

NOVEMBER 2023

STAND UP, BE HEARD

REPORT



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Acknowledgement of Country

The Commissioner for Children and Young People proudly acknowledges and pays respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across Western Australia and acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation upon whose lands the Commissioner's office is located. She recognises the continuing connection to culture, lands, skies and waters, families and communities for all Aboriginal peoples.

The Commissioner and her team also pay their respects to all Elders, past and present and emerging leaders. They recognise the knowledge, insights and capabilities of Aboriginal people, and pay respect to Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

A note about language

Prior to colonisation Aboriginal people primarily communicated through oral use of language, were well versed in multiple languages to converse with surrounding groups for different contexts and responsibilities dependant on where you were located. Seasonal movement was quite common for hunting, gathering and other related responsibilities and language was often expressed through various forms of art, dance, songs and storytelling. The written form of language, arose from the interpretation of Aboriginal words captured by historical documentation and non-Aboriginal linguists who relied on western interpretation of sounds. This then created various forms of spelling of Aboriginal words which can differ and are often accepted and recognised. For example, Noongar, Nyungar, Noongah.

For the purposes of this report, the term 'Aboriginal' encompasses Western Australia's diverse language groups and also recognises Torres Strait Islanders who live in Western Australia. The use of the term 'Aboriginal' in this way is not intended to imply equivalence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, though similarities do exist.

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Acknowledgement

Special thanks are given to the team at Aha! Consulting who designed, facilitated and reported on the Stand Up, Be Heard Youth Forum.

Thank you to the students, teachers and staff from each of the schools who attended the Stand Up, Be Heard Youth Forum: Alkimos College, Balcatta Senior High School, Belmont City College, Bob Hawke College, Gilmore College, Governor Stirling Senior High School, Hammond Park Secondary College, Hampton Senior High School, Harrisdale Senior High School, John Curtin College of the Arts, John Tonkin College - Tindale Campus, Perth College, Swan View Senior High School.

Message from the Commissioner

One of the best parts of my role as the Commissioner for Children and Young People is having the opportunity to meet with young people directly, where they share their experiences and perspectives. At the Stand Up, Be Heard Youth Forum I was excited to spend the day with a group of year 9 students from various Perth schools to discuss the importance of young people advocating for themselves and the issues that are important to them.



All children and young people have the right for their voices to be heard and to participate in making decisions that affect them. This right is enshrined in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child. Western Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006 further recognises that the views of children and young people should be given serious consideration by organisations and taken into account.

When children and young people are empowered to speak up, it not only provides them the ability to contribute to issues that are important to them, but also helps build their skills and confidence to support their participation in the decision making process.

I especially want to acknowledge the young people who attended the forum. Their participation was exuberant and enabled me to hear their views on a range of topics. Thank you also to the participating schools and their staff for providing support to the students to attend.

Jacqueline McGowan-Jones

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

Introduction

As part of the 15th anniversary celebrations of WA first appointing a Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Commissioner invited young people to participate in a one-day forum 'Stand Up, Be Heard', to explore the topic of youth advocacy.

