

Submission in response to Change for Children,
Tasmanian's 10-year Strategy for upholding the
rights of children by preventing, identifying and
responding to child sexual abuse.



30 September 2024

Introduction

The Youth Network of Tasmania (YNOT) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Tasmanian Government 'Change for Children Consultation Draft: Tasmania's 10-year Strategy for upholding the rights of children and young people by preventing, identifying and responding to child sexual abuse'.

YNOT is the peak body for young people aged 12-25 years and the non-government youth sector in Tasmania. We work to drive positive change with young people and ensure that the rights of young people are upheld and supported by government, community and decision-makers. We do this through meaningful youth participation and engagement, amplifying the views of young people and advocating for the inclusion of young people in decision-making on matters impacting them.

Our response to the Consultation Draft has been informed by young Tasmanians aged 12-25 years and YNOT members. The views of young people reflected in our response are based on previous YNOT consultations relating to youth participation and empowerment.

The issues in this paper are incredibly complex. The primary focus of our submission relates to youth and community voice, and upholding the rights of children and young people.

Keeping Children and Young People Safe

YNOT welcomes the Tasmanian Government's commitment to implementing all recommendations from the 2023 *Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings*, including the development of a whole-of-government child sexual abuse reform Strategy and Action Plan. This should be commended. Urgent change is needed, and we are pleased to see work has commenced across government agencies and the community sector.

We are encouraged to see and fully support the need for greater transparency and accountability in upholding the rights of children and young people in government institutions to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse. Failure to do so will most likely result in repeating past mistakes, which is unacceptable. Greater accountability and transparency across government will be critical in transforming government institutions and systems and affecting real, long-lasting change. We are pleased to see *Change for Children* outline formal and informal accountabilities for this change to occur.

YNOT welcomes the strong focus on creating child-safe environments, amplifying the voices of children and young people, involving families in enhancing child safety and wellbeing, and challenging community perceptions of children's rights. These elements are crucial for the Strategy's success.

We commend the government for working collaboratively with the Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania (CCYP) Youth Consultative Council to inform the development of the Strategy and Action Plan. Involving young people in decision-making on matters important to them leads to better outcomes for themselves, their peers, and our communities. We know that systems and programs work best when they are built with and for the people who we want to use them.

"Too often, policy-makers assume they know what is best for minorities, and make decisions based on these assumptions without consulting people from those minorities ...in this case, young people."

Tasmanian Youth Forum Participant 15, South (2024)

Importantly, *Change for Children* acknowledges the need to work together to improve systems responses and keep children safe. It is encouraging to see recognition of the essential role the community services industry plays, not only in providing crucial health and support services but also in challenging and transforming cultural attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate discrimination.

While the need to partner with community sector organisations to develop an integrated, child-centred system has been recognised, our industry has been overlooked. If the government genuinely intends to work collaboratively with community service providers to ensure the safety of children and young people in all settings, this needs to be reflected in the Action Plan.

Child and Youth Reform Agenda

In recent years, the Tasmanian Government has embarked on an ambitious reform agenda to improve outcomes for Tasmania's children and young people. This includes the introduction of legislation to protect and promote the safety of children in our communities, and whole-of-government strategic policies aimed at improving health and wellbeing, and economic outcomes for children and young people. We applaud this.

Change for Children acknowledges the various child and youth-specific strategies in Tasmania and seeks to complement and enhance current efforts. However, greater alignment and coordination between existing policy initiatives across government agencies is critical to maximise limited resources and achieve policy objectives.

It is pleasing to see *Change for Children* articulate the need for a whole-of-government effort to establish best practice approaches to child and youth engagement. Recent State Government policy initiatives, including the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy *It Takes a Tasmanian Village*, Youth Justice Blueprint 2024-2034, Wellbeing for Learning: Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy, Child and Youth Safe Organisation Framework and Child Safety and Wellbeing Framework, all articulate a strong commitment in seeking the views of children and young people to inform policy development and implementation. The impending release of the state's first-ever Youth Jobs Strategy and the Alcohol and Other Drugs Youth Service and Practice Framework is also expected to focus strongly on youth participation and engagement.

The government's increasing commitment to involve children and young people in shaping policy development and implementation should be commended. However, it does reinforce the need for a whole-of-government approach to youth participation and engagement.

