

12 May 2026

NSW Legislative Council
Select Committee on Youth Justice
Parliament House
6 Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

By email: Youth.Justice@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Committee Office

Inquiry into Youth Justice – Response to question taken on notice – importance of school, sport, art and other locally designed and delivered initiatives for children

We refer to a question taken on notice from a member of the Select Committee on Youth Justice ('the Committee') during the appearance of the Justice and Equity Centre ('JEC') at the Committee's 15 April 2026 hearing. The question related to the importance of locally designed and delivered initiatives, such as school, sport or art programs for children at risk of criminal legal system involvements.

In response to this question, we refer to the findings of the National Children's Commissioner's 2024 report *'Help way earlier!' How Australia can transform child justice to improve safety and wellbeing*.

The Commissioner spoke with 150 children and young people who had involvement with criminal legal systems. She made a number of findings concerning the importance of local programs for children:¹

The majority of children and young people (83.3%) in the survey agreed that having positive activities to do (like sport, music, dance, art) were important for keeping them out of trouble.

Children and young people, families and community members repeatedly talked about the lack of positive activities available to them in their communities, including sport and youth activity centres. Many attributed children and young people's engagement in criminal activity to them having nothing to do and being bored. Often this resulted in them hanging out in shopping malls and on the streets where they often started getting into trouble.

Children and young people who had access to activities and centres said that this helped them to stay away from crime. They spoke favourably about youth centres, with access to 'a computer room', 'gym', 'X-box', 'BMX bikes', 'rock climbing wall' and 'something to keep them occupied'. Some

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024) *'Help way earlier!' How Australia can transform child justice to improve safety and wellbeing*, available <<https://humanrights.gov.au/resource-hub/children-and-youth-rights/help-way-earlier!-transforming-child-justice-for-safety-and-wellbeing>> ('Help Way Earlier'), pp 35-36.

children and young people said that 'programs run by community and not police' were preferable and would 'be chockers full of kids'.

Other children and young people enjoyed access to youth clubs that offered a variety of activities, like Police Citizens Youth Clubs, including night programs, boxing and basketball, with some also providing breakfast and transport to and from the centres.

Having positive activities to engage in was also seen as important for connecting with peers. Being able to access positive activities can provide a circuit-breaker to negative peer influences. Many children and young people discussed the role of 'bad influences' and 'peer pressure' in their antisocial behaviour, including not attending school, drug use and criminal activity. They reported that problems at home lead them to 'branch out to different friend groups that may not be good'. Children and young people described a sense of belonging with peers that shared similar home lives, while 'with other young people you feel judged by them, can't connect with them'...

Children and young people also raised music and social activities like school barbeques, camps and holiday programs as a positive use of time that improved their social connections and overall wellbeing... Social connections are the cornerstones of health and wellbeing for children and have a critical effect on child development.

As we touched on in our evidence, cost can often be a barrier to accessing these programs. The National Children's Commissioner found:²

While emphasising the need for activities and programs to help keep children out of trouble, children and young people, families and community members raised the cost of participation, including the lack of transport as major barriers to access.

Many said that sports registration, uniforms, equipment, and travel to training and sports events were unaffordable. They want sport to be made 'more accessible' and 'affordable' for all children, including the provision of buses for local sports clubs, particularly in regional and remote locations. Innovative solutions to improve access should be investigated, such as free registrations and using local schools as a hub for enrolment

Both the benefit of these programs, and issues around cost, were raised in submissions to the Commissioner's review:³

Micah Projects gave examples of positive community initiatives that support connection and belonging, such as welcoming and supportive schools, and community centres providing safe youth hubs and youth outreach. They called for further investment in safe spaces for children which are accessible, culturally safe and offer meaningful activities, as these can effectively facilitate positive social engagement and develop their talents and abilities.

Parents and community members also raised the benefits of these types of initiatives. For example, one parent reflected that greater access to 'sporting teams', or opportunities to ride bikes 'legitimately' in a social setting may have helped their child avoid contact with the justice system, but

² Help Way Earlier, p 36.

³ Help Way Earlier, pp 70-71.

that there 'aren't any programs that do that'...another parent said that sport was an important outlet for her children to be 'part of a community and it is about belonging', but they struggled with the costs of transport, uniforms and registration. The lack of public transport options and accessible activities was particularly acute in regional and remote areas, and outer suburbs of cities.

As well as speaking about the importance of sport, children and young people also said that 'rapping, singing, jazz, gaming – regular people's hobbies' would help them. They explained that peer friendships were critical, particularly for children from unstable homes, but that in these friendship circles 'you've got to get a hobby so that you're not doing bad stuff together.'

On the basis of these findings, the Commissioner made a recommendation specifically directed to improving the accessibility of these types of activities for children:

These recommendations were repeated in our consultations and submissions, reinforcing that improving access to community sport, music and other social and cultural activities should be an immediate priority action for all governments. This should include addressing barriers like cost and improving basic infrastructure including public transport.

Recommendation 11: Australian Governments improve availability of free and accessible community sport, music, other social activities, and cultural programs, addressing barriers such as lack of public transport.

Some organisations in NSW which facilitate these types of activities for children and young people include:

- [CREATE Foundation](#) which assists children aged 0-25 who have experience of the child protection system. This includes clubCREATE where children join activities and experiences and Connection Events where children engage in activities and events with other children with experiences of care.
- [Confit Pathways](#) which uses fitness and mentoring to provide support, guidance, and opportunities for children and young people, helping them build a positive future.
- [Youth Off the Streets](#) which is a not-for-profit youth services organisation that supports 12–24-year-olds experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including through therapeutic living skills programs that combine practical skills and peer support with therapeutic interventions such as art, exercise, self-care and music therapy.

There is opportunity for the NSW Government to support the development of new local and affordable sporting, art, music and other programs. These have significant potential to benefit children and young people and keep them out of the criminal legal system.

Yours sincerely

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