



New South Wales Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy

A submission to the Mental Health
Commission of New South Wales

August 2025

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yourtown is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year through a range of service offerings, supporting them through many difficult challenges.

Our services

- Early intervention mental health services for children aged 0-18 years old and their families
- Domestic and family violence refuge, transitional housing, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments.
- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support 24x7 to 5–25-year-olds across Australia since 1991
- Kids Helpline @ School delivering early intervention and prevention programs to primary and secondary schools nationally
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills, and
- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to support young people at risk of long-term unemployment re-engage with education and/or employment.

Kids Helpline

yourtown's Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for any young person aged 5 to 25. It offers children and young people a range of care options that are right for their needs and circumstances. Our commitment to being there anytime, and for any reason, has meant that we have responded to more than 8.9 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 34 years since our service was first established, while also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels. In 2024, our Kids Helpline counsellors responded to 133,386 contacts from children and young people across Australia, including 4,632 crisis responses for children and young people at imminent risk of harm.

Face-to-face Programs for Children and Families

yourtown provides accommodation and intensive individualised support to vulnerable at-risk young parents and their children through our San Miguel service. For over 40 years, San Miguel has provided a place to call home for vulnerable and at-risk families. In 2023-24, San Miguel supported 43 parents and 52 infants and young children.

yourtown's Care Plus program in Port Pirie is an early intervention and family support service that aims to improve the development and wellbeing of children. We support students to continue to engage meaningfully in their education. On average, Care Plus supported 27 children and young people each month in the last financial year.

yourtown's Starfish program supports children and young people aged up to 18 years to improve their emotional health and wellbeing. We provide outreach early intervention and prevention support in the Moreton Bay and Logan communities. On average, the program supported 99 children and young people each month in the last financial year.

yourtown is the Facilitating Partner for Deception Bay Communities for Children services. These community-based prevention and early intervention strategies support the development and wellbeing of children up to 12 years of age.

yourtown's Penrose Young Parents Program in Port Pirie South Australia and Glugor Young Parents Program in Deception Bay Queensland provide practical parenting support to help with child development, life skills,

and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments. In 2023-24, Penrose and Glugor supported 80 young children with their parents.

Parentline

Parentline offers free confidential phone and webchat counselling and support for parents and carers of children in Queensland and the Northern Territory. It offers a safety net for families by providing support when it is most needed. This includes after hours and weekends, where families feel isolated and where local services are unavailable. In 2023-24, there were more than 7,000 counselling contacts with parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Family and Domestic Violence Refuge and Transitional Housing

yourtown's refuge offers supported accommodation for up to 12 weeks. A specialised team provides women and children with a safe and welcoming environment and creates opportunities for mothers to rebuild self-concept and experience control and empowerment over their lives. The wrap-around care also includes linking with transitional housing and community outreach programs for women and children exiting refuges. Transitional housing is a vital steppingstone for women and children moving towards long term, safe and sustainable independent living in the community. In addition to refuge support **yourtown's** transitional housing offers a safe and supportive environment for 6 – 12 months, with support for legal and financial matters, accessing pre-employment support, and helping children into school. In 2023-24, we supported 20 families (including 33 young children) in our refuge and 24 families (including 43 children) in our transitional housing.

Employment Services

For over 20 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including Transition to Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, and Get Back in the Game provide young people with training to expand their options and help them find sustainable employment. During 2023-24 there were more than 7,000 commencements in our employment services and programs in South Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales.

Social Enterprises

yourtown has worked with young people and employers to break down barriers to sustainable employment for 25 years. As a leader in work-based enterprises we provide young people at risk of long-term unemployment paid jobs in the following areas: construction, landscaping, and asset maintenance to help their transition to open employment. In 2023-24, almost 200 young people were employed in our social enterprises across South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, and Tasmania.

yourtown is pleased to contribute to the New South Wales (NSW) Government's consultation on the development of a new state-wide Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. As a national organisation delivering a range of services across NSW—including Kids Helpline, Kids Helpline @ School, My Circle, Contingent Psychology, Get Back in the Game, transitional social enterprises, and San Miguel—**yourtown** is committed to advocating for the needs of children, young people, and families. The development of this Strategy presents a critical opportunity to shape an accessible, coordinated, inclusive, and sustainable mental health system that responds to the complex realities of young people's lives and supports their wellbeing across all communities.

