

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

**2025 REVIEW OF THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE AND THE CHILDREN'S GUARDIAN**

**At Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Friday 9 May 2025**

**The Committee met at 10:30.**

**PRESENT**

Mrs Helen Dalton (Chair)

Dr Amanda Cohn  
The Hon. Stephen Lawrence  
Ms Lynda Voltz

**PRESENT VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE**

The Hon. Scott Barrett  
Ms Donna Davis  
Ms Karen McKeown (Deputy Chair)

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearing of the Committee for Children and Young People's 2025 review of the Advocate for Children and Young People, and the Children's Guardian. Before we start, I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present here or viewing the proceedings online.

I am Helen Dalton and I am the Chair of the Committee. I am joined by my colleagues: Ms Donna Davis, who joins us via video conference; Dr Amanda Cohn who will join us shortly; Mr Stephen Lawrence, who is a new member of the Committee; Ms Linda Voltz; Ms Karen McKeown, who joins us via video conference, Deputy Chair of the Committee; and the Hon. Scott Barrett, who also joins us via video conference. I declare the hearing open.

**Ms ZOË ROBINSON**, Advocate for Children and Young People, Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined

**Ms UNA O'NEILL**, Director, Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** I thank all the witnesses who are appearing before the Committee today. I now welcome our first witnesses from the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People: Zoë Robinson, Advocate for Children and Young People, and Una O'Neill. Zoë, this is probably the last time that you will be here to report to us.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Please note that the Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the NSW Legislative Assembly's social media pages, website, and public communication materials. Please inform Committee staff if you object to having your photos and videos taken. Before we proceed, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** No.

**UNA O'NEILL:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Would either of you like to make a short opening statement before the commencement of questions?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we gather today, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging. The Committee will know that I am not usually one to do opening statements, as I appreciate this process and always want to ensure I answer questions here, as is the purpose of an oversight hearing. But as you are aware, my five-year term comes to an end this year and this may be my last oversight. Whilst we never say never, it would be remiss of me not to take an opportunity to thank and acknowledge a few things.

Firstly, I want to thank this Committee and each of the members over the six years for their support for always making this process fair, reasonable, and enjoyable. Thank you for always including the Youth Advisory Council members and for engaging in that process. I want to thank all the children and young people across this state who have sat with me and shared their stories and experiences with me, and who have always demonstrated thoughtfulness, kindness, and respect. This role has allowed me to travel this state and sit in places and spaces that I never knew existed, and would never have visited otherwise. That is a privilege and something I'm ever grateful for. All of the consultations, the events, the stories, and the experiences have informed the work that I have focused on, and the way that we, as an office, have approached our work.

The Youth Advisory Council members over the past six years have themselves led real change and have had amazing advocacy achievements over those times. The advice they have given me, the encouragement, and the guidance has been invaluable. At all times, we have focused on what children and young people say that matters to them. That is core to this role, and should always be. Time and time again, the work has shown that when children and young people are heard and their stories are elevated, good change happens. To that end, the work of the special inquiry that saw the Government recently announce that there are no children and young people in alternative care arrangements with unaccredited carers is a testament to the power of voice and the work the Advocate for Children and Young People [ACYP] produces. That has had, and hopefully will continue to have, lasting change and positive outcomes for any child or young person in care.

My colleagues, both across government and non-government, who serve children and young people have always provided thoughtful insights and emanate what it is to be a public servant. People who work in this space have passion and do so with a real desire for change, and do their part to make this state the best. Some of the best people I know work for the New South Wales Government. The ACYP team is incredible. It is lean, and it is mighty. It is a small group of thoughtful individuals that are absolutely committed to advocating for all children and young people across New South Wales. Led by the Director, who sits next to me today, it grows from strength to strength and continues to deliver beautiful, thoughtful work that has impact. To those across government who I've worked with who supported the work, and those who have challenged me, thank you for this opportunity to create space for children and young people, and for encouraging that work in your own roles. I have sat in rooms with people who I didn't think I would sit with, let alone work with but, more importantly, young people have often sat in those rooms with me.

Finally—and perhaps this is the most indulgent part—but none of this work in these days would have been possible without the support of family and friends. My mum is ever present and is no doubt watching right

now, making sure that I brushed my hair and wore a new jacket. The village that raises me has extended long after I was a child. I look forward to answering questions today. If this isn't my last oversight, I apologise for the time taken, but an opportunity to acknowledge those who have supported me and made so much of the last six years possible would be a wasted opportunity. When this role was offered to me, I did not think that I was adult enough to do this role. Perhaps that is a benefit, because it means you can sit in the hope, joy, and love of children and young people, and know that things are possible. It has been a gift these past six years. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Una, would you like to make a short opening statement?

**UNA O'NEILL:** No opening statement, but I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we gather today, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay respects to Elders past, present and rising.

**Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ:** Zoë, on behalf of the Parliament, and the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians in particular, thank you for your work with the Young Women's Network that you undertook for us. That has been invaluable in bringing young women and making those links to the Parliament. Everything you do is noticed, don't worry.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for all your work.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** We will move now to questions. Before we begin the questions, I inform the witnesses that they may take a question on notice and provide the Committee with an answer in writing within 14 days after receiving the questions. The first question is a fairly broad one—could you comment on the New South Wales Government's response to the issues you raised in the special inquiry final report?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Yes. As I said in my opening, it's obviously an incredible piece of work made possible by those young people who shared their stories and their voices. Obviously, the announcement of the government, to ensure that there are no children and young people in those types of arrangements with unaccredited workers, is a huge testament to that piece of work.

The other thing that I do want to acknowledge is that there has been funding given to Legal Aid to create a "your voice" bit of work, which gives children and young people who are in alternative care arrangements access to advice—not just necessarily in relation to legal matters as we might assume, not just care matters, but other things that might be impacting on them, like their access to education or their access to health, as well. I think that is another nod in terms of the four recommendations that we made, which talked about voice and children, and young people having access to independent mechanisms to do that.

