No Child in Poverty

*Note to reader:* fully designed and formatted version including lived experience case studies, stories and quotes will be launched on 15 October 2018.
Message from the CEO

When we talk about building strong, connected and sustainable communities, we know that first and foremost our communities care about getting it right from the start and building a strong foundation for children, young people and their families.

We know this because over the last few years since the last State Election, NCOSS has travelled across NSW to hear directly from communities about the key issues that matter to them, and the solutions making a real difference.

But when we speak to our members, leaders and services on the ground, we hear there are still too many children and young people falling through the cracks and missing out on the support they need.

In NSW, we know that 14% of children under the age of 15 are experiencing poverty – a rate higher than any other mainland state. This means that almost 1 in 7 children are living in households below the poverty line.

Breaking the cycle of poverty and entrenched disadvantage in NSW is not an impossible task. NCOSS has charted a roadmap for the incoming Government that targets five key areas, each with clear actionable recommendations around Affordable Living, Justice, Mental Health, Lifelong Learning, and Family and Connectedness.

These reflect the changes our communities want to see right across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote NSW. Our Election Platform shines a light on their voices, aspirations and stories.

It should not matter what side of politics we stand on; children’s experience of poverty should not determine their chances and opportunities in life.

NCOSS calls for all sides of politics to lead by example and demonstrate that they are committed to investing in our children, young people and families where it is needed most.

Together, we can build a community where all children and young people are supported and empowered to flourish. The upcoming State Election presents a real opportunity to end child poverty in NSW. Let’s get to work, and get it done.
Introduction

Children and young people\(^1\) should have every opportunity to be empowered and thrive in life. But the impact of poverty can be devastating, long lasting and severely limit access to these opportunities.

Experiencing poverty in childhood acts as a statistically significant predictor of subsequent and intersecting forms of disadvantage, including health issues, behavioural problems and homelessness. Yet it is these hardships which predict subsequent poverty, thereby trapping children, young people and their families in a cycle of poverty.

To break this cycle, we clearly need solutions that address a number of intersecting issues.

Before we can flourish and tackle the challenges in life, we all need a stable base and secure environment. This includes a secure home that meets the needs of children, young people and their families. Their families also need to be able to access supports at the right time to avoid crisis and stay together.

For children to get the best start in life and grow through education, we need to support them to engage early and consistently, particularly during times of hardship. They also need to be able to access the right services and supports within their communities when times are tough, so that they feel safe, connected, supported and empowered at all times.

Our roadmap to end child poverty is underpinned by six fundamental principles. All six principles sit at the core of our recommendations and should be considered fundamental in any policy response to end child poverty:

**Youth empowerment**

Services and programs for children and young people are much more likely to succeed if children and young people have been involved in their design, planning, development and delivery. We need to systematise empowering children and young people to be involved in the decisions that affect them.

**Aboriginal self-determination**

Aboriginal communities and leaders know what their communities need and must be supported to self-determine at all levels of decision-making. We need to invest in Aboriginal-led design and delivery.

**Sustainability**

The immediate and long term impact of climate change on our communities is real and has a big impact on our health, safety and communities. Environmental impact and sustainability must be a valued consideration in all social policy responses.

\(^1\) NCOSS refers to children and young people interchangeably throughout our platform and include all those below the age of 25 years.
**Place-based solutions**

Communities should be empowered and resourced to design and deliver their own solutions by coming together and leveraging cross-sectoral partnerships. We need place-based solutions that are grounded in communities.

**Regional, remote and rural focus**

The tyranny of distance means isolation and lack of transport have a significant impact on individual and community access to opportunity, services and supports. We need focused approaches and investment for regional, remote and rural communities.

**Digital inclusion**

Building everyone’s capacity with technology can reduce social and economic exclusion, and increase community and social connection. Improved connectivity can help address the isolation faced by rural and remote communities, reducing the tyranny of distance and ensuring that no one is left behind as we move towards an increasingly digital future.

**Tailored approaches**

Not everyone is on an equal footing. We need tailored and targeted approaches that recognise multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage and are shaped by, and for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, people with disability, LGBTIQ communities, older people and younger people, and girls and women.

