

Yfoundations

Response to NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People Consultation Paper 2027-2030

June 2026



Introduction

Yfoundations is the peak body for children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in New South Wales, representing the specialist services that support them.

We welcome the development of the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2027–2030 and the shared, whole-of-government vision it sets for every child and young person in the state.

This submission responds across the Plan’s five themes, and one idea runs through each: for children and young people, a safe and stable home is the foundation upon which everything else is built. This is a matter of rights as well as policy: Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises every child’s right to a standard of living adequate for their development, and requires the State to assist families to realise it – providing material assistance, particularly with regard to housing, where there is need.

This submission is informed by consultations led by Yfoundations across the NSW homelessness sector in May 2026 to provide advice to the NSW Government on the development of the NSW Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan. Yfoundations strongly advocates for the need for consistency of intent, purpose and commitment between the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People and the NSW Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan. The report from the consultations on the Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan makes a wide range of recommendations aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness in this State. Where relevant, the recommendations made in this submission are consistent with and reinforce those made for inclusion in the whole-of-government Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People is referred to as ‘The Plan’ throughout in this submission.

1. United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

2. Yfoundations, Homelessness NSW & Domestic Violence NSW. (2026). *Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan Sector Consultation Paper*. <https://www.yfoundations.org.au/resources/Policy-Papers/child-and-youth-homelessness-action-plan-sector-consultation-paper-june-2026/>

Educated and thriving

A safe, stable home is the non-negotiable foundation for attending and doing well in school, work or study, and the Plan should recognise stable housing as foundational to education, and name children and young people experiencing homelessness as a priority population in this theme.

Schools are a powerful site for early intervention: disengagement from education is often the first visible sign of a housing or family crisis. Place-based, school-based early identification has been shown to reduce both adolescent homelessness and early school leaving, and this approach has already been piloted in NSW through the Universal Screening and Support program.^{3,4} We seek that the Plan supports this approach and the cross-agency coordination (complementing the parallel work led by Homes NSW) – across education, homelessness and family services – that makes it work.

Cost of living is, for many young people, a binding constraint on their education, often forcing a choice between earning and learning. Income inadequacy is a structural driver with income support rates leaving young people well below the poverty line.⁶ Whilst acknowledging that income support is a Commonwealth responsibility, it is recommended that the Plan backs advocacy to lift Youth Allowance to an adequate benchmark, alongside advocacy to ensure mandatory student placements are adequately paid and supported.

Youth specialist homelessness services link young people back into education and employment as part of wraparound support. Existing measures should also reach this cohort: the Plan should work to extend TAFE fee-free Smart and Skilled scholarship eligibility⁷ to children and young people experiencing homelessness, who face the same barriers as the care leavers and DFV survivors currently eligible.

3 MacKenzie, D., Hand, T., Zufferey, C., McNelis, S., Spinney, A., & Tedmanson, D. (2020). Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people (AHURI Final Report No. 327). Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited. <https://doi.org/10.18408/ahuri-5119101>

4 MacKenzie, D., Hand, T., & Gill, P. (2024). The 'Community of Schools and Services' (COSS) Model of Early Intervention: A System-Changing Innovation for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness. *Youth*, 4(3), 1305-1321. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030082>

5 Homes NSW. (2026). *NSW Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2025-2027* (Action 19). NSW Government. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2026-01/nsw-homelessness-strategy-action-plan-2025-2027.pdf>

6 ACOSS & UNSW Sydney. (2025). *Poverty in Australia 2025: Overview*. Australian Council of Social Service. https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty_in_australia_2025_overview/

7 NSW Department of Education. (2026, May 19). *Fee-free scholarships*. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/skills-nsw/students-and-job-seekers/low-cost-and-free-training-options/fee-free-scholarships>

Educated and thriving

Supporting children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to be educated and thrive in NSW includes:

- recognising stable housing as foundational to education, and naming those experiencing homelessness as a priority population in this theme;
- school-based early identification of young people at risk, with cross-agency coordination across education, homelessness and family services;
- advocating to lift Youth Allowance to an adequate benchmark and to ensure mandatory student placements are paid and supported; and
- extending fee-free Smart and Skilled scholarship eligibility to children and young people experiencing homelessness.

Community connection

For children and young people in NSW, connections to community, family, school and Country are the first things the system takes away when local services are missing.

When a young person becomes homeless in a community with no youth-specific accommodation or support, the outcome is too often dislocation from their support networks and communities. With nowhere local to go, they are moved to wherever a bed can be found, or left with nothing, and forced back to situations they were trying to escape. This dislocation from community occurs as a direct consequence of services not existing, or not being of an appropriate scale, where young people live. NSW has the highest number of children and young people presenting alone in any state,⁸ and regional and rural communities that carry that need often have few if any local services to meet it. The harm for unaccompanied children and young people runs deeper in this group, because as the recent research Yfoundations contributed to makes clear, homelessness for this group is fundamentally a crisis in the availability of care, not just housing.⁹ Care depends on relationships, familiarity and belonging – exactly what dislocation severs. The Plan should support stable, longer-term, relationship-based accommodation and care, located within young people’s own communities and matched to their needs rather than being rationed on the basis of “housing readiness”.