That is a program that is currently running until October. I hope that it gets extended and that funding is given to that program because it is seeing good results already. I understand 67 young people have been referred into that program. It has assisted them with anything from what is happening for them in care, access to people that they might want to have connection with, and also education and other wellbeing related matters as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Thank you, Zoë, for your attendance and your evidence. I am obviously new to the Committee, but I am very aware of your work. Thank you for the work you've done. I know that it is much respected. As you will be aware, the state government successfully amended the Bail Act to apply a more stringent test to children. That's obviously been controversial. I know it has been the subject of quite strong criticism in the Supreme Court, and seems to have led to a very significant increase in juvenile remand numbers, particularly. I am curious whether those legal changes, or anything that's flowed from them, you see as relevant to your functions and, if so, how?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** In terms of the work that we do in Youth Justice, a lot of that work, I would say, is quietly, quietly, softly, softly, because we're very conscious of the particular vulnerabilities of those children who find themselves in custodial settings. We also do a lot of work with police and others around that kind of prevention and diversion. Core to that has always been going in and sitting in the centres and hearing directly from young people about how things are going for them, importantly, but also what they might need in their communities. Not long after that announcement was made, we immediately went into centres and spoke to young people. Unsurprisingly, whether they necessarily are referring to the law or not, they definitely feel an impact of it. They can certainly feel the shift of them. There are some young people who've spoken to me about not getting bail, so being in there for a longer period of time, and that might not have been their expectation.

I've certainly spoken to young people, for example, in Moree, and asked them what they need in their town and their community to make sure that they don't come back. They've spoken to me about things like the Yes Absolutely program, but one young person recently said to me, "I know part of my conditions will be that I have to return to school, and I don't want to go to school. I want to go somewhere else to learn because that's where I would feel more comfortable." Our priority is always hearing from them—their perspective. We have seen that increase in numbers, and we've also seen the increase in terms of the percentage of children and young people who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

I want to acknowledge that there is great work that happens in Youth Justice. Sometimes that is the first time that a young person gets access to things that they have a right to. I mean things like having some of their health needs met. We also support and contribute to, where we can, some of the programs that we see as being particularly successful for young people. One of those is the Plate It Forward program, which trains young people in hospitality, and also works really hard to ensure they have a job when they exit custody. I think it's had an impact, in the sense that we're seeing more numbers. We're seeing young people feel the impact of that. Our view has always been that there are things that we need to do prior, and if someone is in custody, there is a lot that we need to do as they're exiting custody, in terms of access to housing, jobs, employment, training.

That needs to be a way that we invest but also, as we know and have spoken about before, custody is not the best setting for children and young people to thrive. Aside from the great work that happens here in New South Wales, it is not always the best place for young people to thrive. So we want to make sure that we're doing everything we can to create spaces for young people in community where they will engage, and where we can provide true diversion and intervention programs. But yes, it always starts with them, sitting with them, understanding what they need. Then what we will do is work across the agency and provide that information to them so that they can understand what kind of programs are working for young people.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Something that always concerns me is the criminogenic effect of incarceration. Obviously, that's not a reason not to incarcerate anyone. Certain people have to be the subject of control orders or jail if they're adults. I'm just wondering if you have any observations about—since the advent of these amendments to the Bail Act, which will have that criminogenic effect on a larger cohort of young people, have you seen any improvements or additions to programs inside Juvenile Justice facilities or outside that might offset that criminogenic effect?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** I have seen some communities take action in their own way, in terms of understanding how they can respond to their communities. I think this Committee would be aware, but in terms of declaring, I sit on the board of BackTrack, which is one of those organisations in Armidale. They have given the response to a community over to young people themselves who've been through the BackTrack program. I think community-led responses to this are incredibly important because, one, we all understand the resourcing that is in our own backyard, but we also understand the complexities of the people who might live in our communities. We have seen an increase in programs, but we still have some work to do.

As I understand it—and I know that the media reporting is a bit different on this—in terms of numbers, it is not what the media says in terms of this huge increase in youth crime. There is crime that is severe, and there is a small number of young people who are repeat offending. I think we have to really understand what those young people need and how we can meet those needs and serve them. That looks very different, for example, to a PCYC program where you might be dropping in for breakfast and you might be dropping in for a study program. It might look like a behaviour change program and how do we work in that.

I think there is certainly good investment in things that we haven't had access to. Bail accommodation is something that is a big problem. We don't often have the right housing or supports to place a young person in, and the courts are, obviously, wanting to make sure they're following their duty of care. But I still think there are probably some different programs that we need to be doing that address some of those particular needs of young people. Some of those successful programs right now are programs that are run by young people themselves who might have been in a similar experience and are going out and trying to help other young people.

The other thing that I would say is that we often look at the situation that they are currently in, versus all of the things that happen to bring them into that situation. One of the things that I've been very firm on in six years—so it hasn't changed with whoever is holding government—is the behaviour and suspension policies. We know that if a person is not attending school, that's where we start to lose them. There's an important piece of work that needs to be done. We are talking a lot about children and young people right now in an incredibly negative way, especially in the media. We need to go back to that beginning—which is where is your sense of belonging, where is your community, and where do you find safety and security? Those are the things that we should be focused on and investing in, because then we will not lose children and young people in those spaces and we can actually really look at that end.

I think programs in custody are incredibly important. They need to be varied. We need to make sure that the young women in custody are getting the programs that they need as well. That can look very different to, for example, a football program or a shearing program or a cooking program. We need to meet those needs, and always have a positive investment in that space. We still need the investment either side, and I would say that front end, the first 2000 days, some of the behaviour policies, how we can invest in that, is incredibly important to see young people thrive in those settings.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** That's really helpful. Thank you. Now excuse my ignorance, but I assume that it's part of your role to think about the state's compliance with its international obligations.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Are we talking about OPCAT?

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Yes.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** I have a limited role in that sense. Obviously, the Act says that my focus is the welfare, wellbeing, and safety of all children and young people in New South Wales, with a particular focus on systemic issues and vulnerable children and young people. I am also part of what we call the ANZCCGA now, which is all of the Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates from across Australia, and includes New Zealand. We have released statements as a joint group, in terms of the response to OPCAT, but that would sit more with the national Commissioner than it does with me. Other than in the sense, obviously, if we think it would be useful for us to meet our obligations under OPCAT.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Just one more question, if I could. This is pretty recent, but the government has just announced a review of doli incapax and appointed a retired Supreme Court judge and, I think, a serving police officer to do that review. I was just wondering do you think that raises issues that might be within the Advocate's functions? Have you got any initial thoughts or responses to that?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** We as a collective, and the office here in New South Wales, have obviously advocated for the increasing of the age of criminal responsibility. We would expect that we would be able to—should it be submissions or be heard on it—certainly talk to the impacts that we've heard from children and young people, and young children and young people who are in custody. The important thing in re-reading that High Court case this week—and also obviously all of the media around it—is that it talks a lot about the circumstances of that young person. You, obviously, come from a legal background and have that knowledge. Children and young people are not necessarily focused on the law. They're focused on the circumstances in which they're in. So I think being able to elevate the reality of what some of these children and young people are living through, both their education and their circumstances, is incredibly important.

