



Youth Coalition of the ACT
**SUBMISSION TO THE
ACT BUDGET**
2019-2020

October 2018

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The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. The Youth Coalition of the ACT celebrates Indigenous cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

Submission to the *ACT Budget 2019-20*
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October 2018

Prepared by Youth Coalition staff members Erin Barry and Dr Justin Barker.
Designed by Thomas Stevens.

The Youth Coalition acknowledges the ongoing support and input of the ACT Peaks Network, particularly our partnership work with Families ACT, ACT Shelter, the ACT Council of Social Services, and the Women's Centre for Health Matters. We also acknowledge and extend our gratitude to the programs and services that shared their knowledge and experiences, to inform and shape the recommendations in this submission.

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Message from the Executive Director

The Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition) would like to thank the Chief Minister and Treasurer for the opportunity to contribute to priorities for the 2019-20 ACT Budget.

The Youth Coalition is the peak body for youth affairs in the ACT, representing and promoting the rights, interests and wellbeing of young Canberrans aged 12 to 25 years and those who work with them. We undertake policy analysis, sector development, advocacy, research and projects that respond to ongoing and current issues. One of our key roles is to analyse the social policy and program decisions that affect young people and youth services in the ACT, and facilitate linkages and collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people. We work closely with other community-based ACT peak bodies.

This submission to the 2019-20 ACT Budget puts forward our recommendations relating to the most urgent priority areas for young people in the ACT. Our primary recommendation is the allocation of additional funding to implement a service model to prevent homelessness for children aged 8-15. The unmet accommodation and support needs of children under the age of 16 who are homeless have been identified as a critical gap in the ACT for close to 20 years, but never adequately addressed. Other urgent priorities in this submission relate to out-of-home care and education.

Our recommendations align strongly with several current reforms and policy initiatives, including: Early Support by Design, the Future of Education, A Step Up for Our Kids: Out-of-Home Care Strategy 2015-2020, and the ACT implementation of recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. As such, our recommendations provide a valuable opportunity for the community sector and ACT Government to work closely together to improve the wellbeing of children and young people in the ACT.

A brief summary of our recommendations follows:

1. **Preventing child homelessness:** Allocate additional funding to implement the proposed service model to prevent homelessness for children aged 8-15 in the ACT, supported by strong policy.
2. **Valuing, listening and responding to young people in out-of-home care (OOHC):**
 - a. As part of the ACT Government's commitment to embedding a culture of listening to young people in OOHC, allocate funding to:
 - i. implement the outcomes of the upcoming ACT roundtable(s) with young people in OOHC;
 - ii. resource ongoing, territory-wide, formal consultation mechanisms with young people in OOHC to inform responsive policy, service and system design.
 - b. Increase CREATE's core funding by \$30,000, to increase their overall staffing capacity to 2 FTE.
3. **Successfully implementing the Future of Education:** Allocate funding to tender for the development of an evaluation framework for Phase 1 of the Future of Education strategy, to assess how well Phase 1 activities are implemented, and the extent to which they contribute to desired outcomes. As a priority in 2019-20, this should also include funding to investigate ways to strengthen collaboration between schools and community services, reviewing the existing barriers to effective partnerships.

These recommendations have been shaped through extensive consultation with stakeholders, including the youth and community sector, over the past 12 months. They have been informed by the local and national research and evidence base, and successful policy reforms in other Australian jurisdictions. Critically, our recommendations build upon the key priorities that we are actively collaborating with ACT Government to progress, by aligning with current reforms.

As a member of the ACT Peaks Network, we also support the leadership that ACTCOSS provides across the ACT community sector, and further endorse the comprehensive range of recommendations highlighted in their submission. We draw particular attention to their recommendations relating to justice, including youth-focused investment to divert early justice system interactions; funding for services to offer long-term, whole-of-family responses to domestic and family violence; and gambling reform.