The submission responds to the consultation questions, outlining what is currently working, what is not, and what needs to change to ensure the Strategy delivers meaningful outcomes. It draws on **yourtown's** experience, service data, and the voices and insights from young people in NSW who participated the Your Voice 2025 survey, to highlight both strengths and systemic gaps in the current mental health system.

Key themes from the submission include:

- The importance of accessible, youth-friendly services such as Kids Helpline, Kids Helpline @ School, and My Circle, particularly for regional and rural communities.
- The value of integrated, holistic models like San Miguel, social enterprises and Get Back in the Game that link mental health with housing, education, parenting, and employment support.
- The need to embed early intervention and prevention in everyday environments, including schools and community settings.
- The effectiveness of peer-led and community-based supports in reducing stigma and fostering belonging.
- The urgency of addressing service fragmentation, long wait times, and financial barriers that prevent timely access to care.
- The importance of culturally safe, trauma-informed, and inclusive services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, CALD, and neurodiverse young people.
- The need for genuine youth participation in service design and policy development.
- The role of NSW Government departments and agencies in leading, coordinating, and embedding mental health responses across all sectors.

yourtown urges the NSW Government to scale and embed these approaches within the public system to ensure all children, young people, and families benefit from a responsive, equitable, and coordinated mental health and wellbeing system.

What is working?

yourtown brings valuable insights into the strengths of the current mental health system through its extensive service delivery across NSW. These include:

- Kids Helpline - free, 24/7 telephone and online counselling for young people aged 5 to 25
- Kids Helpline @ School - free, virtual program connecting students with counsellors to build mental health skills
- My Circle - secure online peer support network for young people aged 13–25 to share experiences and build coping skills
- Contingent Psychology Service - backfills school psychologist vacancies through tele-counselling for students in hard-to-fill locations
- Get Back in the Game - personalised support program helping disengaged youth aged 15–21 re-enter education, training, or employment

- social enterprises - provide paid work and training to help young people overcome long-term unemployment, and
- San Miguel - residential support service helping vulnerable young parents and children transition from homelessness to independent living.

These services, alongside feedback from young people in NSW through the Your Voice 2025 survey, highlight several areas of success that should be built upon in the new state-wide Strategy, and what is possible when services are designed with young people and families in mind. However, these positive experiences are not consistent across NSW. The Strategy must prioritise scaling and embedding these approaches to ensure all communities benefit from a responsive, inclusive, and coordinated mental health system.

Online and school-based supports

Online services like Kids Helpline and headspace, along with school-based supports such as counsellors and Kids Helpline @ School, are consistently reported by young people as easy to access and vital first points of contact. Supports are valued for their flexibility, confidentiality, and ability to meet young people on their own terms—whether through phone, webchat, or video-based programs. 75% of Kids Helpline counselling sessions with young people in NSW occur outside standard hours and 55% of NSW contacts come via webchat. This demonstrates the importance of 24/7 availability and digital options that feel safe, anonymous, and youth-friendly.

Trusted professionals

Connecting with the “right” professional—whether a school counsellor, psychologist, or peer worker—can be transformative. These professionals are valued for their empathy, listening skills, and practical strategies. However, many young people report difficulty finding professionals who understand their needs or offer continuity of care.

Peer and community support

Peer-led initiatives like My Circle, youth engagement groups, and community-based programs help reduce stigma, build confidence, and foster belonging. Youth-friendly and inclusive services are appreciated, but these models are not consistently available across NSW.

Early intervention and prevention

Programs like Kids Helpline @ School and My Circle show the value of embedding mental health education and support in everyday environments. Early access to help can prevent escalation and support better long-term outcomes. Despite this, early intervention is not yet standard across schools and communities. Limited funding, workforce capacity, and inconsistent integration between education and health systems contribute to this gap.

Integrated support

Linking mental health services with housing, education, and income support leads to better outcomes, especially for those with complex needs. Wraparound models are highly valued but not widely implemented. Coordination between services remains inconsistent, and families often face fragmented systems. **yourtown's** Get Back in the Game program supports young people through tailored Career Transition Plans. Youth workers screen for mental health barriers and link participants to Kids Helpline or NSW Health services, ensuring continuity between employment support and formal care.