**NCOSS supports our members**

We are part of a vibrant sector that holds significant expertise in how to end poverty and inequality in NSW. We stand with our members, and would like to specifically acknowledge our support for the following campaigns:

- [Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) Election Platform](#)
- [Family Matters](#)
- [Home Stretch](#)
- [Everybody’s Home](#)
- [NSW Making Rent Fair](#)
- [Stand By Me](#)
What’s needed

Affordable & Secure Housing
Implement an affordable housing strategy
Support young people to avoid homelessness
Make renting secure and fair
Support children and their families experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness

Justice
Divert young people from the criminal justice system
Slash recidivism rates
Ensure Aboriginal people have culturally appropriate legal assistance

Mental Health
Work with schools to help young people access supports
Ensure children and young people in regional NSW get the help they need

Lifelong Learning
Ensure all children have the best start in life
Support children and young people to remain engaged in education

Family and Connectedness
Keep children and young people safe and with their families
Integrate service delivery for our most vulnerable families

Access
Reduce the impact of transport disadvantage on children, young people and their families
Deliver place-based community transport solutions
Extend opportunities for young people in regional NSW to be supported to learn to drive
Urgently address health transport barriers in regional NSW for children and their families
NSW community voices

NCOSS has listened to stories and experiences all over NSW, and we have formed our Election Platform based on what we have heard.

Between May and August 2018 we undertook a tour of regional consultations, listening to stories from over
- 220 individuals who work in their communities with people who are experiencing poverty and disadvantage,
- 18 consultation sessions with social and community service organisations, over eight NSW districts.

We also gathered stories and experiences through
- an online survey of our membership canvassing their priorities for action
- the responses of 402 people living below the poverty line via an online survey

**Hearing from people with lived experience:** via online survey, we heard from people in metro, regional and rural NSW communities living below the poverty line. Respondents to our survey were diverse and included people with disability, older people, single and family households.

**Consultations with regional communities:** a range of perspectives and experiences were shared during the 2018 NCOSS regional consultation series. We talked to people working in the health and community sectors about the key challenges and unique strengths of NSW communities.

**The involvement of children and young people:** our members undertake conversations, interviews and research with children and young people in NSW in the design and delivery of their services. These perspectives complement our field work and guide our recommendations.

**Being guided by experts within the sector:** brought together with our community engagement and our members’ research with children and young people, expert advisory panels have worked with the NCOSS team to develop this Election Platform.

Our recommendations have been presented to our members and the NCOSS Board and endorsed as key priorities for action.

Details about our methodology, information about the research undertaken by our members and a list of our expert advisory panels can be found in the Appendix of this document.
Affordable & Secure Housing
Children and young people have a safe, stable and secure place to call home

The action needed

Implement an affordable housing strategy

- Deliver 5,000 new social housing dwellings each year until 2026. Ensure that all new stock is accessible for people with a disability and have best practice energy efficiency standards, including solar power.
- Mandate inclusionary zoning targets of 15% for privately owned land and 30% for publicly owned land.

Support young people to avoid homelessness

We need to provide a variety of evidence-based housing support options to young people, including:

- Investing in supported accommodation models such as the Youth Foyer model, Housing Plus and medium term accommodation services.
- Further investment in intensive case management models for young people with complex needs.
- Support to maintain tenancies.
- Accelerated access to social housing.

Investment should be targeted to regions with the highest need.

Make renting secure and fair

- Strengthen the protection for tenants’ under the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 (‘RTA’) by removing ‘no grounds’ evictions under sections 84 and 85 of the RTA.
- Increase investment in tenants’ advice services to strengthen security of tenancies for children and their families.

Support children and their families experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness

- Increase investment in Housing First and Assertive Outreach responses to ensure young people experiencing homelessness are housed as quickly as possible.
- Long term and ongoing investment in Aboriginal community controlled housing providers to build capacity to deliver services, maintain existing housing stock and develop new stock.
Why it is needed

Children and young people want to feel safe and protected. To feel safe, young people need a secure place to call home. On the night of the 2016 Census, just over 9,000 young people were recorded as homeless in NSW. Sadly, we know that this staggering number is not the full picture, as many young people experience ‘hidden homelessness’ and are not counted in the official statistics. Hidden homelessness includes families moving in with other families, or young people couch surfing with friends or relatives.

