

Commissioner
for Children and
Young People

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Aboriginal Youth Engagement Project

What young Aboriginal people
living in South Australia have said
will strengthen their voice



“Elders make sure their input is heard but younger people also need to raise their voice [...] but there’s not enough platforms for us to speak”.

**A joint project between SA
Commissioner for Children and Young
People, Reconciliation SA and Tauondi
Aboriginal College**

October 2018 – March 2019.

Please note: The use of the term ‘Aboriginal’ throughout this report includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their respective nations and language groups. We acknowledge that South Australia is home to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from diverse and different backgrounds from across Australia.

Introduction

In October 2018, South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People Helen Connolly, in collaboration with Reconciliation SA and Tauondi Aboriginal College, initiated an Aboriginal Youth Engagement project to explore the feasibility of establishing an Aboriginal Youth Council (AYC) in South Australia.

The AYC would be similar to those already operating in other states across Australia while being tailored to meet the particular needs of South Australia's Aboriginal young people. Ideally it would be a mechanism to enable the voice of Aboriginal young people across regional, remote and metropolitan areas to be linked directly to government and non-government organisations, informing decisions around matters impacting directly on them.

“The overarching focus of the engagement project was to explore the feasibility of establishing a South Australian AYC that fosters development of cultural identity to strengthen the voice of young Aboriginal people across regional, remote and metropolitan areas.”

Commissioner Helen Connolly





What we know

For a number of years various government and community organisations have sought to establish a mechanism that would allow Aboriginal young people to come together on a regular basis to advocate around strategic and operational matters directly impacting on them.

But although attempts to support development of an Aboriginal Youth Council or similar body have been made, including canvassing the idea of incorporating Aboriginal young people into an adult advisory group, no sustainable model or mechanism has been successfully achieved.

Since commencing in the role of South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2017, I have consulted with many South Australian Aboriginal children and young people firsthand. I have met Aboriginal young people in various settings, through cultural programs and at sporting activities and events in both regional and metropolitan locations.

At the core of the conversations I have had with our Aboriginal young people some common themes have emerged around the importance of knowing, experiencing and respecting Aboriginal culture and of having a safe and supportive space in which to:

- learn from each other
- lead by example
- advocate for community
- have a say on issues impacting Aboriginal young people directly, and
- have input into decision-making and design of initiatives and programs.

I felt there was value in revisiting the question of establishment of an Aboriginal Youth Council at this time, simultaneously examining barriers to its establishment by working closely with organisations who already have strong cultural connections to South Australia's Aboriginal young people including Reconciliation SA and Tauondi Aboriginal College.

By partnering with these organisations there was a greater likelihood of identifying what the barriers to establishment of a South Australian AYC are, including whether Aboriginal young people desire their own youth council and if they do, what form it would take and how it would operate over the long term.

The findings have led to a recommendation that an inaugural Aboriginal Youth Summit be held in the foreseeable future, to explore Aboriginal Youth Engagement further. This reports captures the engagement process that led to this recommendation, and invites others who may be interested to support this idea to get in touch.





The process

As an Aboriginal controlled and managed organisation already engaged directly with South Australia's Aboriginal young people, Tauondi Aboriginal College was invited to take a lead on this engagement project, working in collaboration with representatives from CCYP and Reconciliation SA. Tauondi has continuously emphasised the importance of embracing Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal authority amongst Aboriginal young people as two of its core values.

To help facilitate the engagement process, a ten member project steering committee was established, consisting of representatives from the three key project partners and from organisations operating in the Aboriginal youth service delivery space, namely SA Country Health, Sonder, and the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia.

Two young Aboriginal consultants, Dwayne Coulthard (a proud Adnyamathanha and Kokatha man) and Shaylem Wilson (a proud Ngarrindjeri woman) were engaged to lead the consultations to encourage participation by as many South Australian Aboriginal youth as possible. Engagement of young Aboriginal leaders was considered essential in facilitating participation and meaningful engagement with Aboriginal young people.

Branded as “Engaging Our Mob, Yarning with Aboriginal Youth” the tools of engagement consisted of a short survey, school consultations and a workshop.