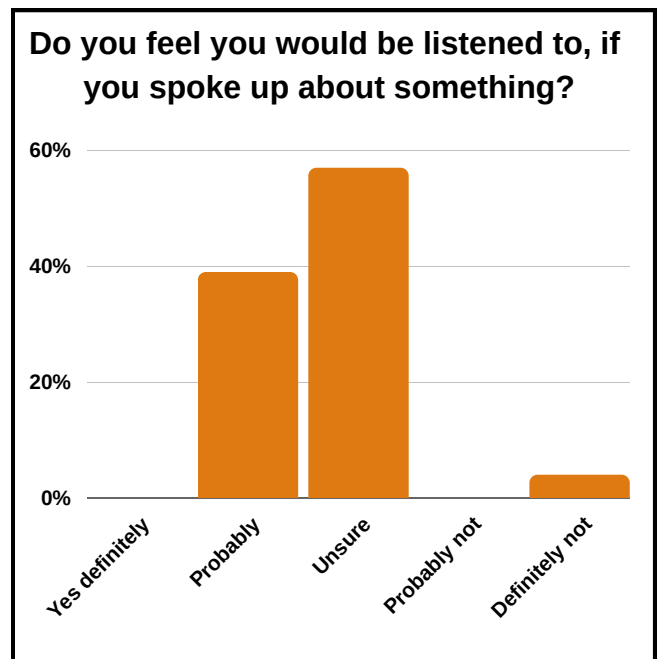
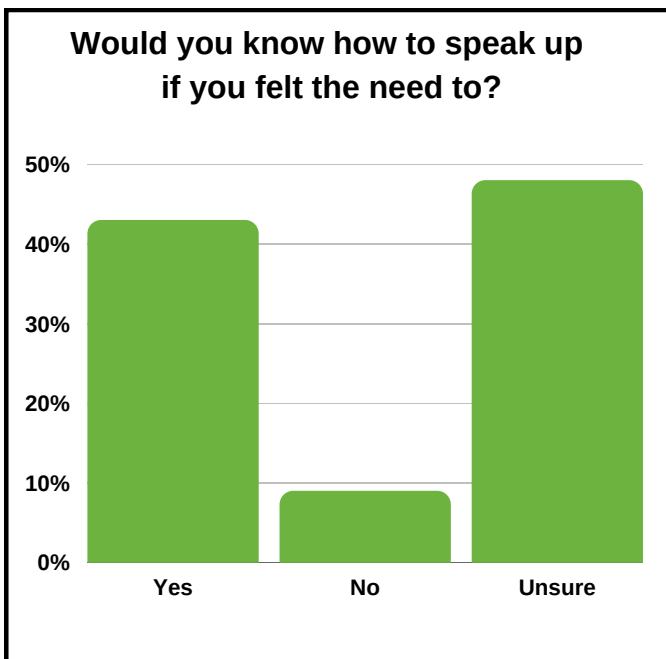
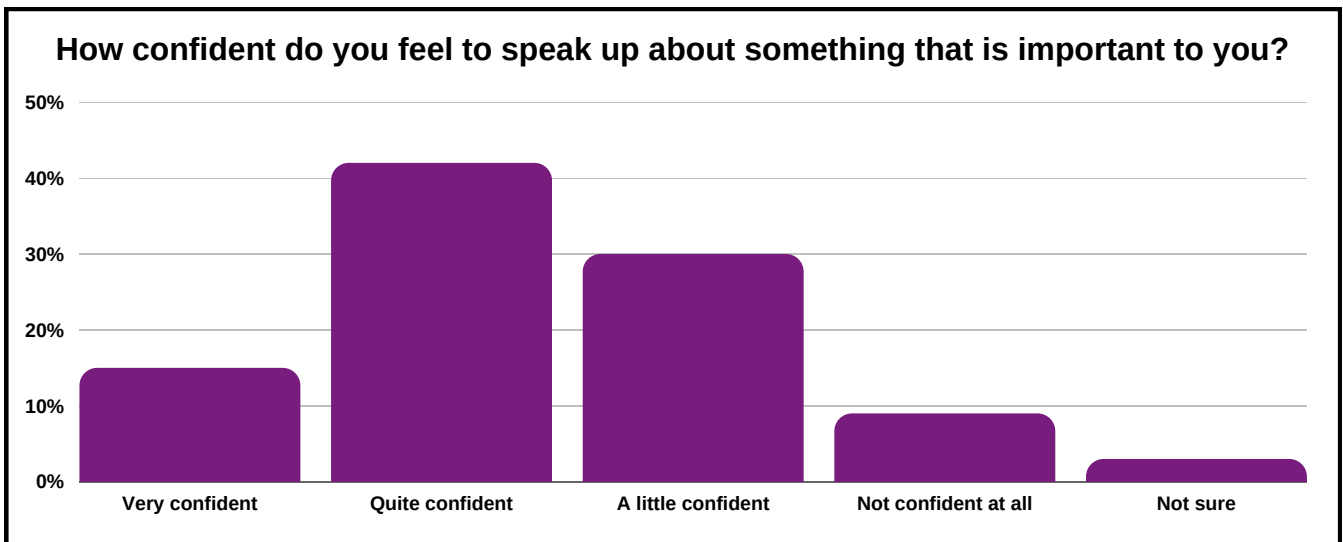
97 year nine students from 13 schools in the Perth metropolitan area attended the forum on Tuesday 20 June 2023. Facilitated by Aha! Consulting, the aim of the forum was to explore what youth advocacy is, what the barriers are to young people speaking up, and how these barriers could be overcome to enable young people to have a say about issues important to them.