The effects of homelessness on young people are devastating and long lasting. We know that without a safe and secure place to call home, young people are more likely to self-harm, leave school earlier and have significantly higher unemployment rates than their peers. Children and young people who experience homelessness have poorer outcomes on a number of measures, including mental health and are 48% more likely to meet the criteria for having a probable serious mental illness.

There is a clear message from young people in NSW that safe and affordable housing is a high priority for their generation.

Across NSW we heard during our regional community sector consultations that the affordability, security, supply and suitability of housing was the most referenced challenge facing communities.

As of June 2016 there were 60,000 people in NSW on the social housing waiting list, with waiting periods between 2 and 10 years. Research commissioned by Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) demonstrates that NSW needs an additional 12,500 new social and affordable rental homes a year until 2026. This includes 5,000 new social housing homes a year until 2026 for low-income households. This would return the proportion of social housing to 6% of all NSW housing, the same level as 20 years ago.

In 2016/17 approximately:

- 37,715 people in total experienced homelessness in NSW (an increase of 37% from 2011)
- 22,000 clients of social housing were unaccompanied young people aged 15-24 (19% of all clients)
- 116,427 people experienced homelessness in Australia (an increase of 14% from 2011)

Children and their families need more than a roof over their head, they need a home which is safe and one they can afford to run. A high percentage of housing in NSW has poor energy performance which costs our communities greatly.

People living in poor energy performing homes pay higher energy bills or live in unhealthy and uncomfortable environments. Sadly, too many people in NSW are living in homes that are damp, too

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2 Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (2016) NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People – Consultation Results.
6 Ibid.
cold in winter and too hot in summer which leads to an increase in mortality. In Australia, cold weather contributes to 6.5% of all deaths and hot weather contributes to 0.5%. Both of these statistics will increase as our climate continues to change.

Excess cold and dampness can generate and aggravate a range of illnesses and allergies having a significant impact on our public health spend.

“Exposure of Australian children to damp housing is associated with 8% of the total asthma burden in children aged 14 years or under.”

With the cost of asthma to the Australian community at $11,740 per person, the economic case for developing energy efficient social housing stock is even more persuasive. According to Australian Built Environment Council and Climate works Australia, a modest increase of one-star equivalent ratings in the National Construction Code could reduce energy costs by up to $900 for each household annually, and installing a solar hot water system could reduce energy use by 80% annually.

NCOSS calls on the incoming government to commit to developing 5,000 new social housing dwellings every year until 2026. There is no reason why new social housing stock should not be built according to best practice energy efficiency standards. We need to ensure children and their families live in safe and comfortable homes that they can afford to keep warm in winter and cool in summer. This is a simple lever that an incoming government can action to support low income households in NSW meet the high cost of living and address preventative health problems.

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Justice

Children and young people have access to justice and grow up in empowered and supportive communities

The action needed

Divert young people from the criminal justice system

Adopt a justice reinvestment approach to end the overrepresentation of young Aboriginal people in prison, that:

- Redirects funding away from the expansion of prison infrastructure and into initiatives that strengthen communities and address the underlying causes of offending;
- Allocates diverted funds to three new community-led justice reinvestment initiatives across NSW; and
- Establishes an independent NSW justice reinvestment body overseen by a board with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

Invest more in keeping young people out of the justice system with targeted diversionary programs. Diversionary programs run by Aboriginal controlled organisations, particularly in regional and remote NSW, should be prioritised.

Slash recidivism rates

Ensure universal access to culturally appropriate post-release programs which focus on continuity of support for young people (up to 25 years). All young Aboriginal people should have access to Aboriginal-led programs that focus on re-establishing their connections to country, community and culture.

Ensure Aboriginal people have culturally appropriate legal assistance

Significantly increase funding for community-based legal assistance services, particularly Aboriginal Legal Services and Aboriginal controlled community legal centres.
Why it is needed

No child should grow up thinking that imprisonment is a way of life. Every child and young person deserves to mature in a safe and supportive environment that helps them realise and reach their full potential. Imprisoning children places limits on their potential and causes lifelong psychological harm. Imprisoning children should only be seen as a method of last resort.

In NSW, Aboriginal children are 15 times more likely to be detained than non-Aboriginal children, making prison a way of life for many young people.

Communities right across the state tell us that our current law and order policies are not effective at reducing crime rates, and children are better able to overcome their challenges and succeed in life when they are supported within their community.