We also strongly support ACTCOSS' call for investment to support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations; and for the ACT Government to establish targets as part of an Indigenous Procurement Policy. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations must be adequately resourced, through both financial investment and appropriate facilities, in order to meet rising demand for support, and to take a lead role in addressing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out-of-home care.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Justin Barker', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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1. Preventing child homelessness: A service model for children aged 8-15 in the ACT

If a child under the age of 16 is homeless in the ACT they are highly vulnerable and at risk of harm, because there are currently no accommodation services in the ACT for these children who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

For close to 20 years, the ACT child, youth and homelessness sectors have called for critical action to address the gap in accommodation services for children under the age of 16. This age cohort was identified in the 2004 'Breaking the cycle: ACT Homelessness Strategy' as increasing and with complex needs, requiring "a range of accommodation and support services to prevent a cycle of homelessness and poverty". This critical need has never been adequately addressed in the ACT, whilst other states have led the way in developing supportive accommodation for children at risk of homelessness.

The government and community services share a commitment to intervening early to prevent harm and ensure all children have access to a safe living environment. It is time to put this critically important commitment into action to protect children aged 8-15 who are at risk of significant harm, and subsequent homelessness.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT, Families ACT, ACTCOSS and ACT Shelter propose a service model that extends across the spectrum of support from early intervention to tertiary prevention.

The service model and its three service components outlined in this submission will also soon be publicly released in an Action Plan to prevent child homelessness.

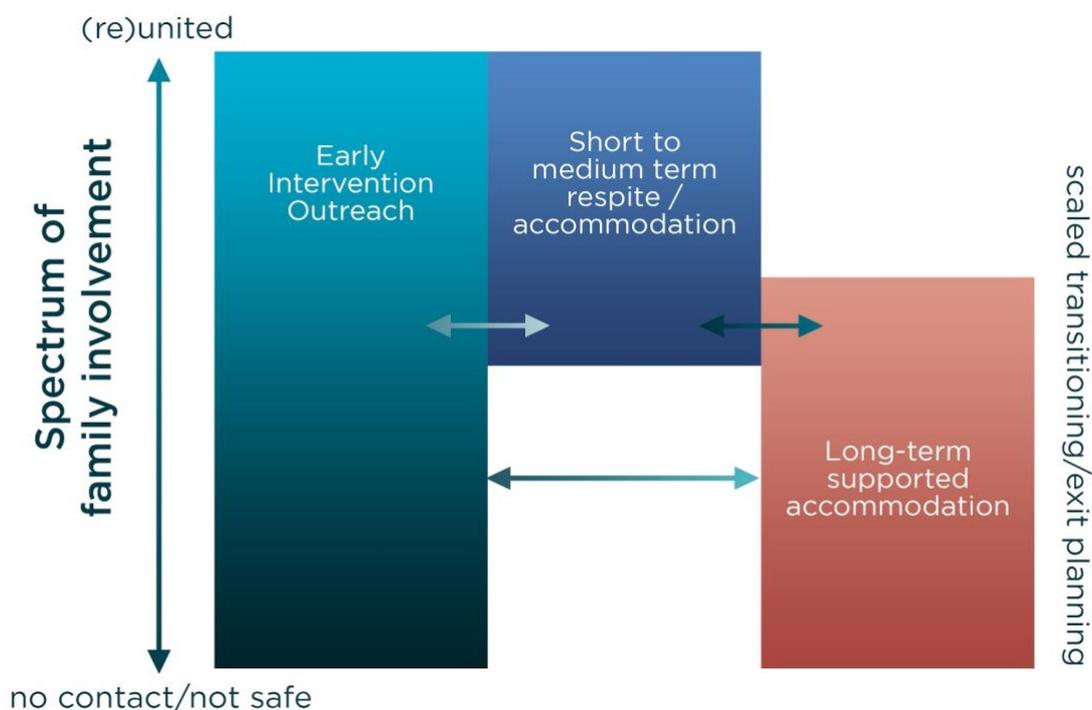
The local and national research that forms the evidence base for the proposed service model has consistently shown that we need to intervene early to support children and families, while also responding to the unmet needs of children who cannot remain at home.¹ It draws crucial attention to the specific needs of children aged 8-15 who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, as well as effective service responses that are operating successfully in other Australian jurisdictions.

We call upon the ACT Government to endorse and allocate additional funding to implement this service model, supported by strong policy, in partnership with the community sector.

¹ Refer to the end of this section for key research and publications.

