



# **2025-2026 Federal Pre-Budget submission**

**January 2025**

**Submitted by Australian Youth Affairs Coalition**



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*We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, and culture. This report was prepared on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.*

*As the national peak body for young people, we acknowledge First Nations young people as the future custodians of this land. We recognise the urgent need to actively engage in the essential work toward reconciliation and provide platforms for First Nations young people to lead positive change. AYAC remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting the Uluru Statement from the Heart and stays true to its values of supporting the leadership and self-determination of First Nations young people.*

*Always was, always will be.*

# Introduction

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia's national youth affairs peak body representing the needs and interests of young people aged 12-25 years, and the wider youth sector. AYAC are experts in youth issues and young people.

In this pre-budget submission, we make practical and necessary recommendations regarding critical investments to strengthen the youth sector and improve outcomes for young Australians.

There are 4.7 million young people, aged 12-25, living in Australia today. Many of these young people face considerable challenges as they make key transitions from childhood to adulthood.

The Australian youth sector plays a critical role in supporting our young people. The youth sector workforce harnesses knowledge and expertise to create safe, supportive spaces that better enable young people to succeed. It promotes the cultivation of meaningful relationships, strong support networks, life skills and confidence among the young. Interventions take place across a range of settings and span a variety of issues, including emotional resilience; peer support and mentoring; relationships and sexuality education; civics education and advocacy; employability; drugs and alcohol; and inter-cultural and inter-generational dialogue.

A Victorian study<sup>1</sup> found that for *every dollar of investment in youth work returns an estimated \$2.62 in social and economic benefits*, indicating that youth work delivers a significant return on investment for the community across areas such as mental health, education and employment, housing stability, youth justice, and the health system. As such, it is vital that this sector is represented by a fully resourced and effective peak bodies.

This pre-budget submission is presented in two key sections – *Investment in AYAC*, and *Investment in young people*.

In *Investment in AYAC*, we highlight a need to bolster the resourcing of AYAC through strategic investment in the organisation. It identifies a need for core peak body funding and for national policy forum for knowledge brokering that works towards achieving a national youth strategy.

In *Investment in Young People*, further recommendations are made to address a variety of issues concerning young people, such as homelessness, education and employment.

These recommendations are supported by AYAC's recent youth engagement work, research and reports, including submissions made to several Government inquiries.

AYAC welcomes any questions regarding this submission, or further opportunities for discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2022 Youth Affairs Council Victoria, the Victorian peak body for young people and the Victorian youth sector, commissioned Deloitte Access Economics to conduct a social and economic return on investment (SROI) study to contribute to an evidence base to inform future policy development.

# Summary of Recommendations

## **Investment in AYAC**

1. Fund AYAC as a youth affairs peak body: A multi-year funding contract for 5 years of \$12.5 million (\$2.5 million per annum).
2. Resource an annual national youth policy expert forum to boost research outcomes and develop a national youth strategy response

## **Investment in young people**

- 1) Expand mental health services for young people including prevention and early intervention services and acute and crisis care.
  - i) Increase accessibility to these services for young people experiencing financial hardship.
- 2) Commit to a substantial increase in the base rates of the Job Seeker Payment and Youth Allowance.
- 3) Increase the amount of income that can be earned before Youth Allowance and Aus Study payments are reduced.
- 4) Commit to a substantial increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance.
- 5) Commence a Treasury review of multi-lever policy solutions to deliver affordable housing for young people into the future.
- 6) Shift from a punitive approach to youth justice to prevention and early intervention approaches by increasing funding for youth organisations and community-based youth programs.
- 7) Increase Commonwealth Prac Payments to at least the minimum wage and expand payments to all courses which require practical placements to alleviate placement poverty and encourage educational equity.
- 8) Abolish junior pay rates to reduce additional intergenerational inequity and relieve cost of living pressure.
- 9) Increase funding for youth workers in both formal education settings, and in informal community settings to engage with young people to develop political awareness and political identities, increase participation in and connection to their communities, and provide opportunities to contribute to the development of youth policies, programs, and services.
- 10) Invest in organisations that advocate for and develop young people's political engagement.

# Priority Areas and Recommendations

## Investment in AYAC

### 1. Fund AYAC as a youth affairs peak body

Whilst AYAC is the national peak body representing young people and the youth sector, it does not receive specific funding to achieve peak body activities. As such, AYAC acts as an advocate and representative for more than 4 million young people, as well as the Australian youth sector, in a largely unfunded capacity.