The survey and consultations both explored whether an AYC was firstly desirable, and if so, what structure and/or governance model might best work to foster ongoing participation by South Australia's Aboriginal young people. The survey and consultation also sought to identify key issues of concern or interest to Aboriginal young people, while the workshop sought to prioritise these issues in order of greatest importance to Aboriginal young people.

A set of four guiding principles underpinned all consultations, with these embedded into the engagement process; self-determination, respect, empowerment and culturally safe spaces.

The engagement approach was respectful of community and cultural protocols within Aboriginal communities, including respecting the boundaries of Aboriginal young people who did not want to engage in the project.

Overall approximately 112 Aboriginal young people between the ages of 12 and 26 participated in the engagement project, which was undertaken between November 2018 and March 2019.

“In asking Aboriginal young people directly what they think an Aboriginal Youth Council might achieve, we can explore the potential of co-designing a model that would foster participation. We need to find a mechanism that will be a good fit for Aboriginal young people; one that they themselves help to design and set their own agenda within. Not one where ‘others’ (usually adults who think we know best) create an agenda we think is relevant to their needs, issues and concerns.”

Commissioner Helen Connolly

The Survey



The Aboriginal Youth Engagement project survey consisted of 10 questions ranging from whether an AYC is a good idea to what issues were of greatest concern to Aboriginal young people in South Australia. A total of **69 responses** were received with the **majority** of respondents from Aboriginal young people **between the ages of 12 and 17 years.**

75%

aged between
12 and 17

16%

aged between
18 and 25

9%

over the age
of 26



A few examples of the types of questions the participants were asked are presented here:

What representative model would you prefer an AYC to adopt?



63%

Representation to state-wide council

54%

Regional groups, which may include representatives from rural and regional areas

48%

Focus/interest groups

12%

'Other' such as meeting together and participating in mentoring programs.

What would you like an Aboriginal Youth Council to do?



81%

Leadership Training

46%

Information Sharing

35%

Research into Aboriginal issues ('this could be looking into what's available for Aboriginal youth or ancestral research')

35%

Aboriginal Advocacy

Do you think Aboriginal young people have a voice?



53%

Yes

46%

No

The School Consultations

Following the survey, three (3) school consultation sessions were undertaken with participants who attend Westminster School in Marion, South Australian Aboriginal Sports Training Academy in Adelaide City and Tyndale Christian School in Murray Bridge.

The school students ranged in age from 14 – 17 years and included boarders and day students who lived within and outside metropolitan Adelaide. Participants included Aboriginal young people who came from Ceduna, Oodnadatta, Tennant Creek and Noonamah. Participants identified as either Wirangu, Mirning, Kokatha, Arabana, Kamillaroi, Ngarrindjeri, Wangkangurru and Warlmanpa, Yorta Yorta, Arrente, Barkindji, Pinjarup, Kurna and Gunditjmarra, highlighting the diversity of Aboriginal young people living in South Australia.

Some of the issues the participant students identified included racism, education and increasing support for students attending boarding schools, as well as fostering connection to culture and finding pathways to employment. Other issues identified including alcohol and drug use and improving young people's health more generally.

The majority of participants were interested in establishment of an Aboriginal Youth Council for South Australia where they could network and meet other Aboriginal young people as well as participate in mentoring, counselling and leadership training opportunities.

“Aboriginal youth do not have much of a voice in school or acknowledgement... it depends on your role and what environment you're in”.





The Workshop

Following the survey and consultations, a workshop was devised to examine the survey responses and explore the feasibility of the AYC further. Forty six (46) Aboriginal young people aged 12 – 18 years attended. They came from Seaton High School, Warriapendi School, St Peters College, and Westminster College, plus there were a number of individual Aboriginal students also in attendance.

The workshop considered the following:

- the best format for Aboriginal young people to come together within
- the benefits of an annual gathering for Aboriginal young people
- the importance of collective action and a collective voice, including how to use the voices of Aboriginal young people.
- some of the barriers to overcome to support Aboriginal young people to attend.

Participants were also asked what issues the AYC could or should address, and the order in which these should be prioritised.