Our Aboriginal communities are vibrant and diverse, with strong connections to culture, community and country. Empowering these communities, and particularly Aboriginal young people is key to addressing the challenges they continue to experience in health, education, employment and the justice system.

Imprisoning children and young people not only comes at a cost to the life of the child and their community, it also has a significant financial cost to us all. In NSW, it costs the government $1,344 each day to keep a child in prison, which is a total of $490,817 a year.\(^9\)

We know there are better solutions to reducing crime rates than building more prisons.

We need to divert funding away from the expansion of prison infrastructure and into evidence based early intervention and prevention programs that are place-based and community-led. Aboriginal communities that are strong in culture and in their community hold the solutions to help young people reach their full potential.

We call on the incoming government to be bold and make NSW the first state in Australia to commit to a Justice Reinvestment approach to juvenile justice by funding three additional justice reinvestment initiatives across NSW. To promote the reinvestment of resources from prisons to community-led, place-based initiatives, and to provide expertise on the implementation of justice reinvestment, we support Just Reinvest’s recommendation to establish an independent NSW justice reinvestment body overseen by a board with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

Aboriginal Legal Services and Aboriginal Controlled Community Legal Centres continue to be chronically underfunded. This is despite the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people, men, women and children, in the justice system. Aboriginal communities have told us that they are not receiving the right level of support. Specialist Aboriginal women’s legal services are particularly stretched and require adequate funding to help their clients work through criminal and civil legal issues. Sadly, about 80% of Aboriginal women in prison have been victims of violence. A high percentage of these women are faced with a range of civil law needs, including child protection issues.

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Funding culturally appropriate legal services does not just ensure Aboriginal people have culturally appropriate legal representation, and therefore access to justice, but they also support vulnerable families to stay connected and reduces the number of children in out-of-home care.
Mental health

Children and young people are supported to lead healthy and happy lives, develop resilience and get the right support at the right time

The action needed

Work with schools to help young people access supports

Increase investment in and expand the budget for evidence-based, prevention and early intervention mental health and wellbeing programs and initiatives in schools across the state

Ensure children and young people in regional NSW get the help they need

Support and resource low-cost, community-based youth mental health support services, with a focus on investment in regional, remote and rural areas, that:

- are recovery-oriented and trauma-informed;
- promote care coordination; and
- complement and integrate with clinical and acute care services.

Why it is needed

Good mental health and wellbeing enables children and young people to lead healthier lives, cope with the stresses of life more effectively and realise their full potential. No one understands this more than young people themselves; we know that mental health is the number one issue of concern for young people in NSW and across Australia right now.³⁰

But getting the right support at the right time is often out of reach for too many of our young people and particularly those experiencing multiple and diverse forms of disadvantage.

Across NSW we continue to hear that key barriers for youth include persistent stigma around mental health and a lack of affordable community mental health supports (and the means to access them), particularly in regional and remote communities. This is consistent with ReachOut and Mission Australia’s 2018 research finding that:

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• 4 in 10 young people feel too embarrassed to seek professional help (42.4%).
• Almost half couldn’t afford to get professional help even if they wanted to (48.1%).
• Around 1 in 4 didn’t have transport to get to a service (28%), wouldn’t have time to get professional help (25.4%), or said local services were unavailable to them (24%).

We know that transport in regional and remote communities is a significant barrier to young people accessing the services they need. We also know that properly resourcing schools and the community mental health sector to connect with young people is crucial to addressing their mental health and wellbeing needs.

As a central access point and place of engagement, schools have a significant role to play in promoting mental health and wellbeing to young people, including coping with stress and reducing stigma. They are therefore the ideal setting to provide preventions and interventions to improve mental health and mental health awareness, reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking and provide referral pathways to support. Communities tell us about the incredible work their local schools are doing to support student mental health and wellbeing, but that their resources are limited and often mean they are unable to engage the full-time staff or range of services and programs needed.

We also hear about the need right across NSW for more affordable community-based supports that maximise opportunities to prevent the impact of mental illness by intervening early and reducing the need for crisis care and hospitalisations, while improving individual wellbeing and strengthening communities. Our members also tell us that youth peer support can and should play a key role, with peer education initiatives found to enhance young people’s self-esteem, self-efficacy and sense of control over their lives, resulting in more positive health-related behaviours.