AYAC receives limited funding through the Australian Government that enables project, policy and youth engagement work on key deliverables through a grant deed with the Office of Youth. Considering the Australian youth population, **this investment by the Federal Government equates to only 10c per young Australian that AYAC represents (see Table 1 below)**. Compared to other jurisdictions and peak bodies, this is a startlingly low amount. AYAC does not receive peak body funding from any other funding source.

Peak bodies play a critical role in advocating for the interests of those they represent and elevating their collective voice to government in order to drive positive systemic change. Peaks are an important mechanism that ensure the needs and perspectives of specific communities are adequately represented in policymaking and in the broader community. Peak bodies have been argued to strengthen democracy through their connecting function which can develop collaborative partnerships between politicians, officials, service providers, and the population they represent (Foote et al. 2023).

AYAC's current funding is constrained to project and youth engagement work, and targeted research. Despite having the networks, relationships, and national reach to serve as Australia's national youth peak body. AYAC is currently unable to fully perform this role due to a lack of core funding for peak body functions. Unlike state and territory peaks, which receive dedicated funding to serve their jurisdictions, AYAC provides essential national coordination and policy leadership—enhancing cross-jurisdictional collaboration within the youth sector. Without core funding, the full potential of AYAC's capacity to unite, amplify, and represent young people at a national level will remain limited, leaving the Australian youth sector and Australian young people without a fully funded and operational peak body. AYAC maintains that a targeted investment, alongside policy reforms, are urgently needed to better support Australian young people and the broader youth sector.

Despite not receiving core peak body funding, in 2023 AYAC contributed to more than 10 Government requests for submissions, consultations and inquiries. The absence of adequate funding resulted in many missed opportunities to advocate for young people that addresses the plethora of complex challenges they face, thereby limiting the government's insights into the experiences of young people and reducing the impact and efficacy of youth policy initiatives.

Given the nature of issues impacting young people, and that they invariably fall across portfolios, input from an expert peak body should be considered vital to ensure their needs are adequately addressed by decision makers. SNAICC's funding model offers insights into how increases to AYAC's funding might be secured. SNAICC funding spans multiple portfolios, including the Department of Social Services and the Department of Education. At this time, AYAC's sole funder is the Office for Youth. Given that AYAC, like SNAICC, works to improve outcomes for young people across a host of policy areas, it is reasonable to explore how it might better draw on funding on a cross-government basis.

## Proposed investment

This submission seeks a multi-year funding contract of 5 years to enable AYAC to act as a fully resourced youth affairs expert peak body, and continue and expand our current work, including to support the Federal Government's ongoing delivery of Office for Youth's Engage! Strategy.

Investment required: \$2.5 million per annum, for five years to:

- Provide high quality coordination and expertise as the National Youth Peak Body
- Deliver high quality youth engagement work that enhances young people's life skills, social connectedness and confidence to participate fully in social life
- Advocate for the profession of youth work, promoting its ability to harnesses knowledge and expertise to create safe, supportive spaces, cultivate meaningful relationships and strong support networks, and build life skills and confidence that better enable young people to achieve their goals.
- Support youth work programs and organisations which operate across a range of settings, such as: emotional resilience; peer support and mentoring; Relationships and Sexuality Education; civics education and advocacy; employability; drugs and alcohol; and inter-cultural and inter-generational dialogue.
- Strengthen policy development through advocacy, stakeholder engagement and support.
- Build capacity in the sector through sector development activities, support and resources, such as national youth and sector conference

- Increase knowledge brokering activities, including mapping national youth studies capability, expanding research translation initiatives, and investigating emerging international approaches to youth policy and their potential application to the Australian context
- Strengthen the coordination and recruitment of AYAC's membership base and amplify their voices to decision makers.
- Initiate a national youth policy expert forum that contributes to a co-designed national youth strategy that is action focused across key issues
- Build on our communications to maximize the quality of sector news and support provided
- Continue to support the delivery of Office for Youth's Engage! Strategy and youth engagement activities
- Build the capacity of the youth sector through targeted professional development and resources to support the national workforce
- Work across Government departments on the intersection of issues impacting young people, such as education, employment, housing and homelessness

This additional investment in the youth sector by the Federal Government will be critical in advancing outcomes for young people and developing robust policy that supports them and the wider youth sector. Moreover, it demonstrates a welcome commitment to young Australians on the part of the government that will better support them in identifying a stake in the democratic process.