Young people and advocacy

At the start of the forum in small groups, the young people participating responded to three online polls which told us that:

- A little over half (57%) felt confident in speaking up, while the remainder felt less confident (30%), not confident at all (9%) or were unsure.
- A little under half (43%) felt that they would know how to speak up, while 9% felt they wouldn't know and almost half (48%) were unsure.
- The majority (61%) felt that they wouldn't be listened to if they spoke up, while the remainder felt they probably would be.



Young people's examples of barriers to advocacy

<p>Support</p>	<p>Repercussions</p>	<p>Not taken seriously</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No one to talk to • Feeling isolated • Having no support • Unsupportive family/friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How people react • People using it against me • Causing drama/controversial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting shut down by adults • Treated like children - young, immature
<p>Judgement</p>	<p>Communication</p>	<p>No opportunities</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being criticised, judged or made fun of for our opinions • Social media hate • Fear of being called annoying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not knowing how to express your opinions • Being misheard or not understood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of youth advocacy • Young people are under-represented in society
<p>Anxiety</p>	<p>Discrimination</p>	<p>Motivation</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overthinking your opinion • Stage fright • Fear of public speaking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being different • Sexism • Racism • Negative stereotypes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indifference • Why try if I won't truly be heard?
<p>Confidence</p>	<p>Capacity</p>	<p>Knowledge</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not confident • Being shy • Low self esteem • Doubting yourself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical and mental disabilities • Don't have time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't know where or how to start advocating • Lack of knowledge
<p>Being ignored</p>	<p>Negative reputation</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of being ignored/told no • Being heard but no one doing anything about it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media representing Australian kids as trouble makers and bad people 	

The barriers identified were grouped into seven key themes:

- judgement
- not taken seriously
- no opportunities
- communication/language barrier
- overthinking/overwhelmed/anxiety
- negative reputation (troublemakers)
- confidence/embarrassment.

The young people individually voted for their top three themes, which was used to identify the top four barriers.

Top four barriers

Judgement (by others)

Young people felt worried that others would make fun of their opinion, leading to bullying, social media hate and people not liking them. Along with this was fears of being called 'annoying', being condemned, and being ridiculed.

Overthinking/anxiety

This barrier includes mental health worries such as anxiety, pressure and stress, along with the worry of overthinking their opinion. For many it meant they felt peer pressure or stage fright around the process of speaking up, and some had a fear of public speaking.

Confidence/embarrassment

This barrier covered young people feeling shy, embarrassed and lacking confidence. Having low self-esteem, no courage and doubting themselves impacts them.

Not taken seriously (by others)

Young people feel that they are seen as immature, less experienced and overlooked. Often feeling shut down, they don't share feedback as they feel it won't make a difference. Sometimes they feel young people are seen as being dramatic and hormonal when these things do matter and people in authority think that they are correct.

Overcoming the barriers

The young people worked together to devise specific approaches for the top 4 previously identified barriers of anxiety/overthinking, confidence, embarrassment, judgement and not being taken seriously.

Key themes emerged from the feedback, with many suggestions focusing on building young people's confidence, skills and resilience, such as:



In addition, it was suggested that others can assist young people through:

- provide training and opportunities to practice advocacy and public speaking
- support through listening
- encouragement (eg. parents supporting)
- provide opportunities to speak up anonymously (eg. online platform with surveys and discussions)
- change how the media represents young people
- provide student education programs
- provide safe spaces to speak up (eg. schools).

When asked who could help make a change, responses included:

- trusted adults (parents, teachers, family, friends)
- councillors
- Government
- Commissioner for Children and Young People
- young leaders
- youth organisations.

Overall, it was clear that young people are seeking opportunities to build on their confidence and gain exposure to speaking up, with the support of trusted adults and decision makers.