Youth-centred, flexible support

Services like Kids Helpline that are confidential, available outside traditional hours, and tailored to young people's preferences are seen as more accessible and effective. Anonymity and flexibility encourage help-seeking, especially among those who feel stigmatised. However, many services still operate within rigid frameworks that do not reflect the realities of young people's lives.

Inclusion and diversity

There is growing recognition of the need for services that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and attuned to the diverse experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, CALD, and neurodiverse young people. The design and delivery of **yourtown's** programs reflect this commitment, though such practices are not yet consistently embedded across the wider system. Initiatives like My Circle and San Miguel offer tailored support through culturally attuned counselling, therapeutic environments, and peer-led engagement—models that should be adopted more widely across NSW.

Therapeutic residential care

San Miguel's model shows that embedding therapeutic care in residential settings can lead to meaningful recovery for vulnerable families. Young parents have accessed counselling, maintained NDIS supports, and rebuilt family attachments. **yourtown** staff continue to persevere despite clients facing persistent barriers to support, including red tape and restrictive eligibility criteria across different agencies and systems. These challenges highlight the urgent need for a coordinated, inclusive Strategy that ensures timely, appropriate support for children, young people, and families in NSW.

What is not working?

yourtown's experience delivering services across NSW, alongside insights from the Your Voice 2025 survey, highlights persistent and critical gaps in the current mental health system. These gaps must be addressed to ensure the new Strategy delivers a more accessible, integrated, and equitable system for children, young people, and families.

To build a truly inclusive and effective mental health strategy, NSW must invest in integrated, community-led models that recognise the intersectionality of mental health with broader social determinants — and ensure these models are embedded within the public system as core components, not treated as peripheral or optional add-ons.

Limited access and long wait times

Young people across NSW face significant barriers to accessing mental health support. Long waitlists, high costs, and limited service availability—especially in regional and rural areas—mean many young people only receive help when in crisis. Walk-in services are scarce, and operating hours are often limited. For some, the only option is a hospital, but the experience is less than ideal due to long emergency department waits, a lack of youth-appropriate care, and the distressing nature of clinical environments during a mental health crisis.

Fragmented and overwhelmed systems

The system is fragmented and difficult to navigate, even when you are aware of the support that is available. Young people and families are often “bounced” between services—within and between the mental health, child protection, housing, education, and domestic violence systems—without a seamless flow of support. They are left to coordinate their own care, facing bureaucratic barriers and inconsistent information. When suicidal thoughts are disclosed but do not meet the threshold for care, young people feel dismissed and risk of falling through the cracks.

A case study from **yourtown's** San Miguel program illustrates this breakdown. Samantha, a young mother at San Miguel, experienced severe anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, compounded by homelessness and financial instability. Despite her urgent need for care, she was unable to access hospital-based mental health services due to long wait times, limited availability, and the complexity of navigating the system. **yourtown's** San Miguel team stepped in to provide consistent, tailored support—offering counselling, expressive therapy, and resilience-building workshops in a safe residential setting. When traditional services failed, staff advocated on Samantha's behalf, connected her with community resources,

and ensured continuity of care. Through this wraparound support, Samantha stabilised her mental health, secured housing, and developed a plan for her future. Her story highlights how **yourtown** continued to provide care despite every block to support, and how the child protection, housing, and mental health systems intersect with one person—yet fail to work together to meet urgent needs.

Lack of youth-centred and culturally safe care

Many services are not youth-friendly, trauma-informed, or culturally responsive. Young people—particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, CALD, and neurodiverse individuals—report experiences of discrimination, stigma, and a lack of understanding. This contributes to disengagement and poorer outcomes. While **yourtown's** services strive to embed inclusive practices, these approaches are not yet standard across NSW.

Insufficient early intervention and prevention

The system remains heavily crisis-driven, with limited investment in prevention or early support. Many young people miss out on help until their situation becomes acute. This reactive approach not only increases distress and risk but also places greater pressure on emergency and acute care services, which are already stretched.

Poor quality and continuity of care

Young people report inconsistent experiences with professionals—some are dismissive or unhelpful. Support is often short-term, with abrupt discharge and little follow-up. Re-telling their story multiple times across different services adds to the emotional burden and reduces the effectiveness of care.

