



WHITELION **YOUTH**

BY  KIDS FIRST

Your views, your future

**Consultation paper
submission**

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ABOUT KIDS FIRST AUSTRALIA

Kids First Australia (KFA) is an independent not-for-profit community services organisation for children, young people and families. In late 2023, Whitelion Youth – a critical youth support service in Western Australia – merged into KFA.

Whitelion's focus on youth justice became a core strength recognised by governments, the youth sector, corporates and the general community as making a real difference to young people's lives. By integrating the programs delivered by Whitelion, KFA now offers support from (pre) birth to young people aged 24.

Our newly combined child, family and youth expertise and services enable us to provide a family-centred response to enhance the life trajectories of at-risk children and young people nationally. Our goal is for all young people to have every opportunity to be active citizens, with equitable access to support they need to reach their potential.

To ensure our responses to this Action Plan represent the voices, opinions, and lived experiences of the young people we serve, we engaged young people who attend our Whitelion Youth Drop-in Centre in Ballajura – The Dungeon – to share their thoughts.

Note: From the group we surveyed, 69% self-identified as First Nations.

Response to questions

What goals do you have for your future?

The overwhelming response from young people reflected that they don't really have any future goals, as they are too busy trying to get through each day and meet their basic needs.

Of those young people that did have a future goal, the most common response was they hoped to be able to meet their basic needs in the future, including being able to access stable accommodation, engage in further education, and to feel safe.

These responses echo the [Commissioner for Children and Young People Speaking Out Survey \(2021\)](#) which found many young people reported that they do not feel safe, have poor life satisfaction, and cannot access the mental health supports they need.

Access to housing is one of Western Australian young people's greatest concerns and needs. We know that those young people who experience homelessness are at significant risk of repeated, longer durations of homelessness into adulthood. Accordingly, efforts to prevent youth homelessness, including identification and engagement of young people at risk in schools, and efforts to increase family functioning, are [critical to a sustained, longer-term end to youth homelessness in Australia](#).

We know that [school engagement has significant benefits for young people well into adulthood](#). These benefits include greater opportunities for employment, economic and social prosperity, increased community inclusion and participation, and an increase in overall health and wellbeing.

Conversely, students who are not connected to and/or engaged at school are [at greater risk of a wide range of negative outcomes](#) including poorer health and wellbeing, anxiety and/or depressive symptoms, lower levels of achievement, and risk-taking behaviours such as substance use.

[Research from the University of Western Australia](#) indicates that students who leave school early are at greater risk of:

- becoming and staying unemployed;
- earning less across their lifetime;
- experiencing social exclusion (at three times the rate of those who complete Year 12);
- exhibiting risky health behaviours (such as smoking, being overweight and low levels of physical activity);
- poorer mental health outcomes; and
- engaging in crime, and consequently, being arrested and incarcerated.

What do you think is helping young people to thrive and achieve their goals (and why)?

The young people we work with indicated that support services are important to them – and that services like ours that offer flexibility, empathetically take personal circumstances into account, and don't have barriers to access – are the services they are most likely to engage with.

In Mission Australia's [2023 youth survey](#), the three priority areas for Western Australian young people included:

1. School challenges
2. Mental health challenges
3. Relationship challenges

Young people surveyed by Mission Australia shared that, across these three areas of challenge, they felt 'being comfortable asking for support or advice' was one of the most important factors that contributed to them seeking help.

This reinforces the experiences of the young people we spoke with, who shared that the more welcoming, inclusive, and tailored the supports offered to young people are, the more likely young people are to engage with them.

Other key areas that were identified in the survey were access to more money that would support their basic needs, and doing well in school which would flow on to increased opportunities later in life.

Organisations like KFA are an important part of the ecosystem that supports the needs of young people. We offer vital services, resources and guidance within a framework of flexibility and empathy. This approach is crucial because young people often face diverse and complex personal circumstances, such as family issues, financial struggles, and/or mental health challenges. By acknowledging and accommodating these individual circumstances, support services can better engage and assist young people without creating additional barriers to access.

Education is often seen as a pathway to success, but barriers such as lack of resources and inadequate support can hinder academic achievement. Investing in quality education, addressing disparities in educational opportunities, and providing additional support for young people at risk, can help all young people thrive academically and lay the foundation for future success.

By addressing these key areas identified by young people, policymakers, educators, and community leaders can create environments that support the holistic development and wellbeing of young people in Western Australia.

What gets in the way of achieving your goals?