A Service Model for Children Aged 8-15

This proposed service model responds to the gap in appropriate services and supports, including accommodation, for children aged 8-15 who are experiencing or at risk of significant harm and/or homelessness. Critically, while addressing the shortfall in accommodation services for children under the age of 16, it also responds to the primary risk factor leading to child and youth homelessness: *family conflict and breakdown*. In addition to homelessness, family conflict and breakdown can lead to a range of other negative outcomes, such as disengagement from education, including school suspension, and possible involvement with statutory child protection and the criminal justice system.



The critical need for services to respond to the existing relationships that children have with their families, across the spectrum of family involvement, is at the core of this service model. Its central aim is to strengthen family functioning, including parenting capacity and parent-child relationships. This aims to support children to remain with their family, while also providing safe temporary and long-term accommodation options where necessary.

The model promotes the following outcomes:

- Early intervention to prevent youth homelessness
- Reducing family conflict and breakdown to improve the well-being of children and young people
- Changing life trajectories away from involvement with statutory services, including child protection and the criminal justice system
- Reducing education disengagement, including in transitions from primary to high school, and to reduce school suspensions
- Building the capacity of the youth and family sector to engage in family-focused youth work

While local and national research in this area mainly focuses on young people aged 12-15, this service model recognises the importance of also responding to the needs of children in the 'middle years' (8-12 years). Children in this age group experience unique challenges and transitions, and these middle years represent a critical opportunity to prevent negative outcomes during adolescence, including youth homelessness.

Three Service Components

The service model encompasses three service components. These components may be delivered by multiple programs or organisations, but robust collaboration and referral pathways are critical to support a cohesive and coordinated response across the service model, ensuring continuity of care. Each of the three components requires expertise in a range of therapeutic interventions and supports, alongside the provision of case management and case work to address other factors affecting families. Specific services and culturally appropriate practices to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families are also required. Pathways into services may include self-referrals, schools/education providers, Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS), Onelink, and youth and community services; as well as between each component within the service model.

1. Early intervention outreach

The early intervention outreach component aims to improve the wellbeing of children aged 8-15 and their families by addressing the risk factors that increase family stress, through case management, family mediation and support. This service responds to early signs of family conflict, school disengagement, and anti-social behaviours such as problematic alcohol and other drug use and criminal activity, that increase the likelihood of family conflict and breakdown. The service would work across the spectrum of family contact and involvement.

Service example: The Youth Hope Program in NSW is an early intervention program, supporting children and young people aged 9-15 and their families, where a child or young person has been identified as at risk of significant harm. Through a therapeutic, wraparound service which may include home visits, counselling, parenting support and referrals to other health and community service providers, the program aims to support families to stay together, improve family functioning and child wellbeing and to prevent escalation into statutory child protection.

2. Short to medium-term respite/accommodation

The short to medium-term respite/accommodation component would provide temporary accommodation to children, while supporting them to rebuild their relationships with their family through mediation and counselling of both child and family members. This provides a flexible, safe, home-like environment and a reliable alternative for children when they are unable or unwilling to stay at home. Families are actively engaged through mediation, counselling, and other supports, with the response adapting to changing family circumstances over time. Success may include children being supported to progressively transition back into the family home, or supporting improved relationships and support as they transition into alternative accommodation.

Service example: Ruby's Reunification Program in South Australia provides support and accommodation to young people aged 12-17 who plan to return home or would like to find other accommodation. This program has been successful in engaging with families to help resolve conflict and improve relationships through family counselling. Young people involved in the program have the option to spend some nights at home, and some nights in Ruby's accommodation services, providing 'respite' away from home. Young people can still access 24 hour support from the program while at home.

3. Long-term supported accommodation in a home-like environment

This component would provide a safe, stable, home-like environment for children and young people who cannot remain in the family home. This service provides long-term accommodation until a viable option is identified and a co-created exit plan is established, which crucially does not exit young people into homelessness (including homelessness services). This long-term support aims to prevent young people from becoming embedded into street/homelessness lifestyles or cultures, and the associated trajectory into chronic homelessness, statutory child protection, the justice system, or adverse health outcomes. Children would have access to the service prior to turning 16, and could remain supported within this long-term accommodation until early adulthood, and then continue to receive support after transitioning to independence.