NCOSS was pleased to see $42 million for community-based mental health services and supports in the mental health budget for 2018-19. However, we need more significant, sustained and targeted investment in community-based supports that are youth focused and designed, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed and recovery-oriented, particularly for regional, rural and remote areas, if we are to meet the needs of young people in all their diversity.

Lifelong Learning

Children and young people are set up early in life to thrive and be empowered into the future

The action needed

**Ensure all children have the best start in life**

Provide universal access to early childhood education and care services for all children in the 2 years before school.

**Support children and young people to remain engaged in education**

Support vulnerable young people to remain engaged with the education system, including:

- Increased investment in student support officers, and provision of centralised support, training and coordination of their activities
- Targeted in-school support for children in out-of-home care
- Appropriate alternatives to suspension

Why it is needed

Children and young people see education as a top priority for the NSW Government. We know that high quality education not only enhances children and young people’s developmental outcomes, but also empowers them to thrive in life and find a pathway out of the poverty and disadvantage they may experience.

However all too often our children and young people experience barriers to accessing and engaging with high quality education. For our most vulnerable, this can be because of a lack of affordable and accessible services, pre-existing disadvantage impacting on learning or social interaction, or a disrupted educational experience, for example due to changes in the home environment or out-of-home care.

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18 Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People 2016, *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People – Consultation Results.*

The approach we take to address these issues can have a real impact on a child or young person’s outcomes in life.

In communities across NSW, we hear how early childhood education and care (ECEC) services often act as key hubs and ‘soft entry points’ that connect vulnerable children and families to a variety of early childhood support services, community and health services and culture. For example, Dalaigur Preschool in Kempsey and Jarjum Centre in Lismore run Aboriginal language and culture programs, provide whole-of-community, wrap-around supports for children with additional needs and refer vulnerable families to other services.

NCOSS welcomed the $200 million in the 2018-19 State Budget to facilitate greater access to ECEC for three year-olds. However, this represents only a 6.8% increase in investment from the previous year and Federal Government changes to childcare subsidies are likely to impact vulnerable families.

It is difficult to see how current levels of investment will facilitate universal access if the NSW Government continues to spend less per child on ECEC than most other states and territories. This means less access, higher fees, and less opportunity for vulnerable children, particularly in regional and remote areas. We need universal access to ECEC for all children in the two years before school, and as a first step, the incoming government should increase the spend per child to be in line with the median state and territory government spend.

We also know that for older children and young people experiencing disadvantage, targeted support at school is key to keeping them engaged with education. Communities tell us about the positive impact that Student Support Officers have on student wellbeing and keeping at risk youth connected to vital supports and services that help them remain in school. But our members are concerned that in recent years, decreased funding and decentralisation of Student Support Officers have limited their ability to effectively engage with young people.

Targeted in-school support is particularly crucial for children and young people in out-of-home care, and we need approaches that place education at the centre of decisions made about their care, placement and future. For example, Victoria’s LOOKOUT Education Support Centre trains Designated Teachers to advocate for educational improvements for children in care at the school, bridging the gap between educators and social workers.

As a state, we also need to respond to student misbehaviour in ways that keep them engaged without disrupting their learning. This is particularly crucial for Aboriginal students, who despite making up only 7% of the total student population, also make up about a quarter of the student population experiencing suspension.

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22 Ibid.
Consultations with young people in juvenile detention conducted by the Advocate for Children and Young People have highlighted that long suspensions (of 20 days) can entrench problematic behaviour as young people become disengaged from their learning and social networks.\(^{25}\) While suspended, young people come into contact with police, confirming the role suspensions play in the ‘prison to school pipeline’.\(^{26}\)

The NSW Government should review school suspension and expulsion policies and procedures to ensure:

- Better collection, monitoring and public reporting on data relating to school suspension;
- A reduction in the maximum length of time for which a student can be suspended;
- Introduction of an in-school alternative to suspension (such as suspension centres); and
- Behaviour management strategies are linked with the provision of learning support.

The NSW Government needs to provide culturally appropriate, wrap-around behaviour and learning support based on a student’s individual circumstances to allow young people to maintain their connection to education, community and culture.

