



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

**All enquiries**

Telephone: (08) 6213 2223  
Email: alexa.wilkins@ccyp.wa.gov.au  
Our reference: 19/114

Diana Harris  
General Manager Projects and Programs  
Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth  
GPO Box 2807  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ms Harris

**National Action Plan for Children's Health: 2020–2030**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the development of the Australian Government's *National Action Plan for Children's Health: 2020–2030*.

As the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People, I have a statutory role to advocate for and promote policies, laws, programs and services that enhance the wellbeing of all children and young people in WA. My functions are set out broadly under section 19 of the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*.

In performing my role the best interests of children and young people are my paramount consideration. I must give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and children and young people who are disadvantaged for any reason.

My office has undertaken significant work to better understand the physical and mental health needs of children and young people across WA, and made a series of recommendations relating to how these needs can be best met, which remain applicable today. This work has included the development of the *Speaking out about youth health* consultation with around 1,000 WA young people; research and consultation regarding children and young people's wellbeing and reducing alcohol-related harm; the *Wellbeing Monitoring Framework* reports; *the Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, and the subsequent follow up report, *Our Children Can't Wait*, which reviewed how the recommendations of the Mental Health Inquiry had progressed.

A key part of my role is to provide input and recommendations to the development of federal and state-based policies and strategies which impact on the outcomes for children and young people. Most recently, my office has contributed to the development of WA Health's *WA Youth Health Policy 2018-2023*, which sets priorities

and strategies for optimising the health and wellbeing of young people in WA. The Policy drew strongly on the *Healthy, Safe and Thriving: National Strategic Framework for Child and Youth Health* to demonstrate WA Health's commitment to achieving the shared vision and strategic priorities of this national framework.

Based on my office's work and current evidence, my priority issues relating to children and young people's health are advocating for:

- Strengthened focus on young people in health policies and services by involving them in planning and decision-making processes.
- Shaping child and youth-friendly services by supporting health professionals with training and resources, encouraging collaboration and referral pathways, and emphasising holistic health and wellbeing.
- Adopting a stronger focus on adolescent health and providing tailored care to young people in hospitals and other care services, with particular attention to mental health and the transition from paediatric to adult services.
- Increasing resources for health promotion, prevention and early intervention, to help children and young people and their families stay healthy, identify problems early, navigate the health system and access services.
- Improving the accessibility and cultural safety of health services for children and young people in regional areas and those who are vulnerable for any reason, including those in the child protection or youth justice systems.
- Expanding the use of digital technologies to engage children and young people in the health system.
- Reviewing the use of data and other evidence to guide policy and service development.
- Enhancing collaboration between State and Commonwealth Governments to ensure children and young people have access to the full continuum of services and programs they require.

The development of the *National Action Plan for Children's Health: 2020-2030* provides an excellent opportunity to revisit the diverse health needs of children and young people in Australia and consider how systems can be improved to optimise their wellbeing and capacity to achieve their potential.

I provide the following comments to contribute to the development of the Plan.

### *A life course approach*

I recommend the Plan adopts a life course approach to the health and wellbeing of children and young people; acknowledging their unique health needs at different developmental stages and the need for appropriate responses at each stage.

Early intervention and prevention in the antenatal period, infancy and early childhood is critical to positively influence the future health and development of children. From before birth through early childhood a child's physical, emotional and cognitive skills and capacities develop at a rate which exceeds that of any other stage of life. The neural connections formed through the interaction of genes and a baby's environment and experiences has a major impact on the development of the brain – the foundation which influences all later learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health.<sup>1,2</sup>

These early investments need to be reinforced through childhood. The middle years (from nine to 14 years), or early adolescence, is increasingly recognised as a critical stage in which major physiological, neurological, cognitive and psychosocial changes occur in a child's life. The transition from primary to secondary school and changing relationship with parents, families and peers are of particular significance. It is also a time during which some children begin to engage in various risk-taking activities and when established symptoms of mental health disorders begin to emerge. Identifying and responding to issues arising in the middle years can prevent their escalation into adolescence, which has positive outcomes for the young person and can reduce the burden on acute services that would otherwise be needed in adolescence.

The period of adolescence is also a significant time of developmental change. Young people have specific needs that stem from the physical, behavioural, psychological and cognitive developments they are experiencing, including in areas such as sexual health and relationships, mental health, alcohol and drug use, body weight, nutrition and injury prevention. There are many opportunities for intervention at this stage to guide young people and create environments that facilitate positive health and wellbeing choices which can in turn have a positive impact on the transition into young adulthood.

Family and parents in particular are a vital source of support and advice for children and young people. They can play an important role in modelling healthy, positive behaviours for their children and involving them in family life and responsibilities, and developing their resilience. It is therefore essential that parents and families are supported in this role and that appropriate services are available, accessible and easy to navigate to enable families to support the health and wellbeing of their children.

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<sup>1</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2017, *Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families – Science to policy and practice*, Harvard University, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Royal Society of Canada & Canadian Academy of Health Sciences Expert Panel 2012, *Early Childhood Development: adverse experiences and developmental health*, eds M Boivin & C Hertzman, Royal Society of Canada, Ottawa, p. 7.