I think globally, we're not meeting the global standard in terms of criminal responsibility. We are under that. It will be an important review. It will be important to sit with some young people. We would facilitate that if that were appropriate, and if people wanted to hear from some young people who had found themselves in a custodial setting under the age of 14 and the kind of impact that might have had on them, plus those who might have had a different experience. I would see that as our role and we would welcome that in terms of being able to provide the voices of children and young people to that inquiry, or however it works.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** That was really helpful. Thank you.

**Ms KAREN McKEOWN:** I want to ask about the current strategic plan, which covered up until the end of 2024. When do you foresee the new strategic plan rolling out, and can you describe to us the arrangements in place to guide the Advocate's strategic direction between the expiry of the old plan and the formal adoption of the next plan?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** You're right. Obviously the strategic plan has been completed for the three years. Again, I've spoken about this before. It is currently being independently reviewed. We want to make sure that we are transparent, and that we share with people what people say we've achieved and perhaps the gaps and opportunities that there might be. That is currently underway, and that process is likely to be completed in August. I think it is reasonable for the next Advocate, whoever that is, to be given the opportunity to set the strategic plan. The strategic plan can be externally quite confusing when you look at it because it's not necessarily the plan for the office, it's the plan for what we are doing well here in New South Wales to support children and young people.

It requires us going across government to ask them what they think that they are doing, and what are some of their initiatives, and measuring that as well. There's also publicly available data around that, so it can take time. When we set this strategic plan, it was informed by the work that had happened before, and what children and young people had been saying, and some quantitative data that we had around that particular work. Then that became the six pillars and the priorities. It was obviously tested with children and young people as well. The process is for whoever holds the chair to figure out what that looks like. I think it's incredibly important for it to

be a collaboration, because children and young people are in a variety of places, and so we need to make sure that we're bringing Education, Health, and the government with us around that, but also community, local councils, and everywhere that children and young people are.

The other thing I would say is that we did public data sharing every year, so we did share tracking reports every year in terms of the strategic plan. They are publicly available on our website. We will obviously share the independent report that looks at the strategic plan as well, and that might assist the next person moving forward. We also have Youth Week polling from this year, 2025, as we have done every year, and strategic plan polling, so that would be information that could help lead the next strategic planning guide and the next Advocate in terms of what that looks like. My hope is that there isn't a huge delay between the end of the plan that was under my term and the next plan, but, again, I can't speak to how someone might decide to run that.

**Ms KAREN McKEOWN:** What do you see as the most significant emerging challenges facing children and young people that will require attention in this period going forward?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Thankfully, having done the Youth Week polling this year, I can tell you what children and young people are saying are still the high priorities for them. Cost of living remains the number one issue. This year—for your benefit as well, Mr Barrett—we made sure that we attempted to have an equal representation of metro and regional. Usually we do 1,000 children in a quantitative poll, and it's weighted and all of that. This year we asked to extend it so we could make sure that we had strong regional representation to understand what was going on for regional children and young people. Cost of living across the board is the number one matter. There is also things around mental health and access to services. As well as in that particular polling, we looked at education and access to extracurricular activities and also jobs. I would say the two things that have appeared year on year are cost of living and mental health. We are also seeing school stress be called out separate to mental health. I think that's important to think about how we are looking at mental health in the whole continuum and spectrum that is mental health, but also the very specific school stress that children and young people are talking about, and what are some of the things that we could do around that.

**Ms LYNDA VOLTZ:** Could I ask for clarification on what the differentiation between mental health and school stress is?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** As I would understand it, mental health would include all of the things that we might be speaking about, for example, access to services. It could also involve general stress around finance and cost of living and all of that. School stress is obviously particularly being called out for the school-aged students, in terms of the pressure that they're feeling at school. We've certainly heard in consultations about the management of workload and trying to do all of the things on top of that. Perhaps not putting the Youth Advisory Council under the microscope for later, but they might be able to talk about some of those things that they're hearing from their peers and colleagues. Whereas I think when they're talking about mental health, they're talking about access to mental health services as we know it, but also the broader concerns that might be around that, including neurodivergence and access to services that they might have, a range of more complexities. I think school stress is very specifically for those who are attending school and are feeling pressure in that space. We hope to do a piece of work around school stress, but, again, that would be for the next Advocate if they would like to continue that piece of work.

**Ms LYNDA VOLTZ:** Earlier you were speaking about the young person that was talking about their bail conditions requiring them to go to school. What kind of model was he wanting to use? I note that you were talking about programs like shearing and football, and every code wants to get on board. But there's a fundamental problem where these kids will actually lose a lot of their life skills at a really crucial age because they're not getting any real formal education that they'll need in their twenties to keep them out of trouble.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** That young person said to me, they would much rather go to the PCYC and do their homework there, which is great because also there's plenty of assumptions that I think we all make, in terms of young people wanting to walk into a centre where there might be a uniformed police officer. So I was really intrigued with that young person saying that that is what they saw. They were based in Moree, and the PCYC in Moree has a particular presence. So I think that is their understanding of where they could go that would make sense for them. In the same visit, I walked into a classroom in a Youth Justice centre. They had just been learning about budgeting and rent, and so they were telling me where I should live, how much it should cost me, and what I should set aside in terms of food.

To be fair, I'm not great at budgeting, so it was excellent for me to learn that, but they are learning some very practical skills in those centres. Most children and young people that I've spoken to in custody have been suspended or have been disengaged from school, so, for them, sometimes it is the first time they are sitting in that classroom and learning something quite practical. Again, I hear you on those programs. They are great programs to help skill up children and young people, but if we're not giving them access to jobs as they're leaving a centre,

or they aren't on that pathway, or we aren't re-engaging them in a learning program, it makes it very difficult to ensure the stability for them around that. But I mean, that young person suggested themselves that they would go to a PCYC and do their homework there.

**Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ:** Your argument is that things that are led by the community are the ones that work the best, rather than organisations coming in from outside trying to implement policy from a top-down approach?

**ZOE ROBINSON:** Absolutely. Community-led responses to these things are usually the most successful, I would say.

**The CHAIR:** You mentioned PCYC a couple of times. Believe it or not, I had a call this morning when I was walking into Parliament about PCYC. The question was: Is PCYC a money-making organisation? Because if kids wanted to get involved in boxing or any other sort of activities that they have, there's a cost. You talk about the cost of living being one of the issues. So the question from my constituent, who volunteers her time, is: What's happening and why is there a cost imposed on these kids when they can't afford it? They're often on the verge of—or they've been in trouble and they've come to PCYC to get back on the straight and narrow, and yet they can't afford the costs of these activities.

**ZOE ROBINSON:** Noting I can't talk about the inner decisions of PCYC or the operational structure. As I understand it, there are obviously very large clubs that exist in some places, including Dubbo, which is quite a large PCYC, and some of them charge particular amounts of money for young people to be able to attend those programs. I do understand that there are some littler clubs that what, years ago, when I worked very closely with PCYC—and I have met with PCYC under the new CEO—would be called the mission clubs, which were more about what the community needed, and the PCYC responded to that. So I always understood that there was a balance in PCYC that if you couldn't afford stuff, you could still participate. But, again, I can't speak to the operational things. What I would say in terms of—as with the cost of living, but also when we broadly talk to children and young people, and in our polling, it talks about being able to access some of those things like sport, art, and extracurricular things without a fee attached to it. And obviously, things like the Active and Creative Kids are very useful for that, for families, particularly, who might come from a lower socio-economic background.

The cost to access things that can assist children and young people is something that they raise themselves. Again, you see programs that often happen in communities, like someone who runs a boxing program—which is incredibly beneficial for those young people—but they have to find a space to do it, they have to have the equipment to do it, and sometimes it's out of the goodness of those individuals' hearts. We've got to get that balance right. We want to have spaces where children and young people know that it's a space for them that they can go to, and our view at ACYP would be that we should do what we can to reduce barriers to go into those spaces. If you have a child or young person coming into your space wanting to do something and wanting to engage, our view is that we should enable everything that we can to keep that young person in the space because then we can assist, then we can provide them the things that they need. It is certainly something I'm very happy to take on notice, in terms of having a conversation to see if there is something that we can discuss with PCYC. But again, I can't speak to their operational decisions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. This is a bit of a curly one, I think—given I'm a former teacher, or have a background in teaching. I find it interesting that we expect five-year-old boys to come to school and sit and learn. Has there been any work on better ways to educate boys? I know how fidgety they are. Do you think that the government is aware that one size doesn't fit all, and that often these boys take a long time to adjust to school? They often can be disruptive, and perhaps we need to look at a different way of educating them. Do you have any comments about that?

**ZOE ROBINSON:** I think that there is a huge need for the school system to think about the fact that the world has changed in so many ways, and that children and young people present in schools in a variety of ways, with a variety of creativities, personalities, all of that. For six years we have been very vocal about exclusion from school. I think people have learnt that sometimes someone not sitting still or fidgeting or not making eye contact isn't disrespectful, it might be that there's something else going on for that young person. School needs to adjust to meet the needs of children and young people. There is a right to education, so we have to make sure that we are ensuring that the first step is creating spaces so you have your right to education.

I think we've seen that there has been investment in alternative kinds of schools that can benefit children and young people. It doesn't necessarily happen at a younger age. I had a young person in Parliament with me this week, meeting with people and talking about their experience of going to a school on the Central Coast that is for those in year nine and above for whom school might not be for them—it creates a completely different space for them. I think we do have to recognise the needs of our students. I don't say that without recognising that teachers do an incredible job, and there's lots of things that they are doing in their days. I think it's about how we bring the



right people into schools to make sure that we are ensuring the right to education is upheld, but also that we understand that children and young people have different experiences of education now, and are looking for different things.

In our polling—not necessarily five-year-olds—but people have talked about life skills, and making sure that school looks like, "What do I need beyond school to help me?" So, making sure that we're investing in that as well, when we're thinking about subjects and curriculum and what they can do. But I think that we have to start with the basis that you have a right to education. We need to create that space to meet your needs. We need to ensure that we understand there are differences in students and embrace them, and ensure that they're getting the best education they can.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I wonder if either of you are familiar with the aspects of the parental responsibility Act? In Orange alone, that allows police to take, I think, children under 16 to a safe place. Is anyone familiar with that aspect of that legislation? Enough to talk to it?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** I'm not in the detail of that bill. I think we appeared at a hearing in relation to that bill, but I would assume that might have something more to do with child protection matters than anything else. But I can take it on notice.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I wanted your views on it because I think that aspect of it comes to an end soon. I wondered your feelings on the success of it, or otherwise.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** What I can say generally, that we've heard when we've spoken to children who might be in care and protection matters, is that the presence of police can always be a bit concerning for a young person if they don't understand the "why" of it. So again, anything that relates to a young person having a process where they are removed or taken, and it's not very clear to them why, it can always be a bit uncomfortable—that's probably the nicest word I could use—for those children and young people. I'm happy to take it on notice and look into it, especially if, as you say, it's coming to an end at some stage.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** We've seen a rapid decline in the number of clubs and organisations that we have in our regional communities, and also participation in those groups that still exist. That could be the footy club, the crochet club, or the dance club, whatever it might be. What are your views on that, and do you have any suggestions on how we could get more people involved, young people in particular, in those different clubs and activities?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** I have to say, Mr Barrett, I've always appreciated your reference to crochet in Budget Estimates, and other places when we talk about clubs. Actually, someone talked to me the other day about taking up the hobby of 'croch-slaying', which means you can vent about stuff while doing crochet, which is a whole new concept to me. Again, children and young people want to be involved in community, they want to be involved in activities, and they want there to be a variety of activities. We also have seen work done, in terms of the volunteering strategy for young people in the state of New South Wales, and young people want to be participants in volunteering. In terms of the work, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the incredible work of the team in the Northern Rivers. They've talked about being involved in their local services and RFS so that they can contribute to a community.