Likewise there is a need for investment in services that respond to the needs of young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness as a result of discrimination due to race, religion, sexuality, gender or ability. LGBTIQ+ young people, for example, often need inner-city based services for community and cultural safety.

Youth hubs – a place-based model championed by Youth Action and endorsed by Yfoundations – offer access to a diverse range of services and support and provide a space where young people can build relationships and trust with youth workers in a safe and inclusive environment.¹⁰ Where fixed models cannot reach, the Youth Hubs model can operate as mobile or outreach services – keeping young people connected to the community while extending support into rural and regional areas that static sites can’t serve. Long-term mobile outreach is likewise identified as critical to helping young people stabilise safely close to home. The Plan should back flexible, place-based youth services and outreach with secure, long-term funding, prioritising regional and rural communities and those experiencing the greatest disadvantage.

8 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2024-25: Children and young people receiving support alone* (Figure YOUNG.1). Australian Government. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/young-people-presenting-alone>

9 Robinson, C., Hobbs, C., Batterham, D., McGregor, J., & Stone, W. (2026). *Better futures: Supported accommodation for unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness* (AHURI Final Report No. 459). Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. <https://doi.org/10.18408/ahuri4133801>

10 Youth Action. (2025, November). *From fragmented to coordinated: Building stronger systems for young people through Youth Hubs* [Position paper]. https://youthaction.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Youth_Action_Fragmented_to_Coordinated.pdf

Community connection

Transport can act as a practical barrier to connection – to family, services, education and community life – and it falls hardest on young people experiencing homelessness, those in out-of-home care, and young people in regional and rural NSW, where transport is scarce and costly. The Plan should support extending Child/Youth Opal Card eligibility to at least 18, and the seven-day use of the School and Student Opal Cards with removal of route restrictions,¹¹ so that cost and rigid eligibility do not cut young people off from the communities and supports they rely on.

Connection to Country is especially protective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, who are significantly over-represented among those experiencing homelessness¹² – and for whom dislocation can mean removal from Country itself. Responses must be culturally safe, locally embedded and led by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Supporting children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to stay connected to their communities includes:

- investing in local, youth-specific supported accommodation so that a housing or care crisis does not force young people out of their community;
- providing stable, longer-term, relationship-based care matched to need rather than rationed by “housing readiness”, recognising that for unaccompanied children homelessness is a crisis in care, not only housing;
- investing in services in locations that respond to the needs of young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness who are often subject to higher rates of discrimination;
- funding flexible, place-based youth hubs and long-term mobile outreach with secure, ongoing funding, prioritising regional and rural NSW;
- easing transport barriers to connection by extending Child/Youth Opal Card eligibility to at least 18 and allowing unrestricted, seven-day use of School and Student Opal Cards, recognising the added burden in regional and rural NSW; and
- ensuring responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are culturally safe, locally embedded and ACCO-led, keeping young people connected to family, community and Country.

¹¹ Transport for NSW. (n.d.). *Children and youth*. Retrieved June 23, 2026, from <https://transportnsw.info/tickets-fares/eligibility-concessions/children-youth>

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2024-25: Children and young people receiving support alone* (Figure YOUNG.1). Australian Government. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/young-people-presenting-alone>

Supported and safe

Safety is inseparable from having a place to live. Homelessness is both a cause and consequence of nearly every harm this theme addresses – family violence, instability in care, and contact with the justice system all push children and young people towards homelessness, and homelessness in turn deepens these harms.

The Plan should name children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness as a priority population for safety, and support Yfoundations' advocacy for a youth-specific homelessness response built on prevention, early intervention, and accommodation models for young people that fund support as an inseparable part of the housing response.

Prevention here works at two levels: stopping a young person from entering homelessness in the first place and ensuring those who do are not carried into a lifetime of adult homelessness. A plan for children and young people is uniquely placed to act at both levels. Nearly 50 per cent of all people who access specialist homelessness services in NSW are under 25 years of age,¹³ yet the youth-specific response remains under-resourced; we continue to call for a 50 per cent uplift to the specialist homelessness sector. Demand is also rising from pressures the current system was never built to absorb – among them the impacts of bushfires, floods and prolonged drought.¹⁴ An uplift that doesn't account for disaster-driven demand won't keep pace.