Currently, AYAC, and consequently Australian young people, receive some of the **lowest amounts of government funding** when compared to state youth peak bodies and similar national peak bodies (see Table 2 below). In the previous Federal budget, **AYAC received just 12.4% of the amount provided by the government to COTA, the peak body for older Australians, and 3.5% of the funding received by SNAICC.**

**Recommendation:**

1. Fully resource AYAC to be an effective youth affairs peak body

**Investment required: \$2.5 million per annum**

**Table 1: Amount of funding per number of Australian young people**

Organisation	No. of young people aged 12-25 (ABS 2024)	Gross yearly income	Funding from government including grants	Gov investment per young person
<b>Australia (AYAC)</b>	<b>4,703076</b>	<b>\$649,639.00</b>	<b>\$509,000.00</b>	<b>\$0.10pp</b>

**Table 2: A comparison with other national peak bodies (2023-2024):**

Name	Purpose	Gross yearly income	Income from government including grants
<b>SNAICC</b>	National Voice for First Nations Children and Young People	\$22,542,529.00	\$14,526,409.00
<b>COTA</b>	Peak body and advocate for Australians aged 50+	\$4,365,815.00	\$4,103, 893.00
<b>ACOSS</b>	Peak council for community services nationally and anti-poverty advocate.	\$4,336,724.00	\$1,436,092.00
<b>AYAC</b>	Peak body and advocate for young Australians aged 12-25, and the Australian youth sector.	\$649,639.00	\$509,000.00

## A national youth policy expert forum

While the Australian Government consults regularly with young people through their Youth Steering Committee, Youth Advisory Groups and holds annual national youth forums, the Australian Government does not currently have a national youth issues strategy.

The youth sector workforce and youth issue researchers have considerable knowledge and expertise to contribute and respond to this policy development process. However, there is not a mechanism for this expert group to contribute to this work in a coordinated and strategic approach.

An annual policy forum for youth sector workforce, researchers and policy experts would boost capacity in youth research and improve outcomes for young people. The forum will leverage the national youth forum input from young Australians and provide policy and research to action solutions and address their issues.

To action the forum outcomes, AYAC will coordinate a plan to address the pressing issues facing young Australians and inform policy and action across all agencies. This will occur in a staged process, issue by issue and ultimately create a policy solution co-designed with young people, youth sector workforce, researchers and decision makers for the Australian Government to address issues impacting young people.

Working in partnership with the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, AYAC is uniquely placed to lead and implement these robust policy forums leading to practical outcomes for young people, leveraging partnerships with the youth sector, Australian and international youth researchers and academics, youth workers, young people and decision makers.

Building on the successful policy roundtable, *Shaping the Future: A new approach to policy that works for young people*, these one / two day forums will bring together these stakeholders in Canberra to chart workable paths forward that address the key issues, challenges and opportunities for young Australians in partnership with the Australian Government.

This initiative will enable the Australian Government to champion the usage of data and research at the decision-making table, build upon existing policy frameworks and action coordinated solutions to issues facing young people.

**Recommendation:**

2. Fund an annual national youth policy expert forum to boost research outcomes and develop a national youth strategy response

**Investment required: \$60,000 per annum**

## Young people:

### Cost of living and mental health

AYAC remains concerned about the impact of cost-of-living pressures on young people. Joining with Orygen, AYAC set out the reasons behind these concerns for the [Senate Select Committee on Cost of Living](#). This submission is based on research conducted by AYAC in 2023 with young people which identified cost of living as their number one concern. Similar findings are mirrored in [Mission Australia's 2024 Annual Youth Survey](#) and [Monash University's 2024 Youth Barometer](#).

The cost-of-living crisis disproportionately affects young people, intensifying challenges during critical life transitions such as moving from education to employment and gaining financial independence. High unemployment and underemployment rates and precarious work arrangements and economic

insecurity further exacerbate vulnerability and can contribute to mental ill-health (AYAC & Orygen, 2024).

Young Australians (aged 20–22) have been found to have poorer mental health outcomes if they have experienced interrupted employment and financial hardship, especially if the experience extends over several years (AYAC & Orygen, 2024). AYAC and Orygen’s submission outlines how extended periods of unemployment, financial stress and debt, are some of the biggest risk factors for mental health problems. Most mental health conditions emerge between ages 12 and 25, which combined with higher poverty rates than those of older adults, situates many young people in a vulnerable position if action is not taken (AYAC & Orygen, 2024).