Service example: The Lighthouse Foundation in Victoria provides home-like accommodation to young people aged 15-22 who cannot remain with their family. This therapeutic and trauma-informed service accommodates up to four young people and two carers in each house, supported by psychologists and health professionals. When young people move into independent living, they have continued access to aftercare and outreach programs. An independent assessment found that 8 out of 10 young people who complete the program permanently exit out of homelessness, creating \$12 in social value for every dollar invested.

Strong Policy

Development and implementation of the proposed service model must be underpinned by strong policy. A targeted ACT policy commitment and response to supporting children aged 8-15 and their families needs to:

- Establish responsibility for developing and implementing the service model across key ACT Government directorates, including the Community Services Directorate (ACT Housing and CYPS), the Education Directorate, Health Policy Directorate and Justice and Community Safety Directorate, in partnership with the specialist homelessness sector and child, youth and family sector;
- Articulate a clear and cohesive governance framework to provide oversight for the service model, to support effective collaboration, coordination and evaluation;
- Build upon and contribute to the emerging Australian evidence base for how best to support children and young people aged 8-15 who are at risk of significant harm and/or homelessness, across the spectrum of need;
- Align and embed the policy response into current and developing policy initiatives, such as Early Support by Design and the implementation of the ACT Housing Strategy.

Recommendation 1: Preventing child homelessness

Endorse and allocate additional funding to implement the proposed service model and its three service components, to support children aged 8-15 who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, noting that there are no accommodation services in the ACT to support children under the age of 16. The proposed service model extends across the spectrum of early intervention to tertiary support. This must be supported by strong policy, and be developed and implemented in partnership with the community sector.

Key Research and Publications

ACT Community Services Directorate. (2018: unpublished). *Homelessness amongst unaccompanied 12-15 year olds: A literature review*. Canberra: ACT Government.

Barker, J., Humphries, P., McArthur, M., & Thomson, L. (2012). *Literature Review: Effective interventions for working with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness*. Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services or Indigenous Affairs.

Chowdry, K., Barker, J., & Watts, H. (2018). *Youth Workers' Perspectives on Youth Homelessness for 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory*. Canberra: Youth Coalition of the ACT.

Hall, K & Cuzzillo, R. (2018: unpublished). *The Missing Middle: supporting middle years children in the ACT*. Canberra: Families ACT.

Noble-Carr, D., Trew, S. (2018). *"Nowhere to go": Investigating homelessness experiences of 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University.

Roche, S., & Barker, J. (2017). *Youth homelessness and its relationship with family conflict: Models for policy and practice*. Melbourne: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University and Melbourne City Mission.

Robinson, C. (2017). *Who Cares? Supported accommodation for unaccompanied children*. Social Action Research Centre. Tasmania: Anglicare Tasmania.

Ross Beaton Consulting. *The Homeless Youth Assistance Program: Summary Report of State-wide Consultations, April to May 2015*. Ross Beaton Consulting.

2. Valuing, listening and responding to young people in out-of-home care

2.1 Develop responsive child protection policy, service and system design informed by young people in out-of-home care

Under the *Step Up for Our Kids: Out of Home Care Strategy 2015-2020*, the ACT Government has committed to holding two roundtables with young people in out-of-home care (OOHC), or who have an OOHC experience. These roundtables aim to directly hear young people's views and experiences, in order to inform policy and service development in statutory child protection.

The first roundtable will be held on 24 November 2018, with a second roundtable planned for the first half of 2019. The Youth Coalition, CREATE, and other partners under 'Step Up for Our Kids' have worked closely with the Community Services Directorate over several months to shape the scope and delivery of the first roundtable, to ensure it is a meaningful, beneficial and supportive experience for participants that leads to positive systemic change. As a result of this direct advocacy, the roundtable will be facilitated by an independent social work researcher who has expertise in talking to children and young people in OOHC, and will be supported on the day by the Youth Coalition and CREATE.

The Youth Coalition welcomes the proactive undertaking by the ACT Government to directly engage with young people about OOHC, which aligns with their commitment to "embed a culture of listening to the voices of children and young people" in care². It is well acknowledged across the Australian literature that young people leaving OOHC are more likely to have poorer outcomes across a range of domains, as a result of their experiences prior to, during and upon exiting care³. Research points towards the need for the views of young people in OOHC to be heard and taken seriously, and highlights that when youth participation is well supported, children and young people can provide unique insights into their OOHC experiences.⁴

The young people who participate in the ACT roundtable are making a significant investment, in both contributing their own time, and being prepared to discuss complex, sensitive and potentially traumatic issues that have affected their lives. In doing so, they place trust in the roundtable facilitators and the ACT Government that their views and experiences will contribute to shaping and influencing child protection policy and service development.