Of a total of twenty issues drawn from the survey and consultations, the key issues of greatest importance to South Australia's Aboriginal young people, selected in order of priority by the workshop participants were:

- education
- alcohol and drug use
- racism
- unemployment
- health, and
- connection to community.

Participants also identified a strong desire to:

- hear other people's stories to build community and gain strength in numbers
- network to hear each other's voices to expand their type and depth of relationships
- provide a safe space in which to regularly meet and talk; and
- foster support that helps to reduce individual isolation and loneliness.

Some of the barriers and challenges identified by the participants to achieving the desired outcomes above, included the logistics of bringing Aboriginal young people together and finding ways to make everyone feel safe within the space, particularly those with low cultural self-identity or personal issues.

Some of the other suggestions made by participants in the workshop included:

- engaging with Aboriginal young people through social media to identify issues of concern
- scheduling regular events, meetings and collective get-togethers; and/or
- holding an Aboriginal Youth Summit – similar to the Koorie Youth Summit held in Victoria, where Aboriginal young people come together to speak on a range of issues of greatest importance and concern to them on an annual basis.

Many of the workshop participants felt an annual summit would suit South Australia's Aboriginal young people most, and would be achievable with combined government and community support.

Facilitated by Aboriginal community leaders, the summit would ideally be focussed on providing a safe and supportive space in which Aboriginal young people could come together to express their concerns, build connections and networks. It would also enable attendees to experience and participate in the expression of Aboriginal culture through performance and activities delivered via the summit format.

Where to next?

Given the numbers of Aboriginal young people across South Australia facing significant challenges in their day to day lives, there is a real opportunity to facilitate an annual event that aims to bring individuals into one space to discuss ways to address some of these issues of concern and allow participants to co-design solutions that would have the greatest likelihood of success.

By enabling our Aboriginal young people to share with each other on a regular basis, both in the lead up and at the summit, the issues and concerns they face will be well defined and prioritised.

We will be supporting them to find a voice that can best describe their thoughts and ideas on possible solutions, including undertaking advocacy work through establishment of an Aboriginal Youth Council at some time that can successfully feed into other adult mechanisms already in place to create real and lasting positive change.

An annual Aboriginal Youth Summit facilitated by Aboriginal leaders would help build much needed support for our Aboriginal young people.

Positioning an annual Aboriginal Youth Summit within National Reconciliation Week or NAIDOC Week would provide a clear link to national agendas while also position the event within a framework of celebration. This will foster potential for establishing the summit as an ongoing event, leveraging off those already enjoying a fixed place on our national calendar.

The Commissioner would work in collaboration with the newly appointed Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, April Lawrie, who is ideally placed to lead on the development of the inaugural event. This would include co-designing a framework that ensures the summit agenda and desired outcomes are determined with input from Aboriginal young people who would also have an opportunity to take on leadership and organisational roles. Government, non-government and community organisations or groups with a demonstrated commitment to supporting Aboriginal young people, interested in partnering on the inaugural summit are invited to get in touch.

Who are we?

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position established under the Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016 (“the Act”).

The Commissioner promotes and advocates for the rights, development and well-being of all children and young people in South Australia. The Commissioner is committed to advocating for children and young people’s involvement in decision-making that affects them, giving particular consideration to the needs of vulnerable and at-risk children and young people.

A key objective of The Commissioner for Children and Young People is to position children and young people’s interests, development and wellbeing front and centre in public policy and community life, and to advocate to decision makers to change laws, policy, systems and practice in favour of children and young people.

In the Commissioner’s work she listens to the views of children and young people, collaborates with them and represents their diverse voices in the public arena with a special focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard. Much of her advocacy is directed by the experiences and issues that children and young people talk about and have asked her to focus on.

This work is underpinned by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which says children and young people have a right to have a say on all issues that affect them and for their views to be taken seriously. By improving our children and young people’s participation in decisions that impact on them, we will strengthen our democratic institutions and structures, and build a strong state for the future of all children and young people throughout our nation and in turn the world.

Thank you to the Aboriginal young people who shared their ideas and suggestions. All photographs appearing throughout this report have been reproduced with permission.

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