These challenges require robust, coordinated policy interventions that span across mental health, employment, and housing to mitigate the long-term consequences of financial hardship and support smoother life transitions.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. Expand mental health services for young people including prevention and early intervention services and acute and crisis care.
  - i. Increase accessibility to these services for young people experiencing financial hardship.

**Investment required: \$500 million per annum for early intervention mental health support.**

### **Raise the rate of income support**

AYAC maintains that the Government’s Youth Allowance and JobSeeker payments are vastly inadequate, and currently \$270 and \$220 per week below the Henderson poverty line respectively (Davidson et al., 2023). In the Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee’s (the Committee) 2023-24 Report 2023-2024 identified that many young people are unable to afford secure housing, food, energy, transport costs, internet access, and a phone—made worse in the context of rising cost-of-living pressures and the housing crisis. Consequently, young people are rationing food, going without heating or cooling, and foregoing necessary medication—leaving them at increased risk of debt, social isolation, and homelessness (AYAC, 2024a).

AYAC calls for income support payments to be increased to \$88 per day to allow young people to meet their basic needs and surpass the Henderson Poverty line of \$87.32 per day. Given the disproportionate impact of rental price increases on young people and the current cost-of-living crisis, AYAC also

advocates for raising the rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance. This will support all young people across Australia to live with security, promote greater equality of opportunity, and support them to gain access to meaningful long-term employment.

#### **Recommendations:**

2. Commit to a substantial increase in the base rates of the Job Seeker Payment and Youth Allowance.
3. Increase the amount of income that can be earned before Youth Allowance and Aus Study payments are reduced.
4. Commit to a substantial increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance.

**Investment required to raise the rate of Youth Allowance and Job Seeker:  
Approx \$12.35 billion per annum (for ages 16-25).**

## **Housing and Homelessness**

AYAC welcomes the introduction of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Bill 2024 (No. 2) (the Bill), and commends its rights-based approach, commitment to addressing homelessness, and acknowledgment of international human rights obligations. However, [AYAC's recent submission](#) which provided feedback on the Bill highlighted the need for youth-specific homelessness policy and the inclusion of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to address housing related-rights for young people. AYAC's submission outlined the need to consider prevention and early intervention to address youth-specific drivers of youth homelessness such as low rates of income support, low-paid or part-time work, discrimination in rental markets, barriers when exiting care or justice systems, and lack of intergenerational wealth transfer opportunities.

AYAC also stressed the importance of developing homelessness policy which is responsive to and informed by the lived experience of young people to ensure that the distinct challenges associated with youth homelessness aren't overlooked in adult-centric policies.

Addressing these barriers will support equitable housing access and ensure they don't further exacerbate housing insecurity and homelessness. Secure housing has compounding benefits through supporting young people's health and wellbeing, participation in education and employment and social inclusion (AYAC, 2024b). These health, economic and social benefits warrant greater government intervention to improve access to safe and affordable housing for young people.

## **Recommendations:**

Commence a Treasury review of multi-lever policy solutions to deliver affordable housing for young people into the future.

### **Investment required:**

- **Approx \$10 million to conduct a Treasury review of multi-lever policy solutions.**
- **Approx \$200 million to commit to a youth-specific Homelessness Prevention Transformation Fund to shift from crisis management to prevention and early intervention of youth homelessness.**

## **Youth Justice**

AYAC welcomes the government's recent efforts to conduct an inquiry Australia's youth justice and incarceration system and is encouraged to see a rights-based approach being taken in the terms of reference. [AYAC's submission](#) to this inquiry outlines how current frameworks which are reliant on putative measures to reduce youth crime are shown to stigmatise and marginalise young people, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds (AYAC, 2024c). AYAC recommends a shift to prevention and early intervention approaches such as addressing the social determinants of justice and points to decades of research showing that investments in health, education, and social justice – rather than incarceration – are much more effective in reducing crime (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009; Just Reinvest NSW, n.d.; KPMG, 2018). The submission also highlights the value of funding community-based youth work programs in prevention and early intervention and increasing the amount of youth workers to work alongside young people who are or who have been in contact with the youth justice system.

### **Recommendation:**

6. Shift from a punitive approach to youth justice to prevention and early intervention approaches by increasing funding for youth organisations and community-based youth programs.

