lack of support and not knowing who to reach out to as contributing factors to social isolation and loneliness. Solutions they identified were flexible support, a wider range of activities to make connections (e.g not just sport), clearer communication from services and activities that are available and updating services to reflect current needs and desires (consultation, co-design).

A lack of awareness and the stigma associated with loneliness makes it difficult for young people to reach out for support and can contribute to them feeling increasingly isolated. In 2022 Uniting Communities created the [Unlock Loneliness campaign](#) that aims to help young people start a conversation about loneliness, break down the stigma surrounding it and includes tips for young people to overcome loneliness.

Uniting Communities also regularly publishes an [Overcoming Loneliness](#) e-news bulletin that is filled with the latest information about initiatives, research, innovative case studies and data related to addressing loneliness.

ACTION AREA 2: Safety and Justice

Young South Australians are safe and nurtured

CHILD PROTECTION

Question 6: How can the South Australian Government help young people who are involved with, or are at risk of becoming involved with, the child protection system?

Uniting Communities has developed a [six-point plan](#) to reframe South Australia's child protection system and believes the overriding objective of the system should be "Keeping as many children and young people living safely and growing up healthily and happily in their own families, community and culture".



What is needed is a clear, achievable but nonetheless, ambitious plan that has at its heart the following key components:

1. Consensus that what we are seeking to achieve is to keep as many children and young people living safely and growing up healthily and happily in their own families, community and culture. Agreeing that this is our key objective helps to frame the type and degree of responses we then enact. It doesn't mean that intervention won't be needed to protect children from harm by removing them from their families and household for a period of time. It does mean though that our primary efforts (and investment) will be directed to keeping children living safely in their own homes and communities wherever possible. This is a fundamental reframe of our current approach to managing the safety and wellbeing of children in SA. How we frame the problem and objective determines how we fix it.
2. A political response which involves a high-level Compact across all major political parties to collectively work to establish a new approach which includes an agreed narrative on the objective of our child protection system and intervention. To facilitate real reform, we also need agreement to avoid making political gain from catastrophes and major incidents within child protection. This is not to suggest that accountability is not important or required. However, the politicisation of child protection has failed to improve the performance of our current system and has perversely probably caused more harm by seeking to further reinforce an overly punitive and surveillance response that is fundamentally flawed. Getting multi-lateral political buy-in to the need for a complete reform agenda for child protection in SA is probably the single most important pre-requisite for sustainable and effective change. To shift the dial on child safety and wellbeing in SA requires a consistent, long-term (multi-year) plan that all sides of politics can contribute to and ultimately commit to. Without this it will be impossible to have the community conversations required to reframe our response.

Without a multi-partisan commitment maintaining the course for reform will not be possible. This requires true political leadership which has been largely absent for many years. As a starting point all leaders of our Political Parties in SA should agree to a collaborative multi-partisan Compact to deliver on an agreed reform agenda for Child Protection in South Australia.

3. Legislative reform – the review of the Children and Young People (Safety) Act provides the ideal platform to achieve an agreed understanding of the legislative levers and responses required to keep children safe, supported and thriving. There are many elements of the Act that need to be addressed but the following changes will be required to underpin a whole system reform.
 - Change the threshold of risk underpinning the obligation to report – the current definition is antiquated and has created a funnel for drawing children (and their families) into a statutory vortex that is often unnecessarily and unreasonably broad. In some cases, it has only served to increase the risk of harm for children rather than protect them.
 - Put an end to mandatory reporting – it has failed to achieve the objective of making child protection everyone’s responsibility and creates an overwhelming culture of detection, surveillance and reporting rather than responding and helping.
 - Enshrine the value and obligation to offer and deliver prevention and early intervention services to families at risk and tie any decision to remove children from families to a right to be provided such assistance. This shifts the onus of responsibility for the State to not only look at and respond to issues of safety for children but their obligation to do whatever is needed to keep children living safely within their family and community. It is a “Family Support First” response to addressing risk of harm. This had been the intent of the Prevention and Early intervention for the Development and Well-being of Children and Young people Bill introduced to Parliament back in late 2017 which unfortunately was never legislated.
4. Shifting the investment and expenditure paradigm - Our expenditure on care services alone has risen by an astonishing 213% in the past decade. It is difficult to identify another area of public expenditure in this State that has got anywhere close to this level of increased cost. We now spend over \$0.56B a year to care for the growing number of children we are removing from families and communities. It's not a financially sustainable trajectory. Conversely our investment in ensuring families can receive the support required to maintain children living safely and well at home has only marginally improved over the corresponding period and is well below what most other jurisdictions across Australia are investing in strengthening and supporting families. Less than 9.8% of total child protection expenditure in SA is spent on early intervention (intensive family support services and family support services). This proportional allocation of resources for prevention has children safely at home.