It is therefore essential that funding is allocated to implement the outcomes of the upcoming roundtable(s), as identified by young people.

Funding and embedding appropriate consultation mechanisms for young people in OOHC is an important step towards developing responsive policy, service and system design. Research for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse exploring young people's views and experiences of safety in institutions, including in residential care, consistently identified the need to provide appropriate opportunities for young people to discuss issues affecting them, to listen to

² Community Services Directorate. (2014). *A Step Up for Our Kids: Out-Of-Home Care Strategy 2015-2020*. Canberra: ACT Government, p 5.

³ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). *Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41)*. Melbourne: Child Family Community Australia information exchange, Australian Institute of Family Studies; & CREATE Foundation. (2018). *Youth Justice Report*. QLD: CREATE Foundation.

⁴ McDowall, J. J. (2013). *Experiencing out-of-home care in Australia: The views of children and young people (CREATE Report Card 2013)*. Sydney: CREATE Foundation, p 94.

young people and take their concerns seriously.⁵ With the ACT implementation of the Royal Commission recommendations currently underway, these research findings have significant implications for the ACT OOHC system.

Youth consultation works most effectively when it is an ongoing consultation process with feedback loops, where young people can see that their knowledge and contributions are used to bring about positive change. This demonstrates to young people that their views and experiences are valued, and aligns with the ACT Government's commitment to hearing and responding to the lived experiences of children and young people.

It is critical that the ACT Government invest in ongoing, territory-wide, formal consultation mechanisms for young people in OOHC, to inform responsive child protection policy, service and system design.

This may be in the form of future roundtables, or other formal consultation methods, developed in partnership with young people. Consultation processes should be developed and facilitated by an independent organisation(s) with expertise in engaging with young people on sensitive issues, that can collaborate with the ACT Government to improve outcomes for young people in OOHC.

2.2 Increase funding for CREATE to meet growing demand

CREATE is a consumer peak body providing engagement and support services to children and young people in the ACT with an OOHC experience. Current core funding in the ACT provides for 1.3 FTE staff, who work closely with children and young people to build connections, provide youth leadership training, support young consultants at speaking opportunities, and run a youth advisory group. This service provides a valuable opportunity for young people to access support, build social networks and develop skills, supported by experienced staff.

The number of children and young people that CREATE supports has increased by 55% over the last two years, with ClubCREATE members growing from 168 at June 2016, to 261 in June 2018. The number of children and young people in OOHC in the ACT also continues to climb each year.⁶

The ACT Government needs to increase CREATE's core funding by \$30,000, to enable them to meet growing demand. This small investment will fund an additional 0.7 FTE, to increase their overall staffing capacity to 2 FTE.

⁵ Moore, T., McArthur, M., Noble-Carr, D., & Harcourt, D. (2015) Taking us seriously: children and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns. Melbourne: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Sydney.

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2018b). Child protection Australia 2016–17. Supplementary data tables. Canberra: AIHW

Recommendation 2: Valuing, listening and responding to young people in out-of-home care

As part of the ACT Government's commitment to embedding a culture of listening to young people in care, and to support the ACT implementation of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recommendations, funding must be allocated to:

- Implement the outcomes of the upcoming ACT roundtable(s) with young people in OOHC;
- Resource ongoing, territory-wide, formal consultation mechanisms for young people in OOHC to inform responsive policy, service and system design. Consultation processes should be developed in partnership with young people, and implemented and facilitated by an independent organisation(s) with expertise in engaging with young people on sensitive issues.

In recognition of the increasing numbers of children and young people in OOHC, the ACT Government needs to increase CREATE's core funding by \$30,000, to enable them to meet growing demand. This small investment will fund an additional 0.7 FTE, increasing CREATE's overall staffing capacity to 2 FTE.