The short answer is that I think children and young people want those things. They want there to be a variety of things. They want to be able to have access to those things. Going back to the cost of living, we still have to enable access to that. We also have to think about, especially in regional areas, how you get to that. If transport, for example, which has come up in our polling, is an issue for children and young people in regional areas, it's not going to be easy for them to get to those things. How do we make sure that it is accessible for all children and young people, and that we are enabling them to access it? But they themselves say that they want to be able to have access to a variety of things, so it's thinking about the spaces that we do that in, how we can make it easy for them to get there, and making sure that we're reflective of the things that they want to be able to be doing in their community. It might not just be footy as an example, or netball, it might be crochet, and it might be different kinds of clubs, and so making sure that we're thinking and asking young people what they would like.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And that's the reason I put the crochet clubs in there, because I don't want it to seem like footy clubs are the answer to this, because you need to be diverse on that front. Thank you for your work, and the way you've always been very good to deal with on these inquiries and hearings.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Thank you.

**Ms DONNA DAVIS:** Thank you, Zoë, for everything that you have done in your role. I apologise that I was unable to be there in the room today, because it is much better to be able to be in the flesh. Given the

composition of the communities here in Western Sydney, we have an extremely high proportion of our youth that are from refugee and migrant backgrounds. I know that ACYP has developed a worksheet for organisations to consider the improvements to the way they work with children and young people from those communities. How do you measure the uptake and effectiveness of the resources that have accompanied those reports that you undertook, and do you do any ongoing work to promote this to the relevant organisations? Lynda, Karen and I, particularly here in Western Sydney, know how many different community organisations touch these children and youth. It's really important for us to know what progress is being made.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Thank you for the opportunity to talk about that beautiful report that the team did in terms of speaking with children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. It was an incredibly important piece of work and, again, reflective of the fact that we saw that there was a gap in our work where we hadn't spoken to children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. I'm very aware and we are grateful for this, because I know the team has worked very hard to talk about reports and recommendations. What I might do is provide to the Committee that particular piece of work that we've undertaken to demonstrate, when we've done a piece of work, what has happened with some of those recommendations. That's for a number of our reports. That might be more useful than me trying to read through that list right now.

In relation to this particular report, as with every report, we send it out to all of the people who are part of our stakeholders. That includes schools, service providers, and every member of Parliament as well. In that particular report, when we did that fact sheet to share as well, we shared that with all of the schools that we went into, and organisations that supported us. When we did the refugee and migrant report, we recognised that we had a particular skill set that we could do but we couldn't do it alone. We worked with service organisations and others to ensure that we could meet those children and young people where they were, and they might have the support that they needed around that. We would, as is usual practice, share those things with those organisations.

That report was released at the end of last year. I think there is still work. The team did a presentation recently at a DCJ conference to talk about that piece of work and some of the recommendations in it. I was in Doonside last week or the week before talking about social media, but also talking about the differences that we've heard, in terms of the experiences of people with refugee and migrant backgrounds, and culturally and linguistically diverse people. Some of it is about going and doing presentations, and then some of it is about following up with organisations. At this stage, that is a report where we're still in the process of making sure that we're doing follow-ups around those recommendations and the impacts of them.

**Ms DONNA DAVIS:** You've obviously worked with DCJ, but how much work do you do with Multicultural NSW, particularly in terms of their extensive knowledge of the different community organisations that touch children and youth in our communities right across New South Wales?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** I always appreciate an opportunity to acknowledge Joseph La Posta and his amazing work as the CEO of that organisation, and Michael Shaw, who was the original director when I came into ACYP and who is there as well. We work very closely with them. ACYP is incredibly respectful in acknowledging that in government there are other people who hold the expertise and making sure that, if we are doing a piece of work, we're not doing it without them assisting or guiding us. The team worked closely with them to ensure that we were working with organisations that they had relationships with and engaging young people, and on, where appropriate, how best to respond to some of those recommendations and where they should go. We work closely with Multicultural NSW, as we do with a number of other agencies across government.

**Ms DONNA DAVIS:** In that report do you also look at the difference between established communities and emerging communities? I think of my area where I've met with school principals just this week about issues that they are witnessing regarding our very new but growing community from Mongolia.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** In that piece of work, we focused on where children and young people were across New South Wales, and we went into the regions as well. Because children and young people often don't identify themselves in the way that we might have labelled them from a policy perspective, we understood, in terms of demographics, how long they had been here. We didn't necessarily draw that out separately, other than to say these were the demographics of people around them. In terms of the details, it does talk about how the majority of young people who participated had their own lived experience of migrating and seeking asylum in Australia, and a small number of young people were second generation migrants or refugees. So it says that in terms of that data. We can give you on notice the breakdown in terms of where some of these young people were coming from, if that's useful.

**Ms LYNDA VOLTZ:** Can I just follow up on that? When I look at where you got people from—the 29 countries—I've got the most diverse electorate in New South Wales and it doesn't appear that you've gone into that area. I've got the highest number of refugees without an income. I've got principals who complain that they have 18 people living in a two-bedroom flat, and it's very difficult to teach children in those conditions. I'm just

wondering how you decided where and the breakdown. For example, Lebanon is not on the list of people that you got a view from, whereas probably the people that are having the greatest problems at the moment are people from those parts of the Middle East in particular. My other question is did you go to my electorate, to Granville, which is very diverse, and into Fairfield? Most children go to private schools that are run by religious organisations. That's where I get the most complaints from young people, about things like not getting sex education in their schools. I'm just trying to work out how you decided where you were going.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** The first thing to say is that we don't cull anyone. We don't make a decision about not going somewhere. It would be that when we went out to seek participation in this particular report, we worked with those who wanted to participate and agreed to participate. Separately, I have done work in Granville and Fairfield for different issues. We have worked with some of the members of the community—and, again, I can take on notice providing you with those details—speaking to young men and working in that community where we can. We've had a young person in our office who I know has done a lot of work with schools in that area. Again, I'll take on notice the details. I can't necessarily answer as to why we didn't go into those areas, but my assumption would be that, when we went out to do this piece of work, we didn't necessarily get people coming back saying, "Yes, please come to our school; please do this consultation." What I will do is take on notice the process that I can share with you as to what we would do. But I would say that we don't ever not go somewhere. If someone has wanted to participate in a consultation, we will go there. I can't necessarily answer the question as to why not Lebanon. Again, it might depend on the schools that we went into and the communities that we went into.

**Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ:** That goes to what I'm saying. It's in the places where they're not jumping on board that the biggest problems are. I wonder how we come to grips with the problems that occur in those places where it becomes very insular.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** I know that the team has pulled together—and, again, we can share with it you—the demographic of children and young people who engage in, for example, our Youth Advisory Council recruitment process. ACYP has also always been very respectful of not forcing ourselves into places and of trying to go with those communities and with those schools. Perhaps it is just something for us to take on board. There might be other ways that we can approach communities who might not necessarily understand the work that we're doing right now and the purpose of that work. Often schools across the board think that, when ACYP is coming in, we might be doing it for the benefit of calling them out for bad behaviour. That's not the intention. We always want to work with schools and communities. I'm happy to take it on board as something that we need to ensure that we consider, perhaps working with local members to understand that there might be particular areas that they would also like us to have conversations about.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Going back to some questions that the Chair asked about the PCYC, something that is raised with me a lot in terms of children and young people in regional and remote areas, and particularly in terms of issues of youth crime, is the lack of after-hours services. In Dubbo, for example, the PCYC on a Friday night has a free service for young people, which is open until nine or 10 o'clock at night. But that's not a regular thing, and that's a membership organisation. I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts about the need or desirability for youth centres to be open well into the night in places of particular need, and whether that is something that is resourced in other jurisdictions by the state or otherwise. Just any thoughts about the relevance of that or all those issues to your functions.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Children and young people would agree that it would be great to have things that are after hours and for a long period of time. Again, if we look at the commentary people make, and the assumptions they make, about why children and young people might not be in their homes and why they're somewhere else, then we should be doing our part to ensure that we are providing safe spaces for them. One of the programs that stands out—and I'm sure I've spoken about it to committees before—is a program I learned about in Bourke that was called Granny Patrol. The community and the grannies would go out of a night time and make sure that those children were fed and that they were safe. They understood their community and they understood what was going on. Some of them are informal programs, I would say. I think part of that—and I know that this government particularly is looking at contracting and what contracting looks like. A lot of organisations do great work, but they're contracted to do it within a certain hour and it costs a certain amount of money. After hours, as we know, in terms of wages and employment and all that can be more complex. But we would see great success and engagement for young people if it did extend longer. The Dubbo one is a great example because, when I went there once, I think there was 250 young people who were attending on a Friday night, which is—

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Incredible.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Yes, which was a huge number for the PCYC.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Absolutely chockers.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Yes. Some of the young people were people that they wanted to come and engage with and so, if there is that, it's like with everything, if people are voting with their feet, then we should do things to reflect the things that they need. Moree was another example, where people said children and young people weren't coming necessarily to the centre, but there would be 250 of them at the basketball court or fishing by the river. Again, that's about meeting young people where they are, but I think after hours programs would be incredibly beneficial. If we're seeing young people not in home, for whatever reason it is, then we need to provide spaces for them to be there. Again, I say that, acknowledging that there is risk, there is liability, there are all of those things, but it can be done well when done with a community and when asking children and young people what they want and what would be better for them. But as you said, if there's 250 people on a Friday night at PCYC in Dubbo, that's great. How do we support that organisation to be able to do that on other nights and perhaps for an extended period of time? That's the other thing. You don't want something to shut at 3.00 a.m. and we still haven't solved the problem of, where are you and are you safe? Are you going to be safe there and are you going to engage with it for a long period of time? We've got to get that balance right as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. You'll each be provided with a copy of the transcripts of today's proceedings for corrections. The Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today, and any supplementary questions from the Committee. We kindly ask that you return those answers within 14 days. On behalf of the Committee and myself, I thank you and your staff, particularly you in your position as Advocate, for your passion and your professionalism. I wish you all the best with your future endeavours. We'll see how things roll out this year. Thank you. It's been a pleasure to work with you.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Thank you very much, Chair, I appreciate that.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**ELLEN ARMFIELD**, Chair (2025) and Member (2024), Youth Advisory Council, affirmed and examined

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE**, Member (2023-2024), Youth Advisory Council, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to our next witnesses, representatives from the Youth Advisory Council. Thank you for appearing before the Committee. Please note that the Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the NSW Legislative Assembly social media pages, websites and public communication materials. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Before we proceed, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** No.

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Would either of you like to make a short opening statement before the commencement of questions?

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** Yes. I acknowledge the traditional lands of the Gadigal people, where we meet today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging and I extend my respects to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples with us today. Thank you, Committee, for your continued support and commitment to the Advocate of Children and Young People, and the children and young people of New South Wales by extension. My name is Ellen Armfield. I am the current chair of the sitting NSW Youth Advisory Council [YAC], as of October 2024. I was also a member of the previous YAC, and am joined today by a fellow member of the 2023- 24 YAC, Terina. I would also like to acknowledge the work of the other YAC members from that term, who all contributed to what was achieved.

One of the key roles of the Youth Advisory Council is to provide advice to the Minister and the Advocate on issues, policies, and programs that impact children and young people. This is a role that each member takes seriously, and I would like to acknowledge the engagement that the Hon Rose Jackson, Minister for Youth, and the Advocate had with our committee. Finally, I recognise that the work of the YAC would not be possible without the support of the Advocate and her team. Throughout our term, they have sought to empower the Council to advocate for their communities and given us the skills and confidence to continue doing this important work. I thank the Committee again and we look forward to answering your questions.

**The CHAIR:** Terina, would you like to make a short opening statement?

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** I don't have an opening statement, but I would also like to pay my respects to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation on whose lands we meet today.

**The CHAIR:** Before we begin the questions, I wish to inform the witnesses that you may take a question on notice and provide the Committee with an answer in writing within 14 days after receiving the questions. That's if you get some curly questions, I guess! Ellen, what motivated the Council to focus on reducing the stigma of mental health and enhancing mental health education in schools for your 2024 advocacy project? Before you answer that, I welcome Dr Amanda Cohn to the Committee.

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** Our YAC is a very diverse group of 12 people from all across New South Wales, but the one thing that we all had in common was that we had experienced issues surrounding our education and our knowledge around mental health—the lack thereof, that we had in school. A lot of which, we all agreed, contributed to the stigma around mental health. It was something that all of us, as a group, were really passionate about. We unanimously agreed that it was a project that we could take on to see what could do about it.