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Family & Connectedness

Children and young people are connected to their families, communities, kinship and support networks

The action needed

Keep children and young people safe and with their families

Ensure there is a well-resourced continuum of support for vulnerable children, young people and their families from the prevention and early intervention stages, right through to family preservation and restoration, with a focus on keeping families and kinship networks together. This should include:

- Increased investment in prevention and early intervention to increase support for vulnerable families and reduce entry into the child protection system, including an early intervention service growth fund targeted at areas with high rates of risk-of-significant-harm notifications.
- Ensuring the real value of funding for existing early intervention programs and services is maintained.
- Establishing a child protection innovation and evidence fund to test and evaluate new approaches to early intervention.
- Increased investment in intensive family preservation and restoration services.

Integrated service delivery for our most vulnerable families

Develop a more integrated, whole-of-government approach to addressing issues which lead to child protection concerns earlier. This should include a policy approach which gives families with child protection concerns priority access to services such as social housing, early childhood education and health services.

Why it is needed

All children and young people have a right to feel connected to their family, community, culture and country. We know that young people see family and friends as a source of happiness and the most
important things in their lives. They have a right to a system and network of supports that provide for and strengthen these relationships.

We also know that for children, young people and their families, prevention and early intervention are key to greater stability in the home environment, reduced risk of harm, and improved outcomes in a range of areas such as education and employment. However, as a state we continue to focus our investment on the ‘pointy end’ and crisis responses while funding for prevention and early intervention has eroded over time.

Across NSW we heard concerns that the levels of funding for the early intervention sector in particular are not sufficient to meet the level of need. Vulnerable and at risk families are not being identified and referred to services early enough to prevent the breakdown of relationships and other serious harm or child protection concerns. As a result, children and young people are entering the out-of-home care system at an increasing rate. This picture is even worse for Aboriginal children and young people; more than 5,500 were in out-of-home care as at 30 June 2016, at an increase of approximately 500 Aboriginal children from 30 June 2015.

There are also long wait times for families with child protection concerns to access other needed supports such as housing, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and mental health services, exacerbated by the fragmented nature of service provision across government agencies. Child protection concerns should trigger greater prioritisation for access to services such as housing and health.

We continue to support efforts to improve existing services and the out-of-home care system for our children and families through the Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) Reform and Their Futures Matter. However, to be effective these efforts must be accompanied by appropriate resourcing that maintains funding for existing services, significantly increases overall funding for prevention and early intervention, and targets areas of highest need. We also need to build an evidence base on what is working and where the gaps are to best inform the allocation of resources, and drive innovative approaches to early intervention.

Working with families to stay connected also needs to happen right across the continuum, whether it is at the pre-crisis stage or after a child has entered the out-of-home care system.

While we are pleased that Their Futures Matter aims to increase places in family preservation services, the steady increase in numbers of children entering out-of-home care demonstrates that we need far greater investment to cope with rising demand. The incoming government therefore needs to direct investment towards intensive family preservation and restoration, rather than foster care and adoption which should always be seen as options of last resort. We also need to see the incoming government

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adopt the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle as a priority. Children and young people should be supported to live safely with their families wherever possible, or permanently in other family arrangements such as kinship care.
Access

Children and young people in regional, rural and remote NSW can access services, supports and opportunities.

The action needed

Reduce the impact of transport disadvantage on children, young people and their families by adequately funding rural, regional and remote community transport providers

Commitment to long term funding of the NSW Community Transport Program beyond June 2019, with a 20% increase in funds received by service providers each year for five years.

Deliver place-based community transport solutions

In consultation with the sector, deliver all NSW transport assistance funds more directly to communities so that local groups can together come up with ways to deploy their community transport resources efficiently and sustainably.

Extend opportunities for young people in regional NSW to be supported to learn to drive

Fund evidence-based programs such as Driving Change that support young people in regional areas to learn to drive.