Financial and structural barriers

High out-of-pocket costs, limited bulk-billing, and complex eligibility criteria exclude those most in need. Young people from low-income backgrounds or with complex needs struggle to access timely and appropriate support.

Lack of genuine youth voice

Young people feel their voices are not heard or respected in service design, delivery, or policy decisions. While some organisations are beginning to establish youth advisory groups, this practice is not yet widespread. Youth participation must be embedded across all levels of the system.

Gaps in community-based and peer support

There are not enough community-based, peer-led, or school-based options. Digital supports are not always well-integrated with face-to-face care, and community-led models like San Miguel are undervalued and underfunded.

Over-reliance on clinical models

The system's reliance on clinical models does not meet the diverse needs of families experiencing trauma, housing instability, and child protection involvement. Integrated, community-led, and family-inclusive services are essential but remain peripheral to the public system.

What needs to change?

To build a more effective and inclusive mental health system in NSW that does not leave children and young people behind, several key changes are needed. **yourtown's** experience delivering a range of services in NSW and insights from the Your Voice 2025 project highlight the urgency of reform across access, integration, cultural safety, and service design.

By implementing these changes, NSW can build a mental health system that is accessible, integrated, youth-centred, and responsive to the complex realities of children, young people, and families.

Improve access and reduce wait times

Young people and families must be able to access timely, affordable, appropriate, and geographically equitable mental health support. This calls for increased investment across a spectrum of services, with a particular focus on rural and regional communities, broader access to diagnostic tools, and the extension of funded support and outreach initiatives.

Integrate and simplify the system

The current system is fragmented and difficult to navigate. NSW must break down silos between various systems across mental health, education, housing, disability, and justice services. A coordinated, “no wrong door” approach—like that used by Kids Helpline—should be embedded across all sectors. This ensures that wherever a young person seeks help, they receive appropriate assessment, immediate support, and seamless referral pathways.

Ensure quality and continuity of care

Young people need consistent, high-quality care that does not end abruptly. Services must avoid short-term interventions and instead offer ongoing, wraparound support—especially for those with complex needs. Care should be coordinated across providers, with clear follow-up and continuity to prevent young people from falling through the cracks.

Make services youth-centred and culturally safe

Services must be designed with young people, for young people. This means embedding trauma-informed, culturally safe, and inclusive practices across all settings. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, CALD, and neurodiverse young people must be able to access support without fear of discrimination or stigma. Employing and training staff who reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, and the experiences of their clients, is essential to building trust and improving outcomes.

Prioritise education, early intervention and prevention

The system must shift from its heavy focus on crisis response to prioritising prevention and early support. Mental health education, stigma reduction programs and resilience-building should be embedded in schools and communities. Programs like Kids Helpline @ School and My Circle show the value of reaching young people before issues escalate. Investment in early intervention will reduce long-term demand on acute services and improve wellbeing across the population.

Remove financial and structural barriers

Mental health support must be accessible to all, regardless of income or background. This means simplifying eligibility criteria, reducing out-of-pocket costs, and ensuring services are available to low-income and marginalised young people. Structural barriers—such as limited session caps and complex referral processes—must be addressed to ensure equitable access.

Embed genuine youth voice

Young people must be actively involved in designing, delivering, and evaluating services and policies. Their feedback should lead to real change. Establishing youth advisory groups and embedding youth participation across the system will ensure services reflect lived experience and meet actual needs.

Invest in community-led, integrated models

Services like San Miguel demonstrate the effectiveness of community-based, family-inclusive, and trauma-informed care. These models stabilise families, prevent out-of-home care placements, and address mental health alongside housing, parenting, and social support. Yet they remain underfunded and peripheral to the public system. NSW must prioritise sustained investment in evidence-based services like San Miguel and ensure they are

recognised as essential components of mainstream mental health care—not as supplementary or short-term initiatives.

Diversify support beyond clinical models

While clinical services are valuable, they do not meet the diverse needs of all young people and families—particularly those experiencing intergenerational trauma, housing instability, or child protection involvement. A broader mix of psychosocial, digital, and therapeutic supports is needed to ensure every young person can access care that suits their circumstances and preferences. This must include greater support for parents and carers, who are often a child's first responder when mental health concerns arise. **yourtown's** Parentline service (Qld and NT) provides a strong model of support—offering free, confidential counselling via phone and webchat seven days a week, with access to trained professionals, culturally safe support, and tailored resources for parenting challenges. As a result, it serves as a vital safety net for families, especially during after-hours or when local services are unavailable. By supporting parents, we strengthen the protective factors around children and improve their social and emotional outcomes.