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** Adding to what Ellen has said, one of the other motivating factors was that we are a very diverse YAC, and although we had many different experiences, especially those of us from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, we had a passion surrounding the stigma around mental health. In my personal experience, that was something that really came through in that briefing and pushed us to work towards breaking down stigma, and helping support young people throughout New South Wales.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** I am new on the Committee, so I don't know a lot of things about what we are talking about in some ways. I would like if you could both tell me about your backgrounds and what made you interested to get on the YAC, and what you see as the particularly important issues for young people at the moment, from your experience on the YAC so far.

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** My name is Terina. I am from Western Sydney. Something that led me to apply to YAC, and be a part of it, was that I was very passionate about youth justice. As someone from quite a few diverse communities, it was something that was really important to me—to represent my community—

because I feel like we didn't have as much of a space in mainstream media. That's something that I found to be a really important factor within ACYP, and the Advocate's job. That was what led me to push through and apply. Sorry, what was the second half of your question?

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** What do you think are some of the big issues affecting young people at the moment, from your experience on the YAC?

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** From my personal experience, and from hearing what our other YAC members had to say, cost of living was by far the number one issue. It's something that filters through to every aspect of life. Struggling to pay the bills, or struggling workwise, or having to keep up with school while managing a multitude of complex responsibilities, was something that really pushed through. We also talked about youth homelessness and youth crime, but that's something that I don't personally have a strong statement about. That's from my perspective.

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** I am from Sydney—the metropolitan area in Sydney—and I applied to the YAC because I am really passionate about making sure that young people have a say in issues that affect them. I have had poor experiences with mental healthcare. I do a lot of work in the disability space, so I am really passionate about making sure that we are hearing from young people with disabilities, and making sure that the government and policymakers are listening to all young people. That includes young people who may not be vocal, and young people who may be in crisis. Being able to amplify such voices is something that drew me to the YAC. Echoing what Terina said, as well, cost of living and mental health were massive issues that came up for the YAC. Also, last year and unfortunately continuing this year, there has been a focus on gendered violence in Australia as a whole, but specifically in New South Wales, which we have discussed as a YAC. It affects all of us, and there is growing sexism in schools and universities and workplaces. How much it is in the media, as well. It definitely should be talked about, but it is weighing on the mental health of young people.

**Ms KAREN McKEOWN:** On the work of the YAC, generally—are there any other areas related to youth wellbeing or education that the council believe should be prioritised in future advocacy work?

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** As I said, I'm really passionate about including young people with disabilities when we're talking about policy and change making. Last year, I was lucky enough to attend a hearing on young people with disabilities in educational settings. That's something that we can be doing much more work on, because those are the young people who get left behind in educational settings. This was also echoing something that came up in Zoe's hearing just before, that sex education in schools is also another piece of work that could be enhanced, to make sure that sex education is equal among state and independent schools so that, no matter the sort of religious teachings, young people are still getting comprehensive sex and consent education.

**Ms KAREN McKEOWN:** Thank you. Also, if I can just explore, have you faced any challenges in trying to engage with other young people, such as young people with disabilities or marginalised groups at all? What are the challenges you have in drawing out information from those other young people?

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** As I said, I do a lot of work in that space. What I found is that often it's the way that policymakers and researchers try to get the information that's not always helpful. For example, if we're looking at surveys, some young people can't sit down and access a survey and do it themselves. But I've gone and done focus groups with young people with disabilities where we can just engage in conversation and speak and communicate with young people through their communication methods. Yes, it may take a bit more time than sending out a survey, but young people with disabilities still want to be involved in those conversations and still want to have their voice heard. So it's about figuring out different ways to do that, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

**Ms DONNA DAVIS:** I've just got a couple of things that have come out of what you've said already. Thanks for being a part of the YAC and for coming today. Last week, the government launched a Digital Inclusion Strategy, which is aimed at improving access to our digital world on a whole range of levels. I just wanted to ask, from a youth perspective, what have you seen both in feedback from the other council participants and also just in your everyday lives about people struggling to access devices, data and wi-fi? Is it a real challenge in amongst your peers?

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** I would just like to say this is more of a personal experience kind of answer. From what I've heard, a lot of young people from my community do have access to technology as a whole. However, it's the quality of this technology and wi-fi that leads to whether or not they're able to participate in things like online classes or anything like that. For example, some of my classmates at school, they did have a laptop which was required for school. However, it was an older model and would often crash and wasn't reliable enough for them to do their work in a way where they wouldn't have to continuously push back the barrier of having to charge their laptop every five seconds. Or they have to sit at the back of the classroom to be next to a

power point, or if they don't have a power point in that classroom, then they can't use that laptop and they'd have to go on their phone. The teachers would push back against that because they don't like students on their phones. So it's that kind of middle ground where majority of young people I know have access to these technologies. However, they're not up to the standard that is required to make the work easier. I can pass it on if anyone else would like to answer.

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** It's not something specifically I've experienced in terms of access to technology, but I'm happy to take that one on notice as well and talk to other young people about that.

**Ms DONNA DAVIS:** It was something that I found quite interesting in terms of that strategy and some of the experiences people are having. Thank you Terina for your insights. What you have expressed is pretty common amongst many of our youth. Just touching on what you were saying before about the view that there is increased sexism in schools and universities. Can you just expand a bit more on that? What does that look like? What are some sorts of examples? Is this something that is played out between youth and youth? I know you talked about the media and the role that the media is playing and, of course, I have no doubt that social media has an incredibly big role in this. Is there anything else you'd like to say about that?

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** Yes, I have an example. Quite recently, at the university I attend, there was an online—I wasn't in this class. I just heard about this. There was an online class, and everyone was on Zoom. Every time that a female student started talking, in the comments, people would just start posting numbers out of ten, so rankings based on the appearance of that particular student. Things like that. That happened recently. I have very complicated thoughts about social media—especially around the social media ban—but I do think that it can be harmful in the fact that it does spread—it normalises bigotry sometimes. When young people are constantly exposed to some really foul language against women or gender-diverse people, that then is normalised, and they feel like that's okay to do that, which it's not. It's harmful. That's a recent example that I could share with you.