Putting advocacy into action

The final part of the session involved the groups selecting one of five topical 'high level' issues and creating a campaign to encourage young people to have a say. The process involved brainstorming ideas, and culminated in the creation of a poster, social media post or other creative way of representing the campaign, either on Canva or using butcher's paper.

What would young people want to say to effect change on these topics?

Equity and discrimination:

- "That more young people need to be educated about this topic in order to reduce discrimination and the stigma around it".
- "Casual racism shouldn't be taken lightly".
- "If witness speak up".
- "Discrimination affects everyone".

Climate change:

- "Pick up trash and/or rubbish".
- "Use bicycles not cars".
- "Stop using fossil fuels".
- "We shouldn't poison the animals with microplastics".

Cost of living:

- "Increase wages".
- "Show the problems with the current system and propose a more effective way".

Facilities and services for young people:

- "More funding to creative and [not] just academic educational areas".
- "Make recreational facilities more affordable which can increase creative expression by young people".

Housing stress:

- "That it should be seen as okay to seek assistance, let that be from the government, parents, friends, etc".
- "Please lower HECS debt so I can pay my mortgage".

How young people want to have a say

**Anonymous online surveys
and discussions**

**Opportunities for volunteer
work in a specific area**

**Discussions in schools,
including event days focused
on key issues, to gain
confidence in voicing their
opinions**

**Being asked by decision
makers**

Protests and demonstrations

**Being included in local and
state discussions, eg. through
a youth advisory council
to the Minister or the
Commissioner**

**Partnering with established
organisations**

**Sharing and commenting on
social media**

Census questions

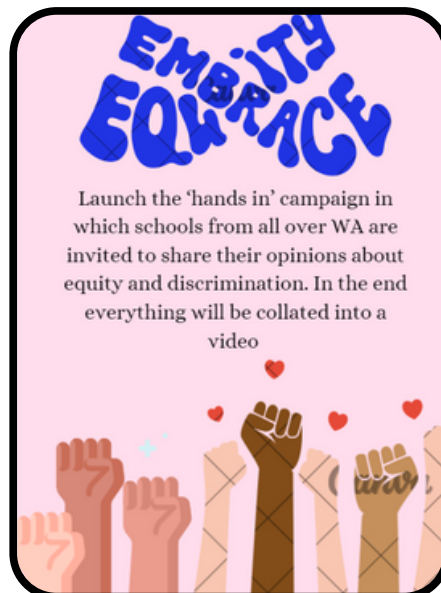
Opinion polls

Advocacy poster examples

The groups created advocacy posters or social media images on the following topics:

- equity and discrimination
- climate change
- cost of living
- facilities and services for young people
- housing stress.

Here are some of the advocacy posters and social media images created by the young people.



Conclusion

The Stand Up, Be Heard Youth Forum provided almost 100 year 9 students with the opportunity to learn more about the importance of advocacy and they were given the space to practice improving their advocacy skills.

Key findings from the forum indicated that many young people feel confident in speaking up about issues that are important to them but are unsure of how to do so effectively, with them believing they would not be listened to if they did voice their opinions.

Participants identified many internal factors, along with concerns about how others may respond to them as barriers they may face in speaking up. The strategies for overcoming these barriers were similarly focused on internal attributes such as improving their confidence, seeking support from trusted adults, practicing public speaking in a safe space, and building resilience. External factors identified included wanting to see changes in how they are represented in media and improving the public perception of young people to result in more acceptance of their opinions and views. They also noted that having parents and friends support them through encouragement and listening would help build their confidence and skills in advocacy.

Young people at the forum stated a preference for advocacy platforms that offer anonymity. They also showed an interest in volunteering opportunities to improve perceptions of young people, while simultaneously allowing them the chance to be involved in issues that are of interest to them. They also encouraged discussions at school through events focused on key issues and identified opportunities to join advisory groups.

The forum reinforced that children and young people want to be involved and need to be heard, but that more work is needed to build their own confidence and skill sets as well as changing the perceptions of children and young people in the wider community.

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Photographs of children and young people

All photographs featured in this report are of Western Australian children and young people and have been taken by or for the Commissioner for Children and Young People's office. All children and young people and their parents/guardians have consented to their use.

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