Domestic and family violence is a leading driver of youth homelessness, and children and young people experience it as victim-survivors in their own right – not simply as dependents of an adult escaping violence. The Plan should ensure responses recognise this, and that a young person seeking safety is never disadvantaged for doing so: a child presenting to a refuge is engaging in a protective behaviour. Responses should also keep families together wherever possible, including older children and teenage boys.¹⁵

A history of out-of-home care sharply increases the risk of homelessness, with up to 30 per cent of young people experiencing homelessness within their first year of leaving care.¹⁶ The Plan should call on the NSW Government to ensure that no young person exits care into homelessness – by securing a stable housing pathway before a young person leaves care and strengthening leaving-care and aftercare support so the commitment to support care leavers to 21 reliably delivers stable housing.

13 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2024-25: Data tables* (Table CLIENTS.1). Australian Government. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/data>

14 Australian Red Cross, Homelessness Australia, & HowWeSurvive. (2025). *Housing, homelessness and disasters: National symposium final report*. <https://www.redcross.org.au/globalassets/cms/internal-docs/housing-homelessness-and-disasters-report.pdf>

15 Yfoundations, Homelessness NSW & Domestic Violence NSW. (2026). *Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan Sector Consultation Paper*. <https://www.yfoundations.org.au/resources/Policy-Papers/child-and-youth-homelessness-action-plan-sector-consultation-paper-june-2026/>

16 McDowall (2020), as cited in Robinson, C., Hobbs, C., Batterham, D., McGregor, J., & Stone, W. (2026). *Better futures: Supported accommodation for unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness* (AHURI Final Report No. 459).

Supported and safe

Homelessness increases the likelihood of contact with the justice system, and that contact in turn can narrow a young person's housing options. Children are held on remand because they lack a safe bail address – detained not for what they have done but for where they do, or do not, live – and Aboriginal young people are profoundly over-represented, making up the majority of those in custody and overwhelmingly drawn from regional NSW.¹⁷ The Plan should support Yfoundations' call for expanding bail and accommodation support with genuine geographic equity, reinstated coordination between youth justice and homelessness services, culturally safe ACCO-led responses, and raising the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14, so that children are not criminalised for the effects of poverty and housing instability.

Disability intersects with homelessness at every point this theme addresses, yet too often a young person falls out of both systems at once. Yfoundations members report that recent changes to the NDIS are directing young people with complex needs – including disability, neurodiversity, dual diagnosis and complex behavioural needs – back towards homelessness services that are not funded, trained or resourced to meet them, while the NDIS interface itself is difficult for young people to navigate and for services to hold.¹⁸ The result is young people passed between systems rather than supported by any. The Plan should call on government – through the NSW Disability Inclusion Plan 2026–2029 and the foundational supports reform – to coordinate housing, homelessness and disability systems around a young person rather than around agency boundaries, and to fund homelessness services for the disability-related complexity now being directed to them.

Underpinning this is a stable, skilled, well-supported workforce and the consistent, trusted relationships young people identify as making the greatest difference.

17 Yfoundations & Shelter NSW. (2026). *Joint submission to the Select Committee on Youth Justice*. <https://www.yfoundations.org.au/resources/Submissions/yfoundations-and-shelter-nsw-joint-submission-to-the-select-committee-on-youth-justice/>

18 Yfoundations, Homelessness NSW & Domestic Violence NSW. (2026). *Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan Sector Consultation Paper*. <https://www.yfoundations.org.au/resources/Policy-Papers/child-and-youth-homelessness-action-plan-sector-consultation-paper-june-2026/>

Supported and safe

Supporting children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to be supported and safe includes:

- naming young people experiencing homelessness as a priority population, and championing across government a youth-specific response resourced through a 50 per cent uplift in funding for Specialist Homelessness Services with a ring-fenced youth share commensurate with the statistical demand
- embedding prevention at both levels - stopping young people from entering homelessness, and ensuring those who do are not set on a path to lifelong adult homelessness;
- recognising children and young people as victim-survivors of domestic and family violence in their own right, and ensuring they are never disadvantaged for seeking safety;
- ensuring no young person exits out-of-home care into homelessness, through strengthened leaving-care planning and pathways into supported housing;
- expanding bail and accommodation support with geographic equity, reinstating youth justice-homelessness coordination, embedding ACCO-led responses, and raising the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14;
- coordinating housing, homelessness, NDIS and foundational supports around the young person, and funding homelessness services for the disability-related complexity now directed to them; and
- investing in a stable, skilled youth homelessness workforce able to sustain the trusted relationships that keep young people safe.

Healthy and well

Mental health is a leading driver of youth homelessness and one of its most damaging consequences.