### *Vulnerable children and young people*

Dedicated health and wellbeing programs and initiatives are required to prioritise the needs of children and young people who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. This includes, but is not limited to, professional development for staff working with vulnerable young people; culturally secure service provision for Aboriginal children and young people; dedicated services or initiatives to improve the service response for culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people; developing strategies and programs to meet the needs of children and young people in out-of-home-care; building the capacity of the workforce to support children and young people of diverse gender and sexuality; and collaborative initiatives for young people with other needs, for example, have a disability, who are homeless, or involved in the justice system.

In particular, significant gaps exist in regards to the health services and supports available for children and young people living in regional areas. It is essential the unique health and wellbeing needs of children and young people in regional and remote areas of Australia are given priority in the development of the Plan.

### *Place-based approaches*

I encourage the inclusion of place-based approaches to support children and young people's health and wellbeing in the Plan. Place-based approaches equip communities to draw on their social and physical capital to design and implement strategies that address their self-identified needs. Importantly, place-based approaches can disrupt traditional models of service delivery where government departments and funding streams operate in silos, at the expense of innovative local solutions and multiagency collaboration.<sup>3</sup>

### *Accountability*

In the development of the Plan, I recommend building both an implementation plan and an outcomes framework which will be actively monitored and reported on, to measure the progress and impact of the Plan and ensure there is robust accountability and transparency.

A critical part of responding effectively to the needs of children and young people is by measuring indicators of their wellbeing to ensure we are achieving positive outcomes, and not simply measuring outputs or activity. This measuring and monitoring assists programs and services to be oriented towards achieving positive, long-term wellbeing outcomes for children and young people, enables targeted and practical funding decisions, and ensures there is a balanced spread of service provision to children and young people across Australia.

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<sup>3</sup> Mission Australia 2017, *Concepts of community: young people's concerns, views and experiences*, Findings from the Youth Survey 2016, Mission Australia, p. 8.

My office has developed a Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to monitor and report on the wellbeing of WA children and young people. The Framework includes publication and monitoring of 'indicators of wellbeing' data across three domains: learning and participating; healthy and connected; safe and supported. The Framework can be accessed on my website: [www.cyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/wellbeing-monitoring-framework/](http://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/wellbeing-monitoring-framework/)

#### *Participation of children and young people*

It is essential children and young people are involved as an ongoing stakeholder in the development of the Plan. There is enormous value in including children and young people in planning and decision-making processes to achieve better policies, services and outcomes. Young people have unique insights into issues, can offer creative solutions and can help ensure strategies are relevant and sustainable. I encourage you to provide children and young people the opportunity to participate in the consultation processes to develop and implement the Plan.

The *Participation Guidelines* and the *Engaging with Aboriginal children and young people toolkit* developed by my office are a useful tool in determining how to engage with children and young people, and involve them in the decision-making process. They are available on my office's website: [www.cyp.wa.gov.au](http://www.cyp.wa.gov.au).

#### *Coordination and alignment across Government*

There is a need for a more comprehensive and integrated approach across, and within, Federal and State Governments, to plan for and provide the full range of programs and services needed to maintain and improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people across the country. This planning should be guided by evidence and data on the need and demand for services in different regions and populations groups, as well as considering the delivery of promotion, prevention and early intervention services for children and young people.

It is also important that the Plan addresses and discusses how it will align with other key strategies relating to children's health, for example, the *Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan*, to ensure a consistent approach across the key Government platforms. It is also important that the Plan reviews and incorporates recommendations that have been made through other relevant reviews and inquiries, including recommendations about the provision of services for children and young people and their families in the *Report of the National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services*.

In summary, I recommend the development of the *National Action Plan for Children's Health 2020 - 2030*:

- Reflects a broad perspective on the needs of children and young people, including the social, physical and environmental determinants that influence their wellbeing.

- Adopts a life course approach and recognises the pathways children and young people travel from infancy to early childhood to the middle years to adolescence and into young adulthood.
- Incorporates the essential role of family and community in any strategies to enhance the health and wellbeing of children and young people.
- Gives specific priority to children and young people who experience vulnerability and disadvantage, and those who live in regional and remote areas.
- Includes an implementation plan and outcomes framework to ensure cross-government commitment to, and robust accountability and transparency of.
- Involves children and young people in a meaningful and long-term capacity to contribute to development, implementation and monitoring of the Plan.

For more information on my office's work on youth health, including a Position Statement on Youth Health, policy briefs and the findings of consultations with young people, please visit <https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/resources/youth-health/>.

Finally, I encourage you to view the [WA Youth Health Policy 2018-2023](#) which outlines the WA health system's goals and priorities for children and young people's health and provides strategies, informed by the views of young people, to guide the health system, health services and communities to effectively meet the health and wellbeing needs of young people.

I would be happy to discuss any of these matters regarding children and young people's health and wellbeing further with you and look forward monitoring the progress of the *National Action Plan for Children's Health: 2020-2030*.

Yours sincerely



COLIN PETTIT

Commissioner for Children and Young People

10 January 2019