3. Successfully implementing the Future of Education in the ACT

3.1 Develop an evaluation framework for the Future of Education

The Youth Coalition welcomed the release of the ten-year Future of Education strategy in 2018. This new strategy has a strong focus on early intervention and prevention, and recognises the opportunity for schools to be key community hubs that respond to the diverse needs of children and young people. The strategy represents an important shift towards better integrating schools and the education system into the broader community structures that support children, young people and families.

The Future of Education will oversee significant education reforms. The Continuum of Education Support (CES) Framework, which includes the introduction of off-site education, will alter the scope of supports for young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from school, with implications for existing community-based education support services. Early school disengagement may result in short and long-term adverse outcomes for young people, including unemployment, which can lead to poor economic outcomes, social exclusion, mental health issues and other risk factors.⁷ It is therefore imperative that the impact of the CES Framework is closely monitored.

The existing provision within the Future of Education to develop an accountability framework for the strategy is inadequate and will not effectively measure the outcomes and impact of key reforms.

A significant investment has been made across government, education, the community sector and broader community to develop this decade-long strategy to guide education, and there is a shared interest in supporting its successful implementation. The absence of a robust evaluation framework undermines the potential of the strategy to lead to systemic change and positive outcomes for children and young people.

Phase 1 (years 1-2) of the Future of Education includes initiatives that will set the groundwork for the life of the strategy. Examples of key activities within Phase 1 include ensuring that young people have a voice in their schooling; enhancing student wellbeing and psychological support; trialling effective community school models; and further developing the CES Framework. Some of the Phase 1 outcomes include students noticing they have an increased say in their learning and learning environment; that their wellbeing is a focus in schools and they can access support when they need it; and that school staff value collaboration and partnerships with community services and parents.

An evaluation framework, including both process and outcome evaluation components, would assess how well Phase 1 activities are implemented, and the extent to which they contribute to the desired outcomes. This would also support the Education Directorate to identify and respond to issues and gaps as they emerge. An evaluation framework should be externally tendered for, and sit across the four foundations of the Future of Education. To ensure its effective implementation, it should be overseen by a steering group comprised of government, education, and community stakeholders. Development and implementation of an Evaluation Framework also aligns with current good practice in ACT policy development – such as the evaluation work being developed for the ACT Community Services Industry Strategy 2016-2026.

⁷ Robinson, E., & Meredith, V. (2013). Family factors in early school leaving (CFCA Paper No. 16). Melbourne: Child Family Community Australia information exchange, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

3.2 Stronger partnerships between schools and community services

The promising focus in the Future of Education on strengthening partnerships between schools and youth/community services will require new processes and systems to remove existing barriers to engagement, and to support collaboration. This should be embedded into an evaluation framework as a priority within Phase 1.

This specific evaluation project needs to investigate ways to strengthen collaboration between schools and community services. During consultations for this submission, community organisations that provide youth engagement services strongly indicated a willingness to partner meaningfully with schools to improve supports for young people. They also identified a range of barriers to collaboration. Some services have experienced an increase in referrals and requests from schools over the past 12-18 months, and without additional funding, are close to or have reached their service capacity. It was also frequently reported that while some schools are actively and meaningfully engaged with youth services (in some cases, with multiple youth services), other schools are less receptive to service engagement.

This component of an evaluation framework would be best implemented by an independent organisation(s) that is well positioned to engage with both youth/community organisations and schools; supported by a steering group. It should actively review the existing mechanisms to support collaboration between schools and community services, identify barriers to collaboration and current good practice; and work with a steering group to develop new processes to enable meaningful partnerships.

Recommendation 3: Successfully implementing the Future of Education in the ACT

Allocate funding to tender for the development of an evaluation framework for Phase 1 of the Future of Education strategy, to assess how well activities are implemented, and the extent to which they contribute to the desired outcomes. An evaluation framework should sit across the four foundations of the Future of Education, implemented by a steering group comprised of government, education and community stakeholders.

As a priority for the implementation of evaluation activities during Phase 1, a specific project should be funded to investigate ways to strengthen collaboration between schools and community services. Supported by a steering group, this would review existing mechanisms to support collaboration, identify barriers and current good practice, and develop new processes to enable meaningful partnerships. This component of the evaluation framework would be best implemented by an independent organisation(s) that is well positioned to work with both youth/community organisations and schools.