"I found that some government representatives were not highly engaged with the youth and were not open to new ideas presented by young people." Advisory Group Member, 16 North West (2023)

We believe a whole-of-government approach to youth participation would be strengthened by the introduction of a youth participation framework that offers a unified structure for genuine and safe engagement of all children and young people in Tasmania. This includes victims/survivors of child sexual abuse, those with lived experience, and those currently underrepresented in decision-making processes. It would help link and bolster youth participation initiatives across various government departments and agencies, ensure consistency in youth participation and engagement activities, and improve health, social and economic outcomes for children and young people.

While *Change for Children* articulates a commitment to developing an empowerment and participation strategy for children and young people in detention, we believe this approach needs to extend across all government departments and apply to all children and young people. An evidence-based, best-practice youth participation framework that defines a shared vision, guiding principles, and practical approaches would foster a unified understanding of youth participation and engagement across government. It would help to avoid duplication of efforts across government agencies, break down silos, optimise the use of limited resources, show a strong commitment to upholding the rights of children and young people, and avoid unintended consequences that could arise from well-intentioned youth participation efforts.

Additionally, a youth participation toolkit and a professional learning program would enhance the capacity of all government departments and agencies to engage with children and young people in an ethical and meaningful way. These resources would ensure the safety of young people, address barriers and opportunities for participation, and empower young people to have their views heard on matters important to them.

“I’ve done my fair share of youth participation. In a few of the gigs that I’ve done with youth participation, it feels quite tokenistic. Sometimes it feels like they want a young person for the sake of having a young person.” Tasmanian Youth Forum participant 15, North (2023)

A youth participation framework and associated resources would also benefit community sector organisations and the broader community by providing guidance and direction on engaging with children and young people safely, effectively and meaningfully.

YNOT strongly believes that no single organisation should be the gatekeeper of youth participation activity in our state. Instead, recognising when to collaborate with subject matter experts and specialist community organisations, thereby enhancing the capacity of government agencies and community organisations to engage with children and young people, will be more effective in creating child-safe environments and upholding children’s rights.

“It is possible for youth participation to feel meaningful and important, and this is ultimately the responsibility of the organisation, in making their youth participants feel supported, safe, and heard.” Advisory Group Member, 16 North West (2023)

The introduction of a youth participation framework, toolkit, and professional learning program aligns with similar initiatives across Australia. In the 2023 paper, “Engage! A Strategy to Include Young People in the Decisions We Make,” the Australian Government outlined six key priority areas to enhance meaningful engagement with young Australians, including First Nations peoples. This Strategy aims to recognise, empower, and value the contributions of young people in shaping policies and programs that impact them, while also acknowledging their diverse identities, intersecting experiences, and unique perspectives. In 2022, the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) launched its child and youth participation Framework, designed to incorporate children's rights into its operations and direct its youth engagement activities.

Tasmania’s reform agenda for ensuring the safety of children and young people in State Government institutions and Tasmanian communities presents a valuable opportunity to strengthen youth participation and engagement across government and community sectors, and contribute to upholding the rights of children and young people in Tasmania.

Summary

YNOT endorses the *Change for Children* consultation draft on:

- the commitment to implement all recommendations from the 2023 *Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings*
- greater transparency and accountability in upholding the rights of children and young people in government institutions to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse
- a strong focus on creating child-safe environments, amplifying the voices of children and young people, involving families in enhancing child safety and wellbeing
- challenging and responding to community perceptions relating to the rights of children
- working together to improve systems responses and keep children safe and recognition of the essential role the community services industry plays.

YNOT is committed to ensuring that the voices of young people on issues that affect them are heard, and in response to what young people are telling us, we recommend that:

- the essential role the community services industry plays in preventing, identifying and responding to child sexual abuse in Tasmanian communities is reflected in the Action Plan
- greater effort is made across government to align strategies and action plans affecting children and young people
- that the government invest in the development of a comprehensive youth participation framework to provide an overarching structure for genuine and safe engagement of all children and young people in our Tasmania
- that the government introduce a toolkit and program for professional learning to build the capacity of Tasmanian Government departments and agencies to deliver safe, ethical, and meaningful youth participation and engagement activities.