Yet the barriers to getting help fall hardest on young people experiencing homelessness: the ten-session cap, wait times of more than a month, and the reality that access is hardest in regional, rural and remote areas – precisely where youth homelessness services are already thinnest.¹⁹ The NSW Youth Health Framework 2017-24, the state’s dedicated policy architecture for young people’s health, has not been refreshed since its 2017-24 period and remains the operative policy with nothing newer in place.²⁰ The Plan should support its renewal, alongside sustained investment in youth-specific, culturally appropriate and trauma-informed mental health support – including early intervention methods and enhanced capability for those experiencing complex needs – that remains genuinely accessible to young people who are housing-unstable, trauma-affected or moving between services, rather than screened out by session caps and rigid eligibility.

Making it easier to ask for help means meeting young people where they already are, in places they trust. Youth hubs do exactly this: they bring mental health, alcohol and other drug, and primary health support together with youth workers in a single, welcoming, low-barrier setting, so a young person can build a trusted relationship first and reach clinical support through it. The Plan should support youth hubs and similar integrated, youth-led models as a way to make help genuinely accessible, reducing the fragmentation and anxiety that stops young people – especially those who are housing-unstable – from seeking support.

Physical health and healthy habits are also shaped by housing and income. Young people without a stable home face real barriers to nutrition, sleep, physical activity and routine healthcare, and cost is a frequent reason they go without – including delaying or avoiding seeing a GP. The Plan should recognise that healthy habits are enabled by stable housing and income, not by messaging alone.

19 NSW Office for Youth. (2026). *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2027-2030 Consultation Paper* (mental health and healthy habits evidence, pp. 28-29).

20 NSW Health. *NSW Youth Health Framework 2017-24* (PD2017_019).
<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/youth/Pages/yh-framework.aspx>

Healthy and well

Supporting children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to be healthy and well includes:

- sustained investment in youth-specific, culturally appropriate and trauma-informed mental health support that remains accessible to housing-unstable and trauma-affected young people, free of rigid session caps;
- supporting renewal of the NSW Youth Health Framework 2017-24 – still in use beyond its intended period – so the state again has a current, dedicated policy architecture for youth-friendly, integrated health care for young people;
- prioritising mental health access in regional, rural and remote NSW, where both mental health and youth homelessness supports are scarcest;
- supporting youth hubs and integrated, youth-led models that bring mental health, AOD and primary health support together with trusted youth workers, making help low-barrier and easier to ask for; and
- recognising stable housing and adequate income as the foundation for healthy habits and preventative health.

Voice and influence

Young people experiencing homelessness are experts in the systems meant to help them – yet they are among the least likely to be in the room when those systems are designed. A plan built to put young people’s voices at the centre of decisions has to work hardest to reach the young people furthest from power.

The consultation paper records that many young people feel the government is not listening, and that those least likely to feel heard are often those with the most at stake. This gap is sharpest in regional and rural NSW, where young people describe their voice as “lost in governance”, and sharper still for young people whose lives are disrupted by homelessness, out-of-home care or contact with the justice system – who move schools, towns and services often, and who are rarely settled long enough to be picked up by conventional consultation. The Plan should commit to reaching these young people deliberately.

Meaningful voice also depends on what happens after young people speak. Young people have been clear that they want not just to be consulted but to see what changed as a result. The Plan should embed lived-experience engagement across its full lifecycle – design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation – and, where appropriate, should remunerate young people for the time and expertise they contribute, recognising that unpaid engagement quietly excludes those who can least afford to participate. Engagement should also be supported by trusted youth and community workers and organisations – often the bridge between marginalised young people and government – alongside collaborating with existing youth lived experience bodies.

Finally, young people and the organisations that represent them should help define what success looks like. The consultation paper’s evaluation called for clearer ways to measure success; involving young people and peak bodies in setting those measures – and reporting back transparently on progress – would both sharpen the Plan and demonstrate that their voice carries real influence.

21 Youth Action. (2025). *From Fragmented to Coordinated: Building stronger systems for young people through Youth Hubs*. (Endorsed by Yfoundations.) https://youthaction.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Youth_Action_Fragmented_to_Coordinated.pdf

Voice and influence

Supporting children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to have voice and influence includes:

- reaching young people who are most often missed – including those experiencing homelessness, in or leaving out-of-home care, and in contact with the justice system – through deliberate, supported mechanisms rather than conventional consultation alone;
- prioritising the inclusion of the voices of young people in regional and rural NSW, who report feeling least heard;
- embedding lived-experience engagement across the Plan’s design, delivery and evaluation, and remunerating young people for their time and expertise, particularly where this will better enable the voice of those otherwise less able or likely to engage;
- resourcing trusted youth and community organisations to support marginalised young people to take part; and
- involving young people and peak bodies in defining how success is measured, and reporting back transparently on the action their input produced.



**Yfoundations’ vision is a future without
child and youth homelessness in Australia.**

**For any enquiries or further information regarding this submission, please contact
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