### **Investment required:**

- **Approx \$250 million per annum to establish community-led programs for young people, expanded youth work and education support, and restorative justice and Indigenous-led initiatives.**

## Education

AYAC welcomes the introduction of Commonwealth Prac Payments for students undertaking mandatory placements as part of their tertiary studies and appreciated the opportunity to [provide feedback](#) on the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024 [Provisions] to the Senate Education and Employment Committees Inquiry. As outlined in our submission AYAC is pleased to see this initiative however we believe these changes do not go far enough to provide adequate support for young people undertaking tertiary education. AYAC would like to see the following amendments to the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill:

- Commonwealth Prac Payments to be increased to at least the minimum wage.
- The implementation date for Commonwealth Prac Payments should be brought forward, to provide immediate financial relief to students.
- Students in courses requiring any practical placements should be eligible to receive the Commonwealth Prac Payment.
- As a matter of urgency, youth work should be included in the list of courses eligible for Commonwealth Prac Payments due to having to undertake over 400 hours of unpaid placement on average.

Benchmarking Commonwealth Prac Payments to income support payments, which are demonstrably insufficient particularly in the current cost-of-living crisis, is ill-advised. Raising the rates of income support payments for students is therefore urgently recommended to improve thousands of young people's living conditions which are currently well below the poverty line (AYAC 2024a; Davidson et al., 2023).

### **Recommendation:**

7. Increase Commonwealth Prac Payments to at least the minimum wage and expand payments to all courses which require practical placements to alleviate placement poverty and encourage educational equity.

### **Investment required:**

- **Approx \$2 billion per annum to expand Commonwealth Prac Payments to all courses with placements and raise the rate to minimum wage.**

## Employment

AYAC remains concerned about the significant systemic barriers faced by young people to gaining employment, and high rates of youth unemployment (9.6% versus 3.7% within the general population) and youth underemployment (15.2% versus 6.6% within the general population) (Australian Government, 2024). As outlined in [AYAC's 2024 submission to Department of Employment and Workplace Relations National Skills Passport Consultation](#), young people face a range of barriers that limit their ability to secure and maintain safe, secure, meaningful employment. Some of these include:

- Being rejected from jobs due to age, race, gender, and disability discrimination (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023; Ghin & Ainsworth, 2024).
- Being engaged in precarious, low-wage roles with unclear career progression opportunities (Walsh et al., 2023).
- Susceptibility to exploitation and wage theft (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023).
- Being subjected to high rates of workplace sexual harassment (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020).
- Infrastructure challenges in regional and rural areas, including limited access to education and training services, and lack of public transport to facilitate travel to work (Hutchinson, Block, Robin, Cheng, Shi, & Zou, 2023).

These issues are at the core of youth unemployment and underemployment, and significantly impact young people's social inclusion, mental well-being, economic participation, and career progression (AYAC, 2024d). In the context of the current cost of living crisis, addressing these barriers must be a national priority to reduce long-term impacts of unemployment and economic insecurity amongst younger Australians.

### **Recommendation:**

8. Abolish junior pay rates to reduce additional intergenerational inequity and relieve cost of living pressure.

### **Investment required:**

- \$500 million per annum to phase out junior pay rates over 3 years, introducing wage subsidies for small businesses and hiring incentives to help ease the transition.

## Civic Engagement

Young people's interest in politics and issues that impact them is clear, but their engagement in formal politics remains low compared to older cohorts. Numerous submissions made to the recent 2024 inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia highlighted that young people are currently receiving inadequate civics education in schools and are consistently not meeting proficiency standards in NAPLAN testing.

Monash University's Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice's 2024 Youth Barometer report surveyed more than 620 young Australians aged 18–24 on a range of issues including participation in civic life. Many participants saw efforts to create large-scale change as futile within the current political system and preferred instead to take small steps to improve the lives of the people closest to them and their immediate community.

Recognising that feelings of powerlessness can impact upon young people's political participation, AYAC believes that lowering the voting age to 16 and introducing more collaborative forms of civic education that builds a sense of shared purpose to achieve political advocacy is more effective at encouraging young people to engage in conventional forms of civic engagement.

### Recommendations:

9. Increase funding for youth workers in both formal education settings, and in informal community settings to engage with young people to develop political awareness and political identities, increase participation in and connection to their communities, and provide opportunities to contribute to the development of youth policies, programs, and services.
10. Invest in organisations that advocate for and develop young people's political engagement.

### Investment required:

- **Approx \$1 billion per annum to invest in youth workers across Australian secondary schools and expand community-based youth work programs and advocacy organisations focused on political engagement.**

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