Urgently address health transport barriers in regional NSW for children and their families

Extend the Isolated Patient Transport Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS):

- Include community transport providers in eligible NSW areas.
- Include upfront payment to service providers and clients as an option in the Scheme.
- Expand the range of medical services covered by the scheme to include specialist mental health services and specialist drug, alcohol and addiction treatment services.
- Undertake an awareness campaign encouraging health services and the community to make use of the service.
Why it is needed

The tyranny of distance means isolation and barriers to accessing social, educational and economic opportunities, services and supports. We need focused approaches and investment for both physical and digital access in regional, remote and rural communities. Transport and technology are crucial links for people experiencing disadvantage, and ensure that no one is left behind. With a growing range of education, information, government, and community services moving online, internet access is increasingly regarded as an essential service.\(^{32}\)

However in NSW, community transport still does not meet the needs of regional and remote communities for physical access to supports, and people are missing out. We heard from the NSW community that meaningful access to transport can reduce social and economic exclusion, increase community and social inclusion, and indeed provide a way to gain support for digital connection.

We know that affordable housing, diversionary programs, mental health supports and early childhood education and care services are only going to help alleviate poverty and disadvantage if children and their families can access them. Access to transport is not an end in itself, but a crucial link. The lack of available and suitable transport options has a compounding effect on people experiencing disadvantage in rural and regional NSW.

People living in regional and remote NSW experience higher levels of illness compared to people living in metropolitan areas.\(^{33}\) Children and young people living in regional and remote areas are over-represented in the child protection and youth justice system.\(^{34}\) Despite this, people in rural and remote areas are less likely to access health and community support services.\(^{35}\)

All children and young people have a right to be connected with affordable housing, family and community, health and learning. The NSW Government acknowledges that transport is an essential service that is crucial to ensuring participation.\(^{36}\)

We have heard that access to transport in regional and rural areas is a major issue; it is insufficient, overcomplicated and under-funded. At present, poor access to transport is curtailing people’s opportunities, health and quality of life. Indeed, the absence of this link can even cause unemployment, ill-health, mental illness and poverty.

Children, young people and their families are particularly vulnerable to transport disadvantage and particularly negatively affected as they seek to access the community.\(^{37}\) A lack of transport can make


impossible the employment and education necessary for young people to become independent, contribute to their communities and build a better quality of life.

**It’s complicated**

There are at least nine state and federally funded transport assistance schemes operating in NSW. They are targeted at older people, people with disability, school students with disability, Veterans, isolated patients, people who are unwell and people who otherwise have limited or no access to public or private transport. Each have their own eligibility requirements of service users, and contractual obligations of service providers.

We have heard that this complicated system is inefficient and overly rigid, prescriptive and not flexible enough to address the diverse needs of communities and individuals accessing the service. Drawn out administrative processes are getting in the way of the provision of vital services.

**The real cost of service delivery**

The relatively small and dispersed population of regional and remote communities, combined with the centralisation of health services, can make it very difficult to run a viable community transport business. In rural and remote areas, the cost of fleet maintenance is high, and current funds cannot be stretched to cover the cost of transporting people the distances they require.

Compounding this, the shut-down of the NSW Community Care Support Program and insufficient transport support funds in NDIS plans mean that charging people with disability the full gap of their travel costs may exclude them from accessing transport at all, particularly if they live in areas where distances are long. This is the case even with the recently announced $3 million to provide $10 per trip subsidy for NDIS trips. In regional areas, the blunt application of $10 to trips over large and varying distance will have little impact.

**Insufficient options**

There are not enough meaningful or accessible public transport options in regional NSW and in many cases it is not viable given the long distances and scattered populations. The result is unassailable pressure on community transport providers. For those who are further disadvantaged by illness or disability, isolation leads dependence on income support and poorer health outcomes.

People in regional and remote areas are missing out on vital supports and services. The sector urgently needs reform to health and community transport that gives service providers more autonomy and flexibility to meet the needs of people living in and around regional centres.

We need to address access to transport as a fundamental right for all NSW residents, in such a way that reflects each community’s unique geographic and demographic needs.

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Communities have the answer

We have heard that in order for community transport to achieve its aims in regional NSW, an incoming government must work with the sector toward reform. Service providers want simplified and streamlined eligibility, and flexibility in how people access NSW-based transport programs. We heard that there must be a review of regulations governing school and other transport resources with a view to better utilising existing assets across the relevant funding buckets. Community transport programs must reflect the actual needs of the community and the real costs of providing the service, so that children and young people can be connected.

The reality of living remote

A smaller proportion of households in regional NSW do not own a car compared with Australia overall. Private transport, while certainly not the answer for everyone, is the only option for many people living in remote and regional areas.