How should change happen?

To build a mental health system that truly meets the needs of children, young people, and families in NSW, change must be collaborative, integrated, equitable, and sustained. Insights drawn from **yourtown's** frontline service delivery and the voices of young people captured through the Your Voice 2025 project highlight the importance of reform that is driven by lived experience and grounded in community realities.

By centring lived experience, strengthening collaboration, and investing in inclusive, community-led models, NSW can create a mental health system that is responsive, resilient, and truly supportive of all children, young people, and families.

Co-design with young people and lived experience

Change must begin with genuine engagement. Young people, carers, and those with lived experience should be involved in designing, delivering, and evaluating services—not just consulted after decisions are made. Their voices must be central to policy and service reform. Youth advisory groups, peer-led initiatives, and participatory design processes should be embedded across all levels of the system and stages of service delivery to ensure services reflect real needs and lived realities.

Whole-of-system, cross-sector collaboration

Mental health cannot be addressed in isolation. Effective change requires dismantling the barriers that prevent coordination across systems such as education, housing, disability, justice, and social services. Integrated, wraparound approaches—where services communicate and coordinate—are essential to meet the complex, interconnected needs of young people and families. Services like San Miguel demonstrate the power of holistic support, combining trauma-informed care, housing stability, and parenting support to improve mental health outcomes.

Invest in workforce and training

A skilled, diverse, and supported workforce is critical to delivering quality care. NSW must invest in expanding and upskilling the mental health workforce, with a focus on trauma-informed, culturally safe, and youth-friendly practice. This includes recruiting staff who reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, providing ongoing training, and valuing peer workers and those with lived experience. Workforce investment also enables services to extend operating hours and reduce waitlists, ensuring support is available when and where it is needed.

Make access simple and flexible

Reform should focus on removing barriers to access. Referral pathways must be simplified, paperwork reduced, and multiple modes of support offered, including in-person, online, outreach, school-based, and after-hours options. Services should be available in the everyday environments where young people live, learn, and connect rather than limited to clinical settings. Implementing a “no wrong door” approach, such as the one used by Kids Helpline, ensures that every point of contact acts as a gateway to timely, tailored support. This helps reduce fragmentation, break down access barriers, and prevent individuals from slipping through the cracks.

Prioritise prevention, early intervention, and equity

NSW must shift investment towards prevention and early support. Mental health education and resilience-building should be embedded in schools and communities. Resources must be targeted to those most at risk, including rural, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, and low-income groups. This approach not only reduces long-term demand on crisis services but also promotes wellbeing and recovery before issues escalate.

Embed care navigation and continuity

Families and young people often struggle to navigate disconnected systems. Embedding care navigation roles within community services, such as those provided at San Miguel, can help guide individuals through complex pathways and ensure continuity of support. These roles are critical in bridging gaps between clinical and psychosocial care and ensuring no one is left to manage their journey alone.

Ensure accountability, transparency, and long-term commitment

Change must be transparent and accountable. Governments and organisations should commit to sustained, long-term investment and regularly report on progress. Short-term initiatives and pilot programs must be replaced with scalable, embedded models that become foundational to how NSW supports mental health and wellbeing.

What could improve mental health and wellbeing across our communities?

Improving mental health and wellbeing across NSW communities requires a shift toward whole-of-community, whole-of-government approaches that address the social determinants of mental health. **yourtown's** consultations and service experience highlight the need for accessible, inclusive, and community-led supports.

By shifting resources upstream—into school-based programs, community outreach, peer networks and parenting supports—NSW can ease pressure on hospitals and specialist services, strengthen community wellbeing, and build protective factors across the lifespan. This includes recognising parents as key responders in a child's mental health journey and ensuring they have timely access to evidence-based tools and guidance.

Universal, affordable access to support

Mental health care must be free or low-cost, with expanded access to funded, evidence-based services and outreach—especially in rural and regional areas. Long wait times and complex referral pathways prevent early help-seeking and increase reliance on crisis services. Services like Kids Helpline demonstrate the value of low-barrier, 24/7 support that meets young people where they are.