As a result, most families who require quality and often sustained help to ensure they can keep their children safe are not able to access needed help. It is not surprising that we then resort to (the more costly) alternative of removing children into care environments including residential homes. At a minimum the level of resourcing for family support and interventions including reunification needs to be quadrupled in SA to give us a fighting chance of turning the tide of excessive child removals. We should be aiming to lift our expenditure on family support and intensive family support services to \$275M p.a. if we are serious about making a sizeable dent in the over representation of children in care in SA. Even then, on today’s values, it would only represent 30% of our total expenditure on Child Protection in SA.

5. Setting targets – setting targets to keep more children and young people living safely at home and out of our care systems signals a very important message. Targets matter as they help shift where and how we spend money and ensure a focus on meeting the overarching goal of keeping more children in their homes, safe and thriving. Our initial target should aim to reduce the number of children in care in SA to the national average in the next 3 years.

South Australia's rate of children and young people in our care system is currently just under 50% higher than the national average. If we were to perform at the national average of children in care, there would be 1,450 less children and young people in care in South Australia today. This would in turn save South Australians more than \$174M p.a. in out of home care expenditure – money better directed to helping families and keeping children out of our care system. Beyond this target we should aim to become a leader in keeping children safely within their families and communities by achieving care rates at 10% below the national average. These are ambitious but by no means unattainable targets if we implement the reforms as outlined.

6. Structural Change - To achieve this level of reform requires strong political commitment and a changed community narrative about what child safety and protection means and what is needed to give us our best chance of achieving it. However, it also requires all systems and services which interact with children and families to work in a greater sense of harmony and common purpose. This might require some different structural and governance measures to ensure all those with a responsibility for protecting and supporting children and families (whatever their role) are directing their efforts, their resources and their accountability and reporting to better align with the agreed goal of keeping children safe in family and community.

The primary responsibility for child safety and wellbeing is not our Child Protection Department although they have a very important role to play. It is in our schools, health settings, community agencies and housing authorities amongst others. Creating a 'super' Department responsible for the wellbeing of all Children and Families may not be viewed as a positive or desirable reform. However other structural reforms should be considered to facilitate all of agency and Government (and ultimately society) accountability for promoting the welfare of our children, young people and their families. Our current fractured responses are not working and haven't been working for many years. Creating an alternative line of responsibility and reporting either through agency amalgamation or through other means (such as a high-level Cabinet or Parliamentary Committee) for managing a more cohesive response should certainly be part of the broader reform agenda.

Creating a State where we have a declining number of children needing to be removed or remaining in care is possible and with political will and a consensus around how we define the problem and frame the objective - it can be done.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Question 8: How can the South Australian Government help young people to access safe and appropriate housing?

In order for young people to feel safe and secure it is essential that they have stable accommodation and for many young people access to housing is a serious concern. Not only is it difficult to attain and afford a rental property amidst a rental affordability crisis but there are long waitlists for access to social and affordable housing options. For some young people this leaves them experiencing homelessness, living in temporary accommodation with family or friends.

Due to a variety of challenges experienced by young people and their families, family relationship breakdowns can be one of the key drivers of young people between the ages of 12-17 being at risk of or

experiencing homelessness. With access to the right services (including programs like Uniting Communities' [Ruby's Reunification Service](#)) young people and their families can get the support they need to stay together, and this ultimately reduces the number of young people entering the homelessness sector.

It is vital that housing policy is not just limited to helping young people attain home ownership but considers improving the outcomes for renters as well. In the current rental market young people make up a significant portion of private sector renters. For many young people renting is no longer a steppingstone to home ownership but a destination with the prospective of home ownership out of reach. As such rental laws need to be suitable for long term housing.

Not only do young people face discrimination in the application stage of the private rental market but they also face a lack of affordability, safety and security due to insufficient protections for private sector renters. The current presence of short-term contracts and no cause evictions means renters do not have security of tenure. In addition, the unaffordability of the rental market including the lack of regulation of rent increases makes renting increasingly unaffordable for young people. Many young people are forced into shared accommodation that is unsafe and unsuitable.

In addition to this, poor housing conditions in rental properties are a serious health concern for young people including a lack of minimum energy efficiency standards and repairs not being made. Protections for tenants must be improved in the legislation coupled with greater enforcement of the legislation. Currently the system relies on the young person (renter) to go to the Tribunal if the landlord is not following the law which they are unlikely to attempt due to the costs and being vulnerable to an eviction or poor review left about them on a tenancy database. Government departments must have the resourcing and responsibility to ensure compliance of legislation to better protect all renters including young people.

Conclusion

Uniting Communities thanks the Department of Human Services for seeking input into the development of the 2023 – 2026 Youth Action Plan and we believe this plan has the ability to assist all young people in South Australia to have fair and equitable access to opportunities, resources and supports.