There was more to say from young people about the challenges in achieving their goals. Some of the themes that emerged included:

- Finding and accessing services that meet their needs is difficult
- Paying for additional things that would contribute toward them achieving their goals is expensive
- The cycle of poverty is hard to escape

Intergenerational poverty; limited access to, and the affordability of high-quality education, employment, and training; and difficulty accessing and affording healthcare that meets their needs all perpetuate the cycle of poverty and disadvantage, making it difficult for young people to achieve their goals.

Young people growing up in poverty often lack access to essential resources and opportunities. This includes access to educational resources, extracurricular activities, mentorship programs, and financial support, all of which are crucial for personal and professional development.

Many young people face difficulties in finding and navigating services that adequately meet their needs. This was an area specifically mentioned by the young people we work with.

These challenges can occur due to a lack of specialised services tailored to address the specific challenges they are facing. For example, young people with complex mental health needs may find themselves caught in the "missing middle," where they do not meet the criteria for acute support services but still require more than what mainstream services like Headspace offer.

Recognising that traditional talk therapy may not resonate with all young people, there is a growing need for Government to fund diverse and alternative interventions. The success of supports like our Equine Therapy Program demonstrate the effectiveness of non-traditional approaches in addressing mental health and wellbeing – approach that are trauma-informed, people-centred and strengths-based. By expanding the range of available interventions and exploring alternative therapies, young people have more options to find support that aligns with their preferences and needs.

What do you think would be the most positive outcome or change the Action Plan could make for young people in Western Australia over the next three years? Is there anything else you would like to say about what should be considered in the Action Plan for young people in Western Australia?

Based on conversations with young people connected to our programs, something highlighted by them as important is a shift towards recognising young people as individuals with unique needs and circumstances.

Tailored supports

Instead of fitting each young person into a predefined category or program, the Action Plan should prioritise personalised support tailored to each young person's situation. This approach fosters a sense of agency and empowerment among youth, acknowledging their diverse backgrounds, strengths, and challenges.

Flexible supports

The extension of support services' hours of operation could significantly benefit young people in Western Australia. Many young people face challenges outside of the standard 9am-5pm operating hours. Access to support services during evenings and weekends would provide crucial assistance during times of need. Expanding the availability of counselling services, educational support programs, recreational activities, and community resources to outside of 'business hours' would expand accessibility, ensuring inclusivity for all young people.

Housing accessibility

Adequate housing is a fundamental need for young people, and the Action Plan should prioritise the development of appropriate accommodation services tailored to the unique needs of young people. This includes affordable housing options, transitional housing programs, and supportive housing models that offer stability, safety, and opportunities for independence.

Flexible education options

The Action Plan could advocate for flexible education options and better support for young people in the educational system. This could include initiatives such as Flexible Learning Options (FLO) – a key program that KFA offers in South Australia – where youth practitioners work closely with students to reengage them in education. Additionally, investing in professional development for teachers to enhance their ability to connect with students from diverse backgrounds can improve educational outcomes for young people.

Collaborative innovation

In addition to the specific recommendations raised by young people connected to our youth programs, the Action Plan should also prioritise innovation and collaboration across sectors. This involves leveraging technology, community partnerships, and best practices to create holistic solutions that address the multifaceted needs of young people. Engaging young people directly in the planning and implementation process ensures that their voices are heard, and their perspectives are incorporated into decision-making.

Positive, sustainable change

Overall, the Action Plan for young people in Western Australia should focus on promoting inclusivity, flexibility, and empowerment, while addressing systemic barriers and inequalities. By prioritising individualised support, extending accessibility, improving housing options, enhancing educational opportunities, and fostering innovation, the Action Plan can create positive and sustainable changes that benefit the wellbeing and future of young people across the region.

Our three key recommendations

- 1** Invest in quality education to address disparities in educational opportunities, and provide additional support for young people at-risk and/or disengaged from education. This will help all young people thrive academically and lay the foundation for future success, no matter their background or personal circumstances. Investment should include for educational resources, extracurricular activities, mentorship programs, and financial support, all of which are crucial for personal and professional development.
- 2** Address homelessness and housing insecurity by prioritising the development of appropriate accommodation services tailored to the unique needs of young people. This should include affordable housing options, transitional housing programs, and supportive housing models that offer stability, safety, and opportunities for independence. We know young people who experience homelessness are at significant risk of more and longer instances of homelessness into adulthood, so we view efforts to prevent youth homelessness as of paramount importance to improving the life trajectories of Western Australia's young people.
- 3** Prioritise education, training, support and healthcare services that centre flexibility, empathy, and approaches that meet the needs of the individual. Catering to the diverse and often complex personal circumstances young people face fosters a sense of agency and empowerment, supporting their holistic development and wellbeing.



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Kids First Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise that sovereignty has never been ceded. Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.



We celebrate and value diversity. Kids First Australia is proud to provide support to the community in the most inclusive manner.