Young people can find it challenging to get the support they need to get their licence, especially if they do not have parents or guardians that have a car, or a licence. More needs to be done to extend opportunities for young people to be supported to learn to drive.

Research shows that long term and consistent investment in local delivery of licensing support services works best. Services that address fines management, literacy, driving lessons, supervised driving practice and the costs associated with licensing help young people overcome the many barriers to getting their licence in regional areas. Community-based programs are also most effective at facilitating licensing for Aboriginal people, particularly where they are culturally responsive, staffed by Aboriginal workforce and prioritise respectful communication. Driving Change is an excellent example of a community driven initiative that is having a positive impact on young people.

Regional Transport Scheme in focus

We have heard that major improvements are required of the Isolated Patient Transport and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS) to ensure that all people travelling long distances for health services can access the support they need.

IPTAAS is not generally well known and is underutilised. IPTAAS provides reimbursement only for public transport or private vehicles. This is a barrier for people who live in areas unserved by public transport, who have no car, and who are unable to pay the upfront costs of frequent long drives. IPTAAS eligibility does not include mental illness or drug and alcohol supports, despite these being significant health issues in regional areas. Further, failing to include Community Transport Providers as an eligible form of transport in IPTAAS excludes a source of income for these providers and source of transport for many.

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42 Ibid
Appendix - Methodology

Hearing from people with lived experience

We surveyed 402 people living below the poverty line via an online survey conducted in May 2018. The sample was diverse; 35% lived in rural and regional areas, 79% spoke a language other than English at home, and 25% identified as having a disability.

The survey fieldwork and data processing was conducted by Essential Media’s Online Research Unit. The most recent ACOSS definition of the ‘poverty line’ was used as the basis for determining the target population. The target population was selected by cross-matching responses to a question about after-tax household income with information about the number of people in the household. Only participants that meet the upper limit for the relevant ‘poverty line’ could continue the survey. Respondents were invited to take part in the survey via an email invitation to the Online Research Unit’s online research panel. During the fieldwork, soft quotas were placed on gender, family composition, region and language spoken at home. We also placed a hard quota of 25% on the number of responses from pensioners in order to gain a balance of responses from family households. The data has otherwise not been weighted.

The survey was designed by NCOS, with input from representatives from the NSW Cancer Council and NSW Health in conjunction with Essential Media Research. The analysis of this data was conducted by NCOS. The research design and fieldwork for this project were conducted in line with ISO 20252 accreditation (the international ISO quality assurance standard for market and social research).

Hearing from Children and Young People

We recognised that an Election Platform that focuses on the welfare of children and young people means that their voices should be at the heart of our learnings and recommendations. It was therefore important for us to complement our field research with documented consultations and interviews with children and young people in NSW conducted by our members. We would like to particularly acknowledge the following sources and the contribution they have made to our Election Platform:

- Advocate for Children and Young People (May 2016), *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People – Consultation Results*
- Mission Australia (December 2017), *Youth Survey Report 2017*
- ReachOut & Mission Australia (June 2018), *Lifting the weight. Understanding young people’s mental health and service needs in regional and remote Australia.*
- Youth Action (August 2018), *Inequality in Australia: A Young Person’s Perspective*
- Mission Australia (August 2018), *Homelessness Draft Report*
- Advocate for Children and Young People (Forthcoming), *Consultations with young people in juvenile detention centres*
Consultations with regional communities

Our consultations have been guided by principles enshrined in widely recognised methodologies, such as the Harwood, World Café and Tamarack approaches to community conversations and engagement. We have used these principles as a framework for our consultations to:

- encourage diverse, cross-sector contribution and perspectives
- create a safe space for people to share their insights and experiences
- understand the shared aspirations and values of a community
- identify the strengths, assets and past successes of a community
- identify the changes or solutions that would assist in achieving a community’s aspirations
- develop public knowledge based on experience, and
- develop a strengths-based approach to community development.

Being guided by experts within the sector

The public knowledge gleaned from our survey and consultation engagement was brought together with the expert knowledge of our diverse advisory panels, other experts in the field, and the NCOSS team to develop specific recommendations. The advisory panels consulted included:

- Forum of Non-Government Organisations
- Children, Young People and Families Alliance
- Children Services Forum
- Housing and Homelessness Collaboration Group
- Health Equity Alliance
- Transport Policy Advisory Group