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** I would just like to add to that. From personal experience, there was a mishandling of particularly gender-related kind of incidences, in terms of how the school treated female students and listened to them when they had complaints of sexism. Especially foul comments made by other students, usually other male students. That's something that shows that it's not just peer-on-peer sexist attitudes, but also it goes up, in terms of a systematic issue of how gender-related, not so much crimes, but situations and discrimination aren't really treated seriously. That's how myself, and I know quite a few of my peers, feel. It's that lack of feeling heard in many circumstances—whether that be by your other peers, the school, and other educational areas or family and the police. I know that there's a big disregard there.

In terms of sexism on a peer-to-peer level, I do feel that social media especially does normalise bigotry, in the way that a lot of trends and language used is spread so fast now, because everyone I know has social media, and there are a lot of micro-trends that pass through young people quite fast. These often can be related to sexism. For example, relating and talking about young women and their sexual history, no matter what age they are, is quite prominent. I see it a lot online, and it is honestly quite horrible to see. It's not just myself that witnesses it, but a lot of people witness this kind of talking down of women online. The more that you see it, the more it's normalised, and the more that people feel comfortable expressing these attitudes in person and in school situations and stuff like that. My perspective is that it's a very prominent issue, and it's very widespread in the way that it impacts everyone.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** If it would assist the Committee, in our recent youth work polling, I believe there's some work in there done around bullying, but it also calls out whether it was about your identity, your sex. We can share that with the Committee in its entirety, and that might be helpful.

**Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ:** Is there an awareness that's coming out amongst young people? There is obviously a trend, particularly with right-wing extremist groups, and you'll see this around transgender issues and with women and certain migrant groups. Another example is the "ban the book" campaign in Cumberland. They will put something controversial up to get people to comment and to recruit them basically into the dark web. So obviously most at risk here are women and people in minority groups. But is there an awareness coming through that this is actually the tool they're using? When you say they're moving lightning fast, it's because they're using algorithms and artificial intelligence to actually blow that debate up.

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** I do remember the "ban the book" campaign and everything surrounding that. It actually was quite personal because I had a similar kind of campaign happen at my high school regarding LGBTQI+ books, so that's something that's extremely prominent as well in my area.

**Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ:** Are young people conscious of how those things are being used?

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** Speaking from personal experience, I don't believe it's very widespread. It of course depends what community you're a part of and where you're based, but my understanding

of my peer group specifically is that the people who were more aware, especially of the way that white right-wing extremists use the algorithm to boost morale and support on their side, are from minority communities that are experiencing the discrimination and all the downsides of right-wing extremism. It's not necessarily the people who are perpetuating those attitudes and beliefs.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I understand there used to be a Regional Youth Taskforce. How are you doing picking up the gap that has been left since that taskforce has been abolished?

**ZOË ROBINSON:** Obviously, the Youth Advisory Council is always reflective of the diversity in New South Wales, and we always ensure that there is representation. I think on this Youth Advisory Council, it was a 6:6 split, in terms of metro and regional. It included Orange, Dubbo and Lismore. They do work very hard. The current YAC, as an example, Mr Barrett, is doing work specifically in their communities to make sure that they are bringing the voices of their communities to the youth advisory councils in specific projects. But in terms of recruitment, we always ensure that it's reflective of the metro and regional and the split around that as well.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Ellen, can you tell me what are some of the different issues faced by regional youth as opposed to metro youth?

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** I'm not from regional New South Wales, so I can't speak for that community myself, but I am happy to take that one on notice and get more voices. I do know that access to services in regional New South Wales comes up a lot, because access to mental health and health services in general in regional areas is tricky. Transport comes up a lot for regional areas, and that differs for those of us in metropolitan areas.

**ZOË ROBINSON:** With the mental health project that they did do, it's worth noting that the three people who presented that work to the government and to the agencies were reflective of regional young people as well. In the mental health work that this YAC did, we had two people who had participated in a leadership role around that who were from regional areas, to talk about the differences in that space.

**Dr AMANDA COHN:** Good morning. Thank you so much for being here. It's really good to have young people here representing yourselves, which isn't as common as it should be in Parliament. I wanted to ask a question about cost of living. The 2024 survey for children and young people showed the top two issues were mental health and wellbeing and cost of living. I know you've already talked about some of the really important work you're doing in mental health. What have you been hearing from young people about the cost of living and how it's impacting people, and do you have any recommendations for what we should be doing about it?

**ELLEN ARMFIELD:** I think it's interesting that cost of living and mental health came up because I think they're really intertwined, even just in terms of services for mental health adding to the cost of living, because they are quite expensive as well. Yes, Medicare rebates are available, but even with them, they're still quite expensive, and then we still only have ten sessions under the mental health care plan. I think because it's talked about so much, there's a lot of stress as well about, "This is our future. This is where we're going now. What will it look like moving out? What will it look like needing to pay rent?" Most young people who I talk to, unless they come from generational wealth, are not thinking they're going to own property, so it's reframing what our futures will look like.

But, yes, it is weighing on a lot of people. I know of a lot of peers who are having to contribute to their family's rent, or bills to pay or different things like that, which impacts young people. So many young people are working part-time or even full-time while also in university, which obviously impacts things. Then also knowing that when we finish university, we will also have quite a large debt at the end of it as well, so it's just compiled. In terms of things that the government could be doing, relieving some of those pressures, such as addressing student debt and including more things under Medicare, would be really helpful. I'm so passionate about just getting out, talking to young people, and hearing what young people are asking for, and what young people are asking for, especially in my community, is better funding support for accessing mental health services and also addressing the stress of our HECS debt when we finish university.

**Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ:** We've got some good news for you there.

**TERINA RAPANA-HOTERE:** I would like to second what Ellen has said. I completely understand the perspectives of young people, in the sense that the cost of living is placing a lot of extra stress in so many aspects of their lives—whether that be through their physical health, mental health, social life and social health, and even struggling to connect to their spiritual self, and connect with the community.

**The CHAIR:** That concludes our public hearing today. I'd like to place on record my thanks to all the witnesses who appeared today. I'd like to thank the Committee members, the Committee staff, Hansard and AVB teams for their assistance in conducting the hearing. Thank you again for appearing. You will each be provided with a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings for corrections. The Committee staff will also email any



questions taken on notice from today and any supplementary questions from the Committee. We kindly ask that you return these answers within 14 days. Again, thank you for appearing, and keep up the good work.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**The Committee adjourned at 12.00.**