Early intervention and prevention

To reduce the burden of mental illness and suicide, early intervention must be holistic, developmentally appropriate, and embedded across the environments where young people live, learn, and grow. Programs like Kids Helpline @ School can help build resilience

and mental health literacy from the early years, helping children and young people recognise warning signs and seek help before issues escalate. Evidence suggests that Tier 1 initiatives can be effective at lowering the risk of developing mental illness and support sustained wellbeing.

Community-based, holistic approaches

Mental health cannot be separated from housing, education, employment, and social development. When families are supported holistically—through trauma-informed care, housing stability, and parenting support—mental health outcomes improve significantly. **yourtown** recommends flexible, place-based funding that enables community organisations to tailor services to local needs and deliver wraparound supports.

Culturally safe and inclusive services

Services must be trauma-informed, culturally safe, and inclusive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, CALD, and neurodiverse communities. This includes employing diverse staff and peer workers as well as designing services that reflect the values and realities of the communities they serve. **yourtown's** programs actively embed these principles, but broader system-level adoption is needed.

Youth voice and co-design

Young people must be involved in designing, delivering, and evaluating services and policies. Their lived experience should shape how services are structured and funded. Platforms like My Circle offer peer-led support and connection, and youth advisory groups are increasingly being used to inform service design. These approaches must be scaled and embedded across the system.

Safer, stronger communities

Social inclusion, belonging, and peer support are protective factors for mental health. Community groups, youth spaces, and accessible activities help reduce stigma and isolation. Accepting and safe communities for those from diverse or marginalised communities reduce levels of distress and potential triggers while also increasing protective factors. Programs such as **yourtown's** peer-led and creative therapy initiatives should be expanded because they foster connection, build confidence, and deliver accessible support in the everyday environments where young people live, learn, and connect.

Workforce development

A skilled, supported workforce is essential. **yourtown** recommends investment in training for youth workers, peer mentors, and non-clinical practitioners to deliver evidence-informed wellbeing supports. Workforce development grants should upskill staff in trauma-informed, culturally competent, and youth-friendly practice, and expand the peer workforce.

Long-term, coordinated action

Improving mental health and wellbeing requires sustained investment, cross-sector collaboration, and transparent reporting. Governments must move beyond short-term initiatives and commit to systemic, lasting change. Regional coordination hubs should be established to connect schools, health services, and community organisations, ensuring no child, young person or family falls through the gaps.

Support through employment services

Young people experiencing unemployment are disproportionately affected by mental health issues. Employment services must be equipped with assessment tools, training packages, and warm referral pathways to identify and support those at risk. **yourtown's** employment programs show that personalised, holistic, strengths-based support can help young people re-engage with education, training, and work—and improve their wellbeing.

Support for families in the child protection system

Children and young people involved in the child protection system face elevated risks of mental health challenges. To address this, families (including foster and kinship families) must

have access to trauma-informed, culturally safe, and flexible supports that reflect their lived experiences. This includes equipping carers and parents with evidence-based tools, and embedding outreach and therapeutic services in homes, schools, and communities. Models like San Miguel show how wraparound residential support can stabilise families and reduce the need for out-of-home care by bridging gaps across systems.

Child-centred, family-inclusive models

Mental health systems must recognise the role of families, carers and communities in supporting children and young people. While privacy is essential, parents and carers should be included in care planning (where appropriate) and equipped with the knowledge and skills to support their children. **yourtown's** face-to-face services demonstrate the effectiveness of family-inclusive approaches, where therapeutic messages are reinforced in the home environment.

What roles should NSW Government departments and agencies play in that?

Improving mental health and wellbeing across NSW requires a coordinated, whole-of-government response. While the Health Department plays a central role, every NSW Government department and agency must recognise mental health as part of their remit and actively contribute to systemic reform. This includes embedding mental health considerations into core functions, policies, and service delivery across areas including education, housing, justice, employment, transport, and community services.

Leadership, coordination, and accountability

Government departments must provide strong leadership and set a clear, shared vision for mental health reform. This means moving beyond siloed approaches and ensuring cross-sector collaboration. Agencies should work together to develop joint goals, shared funding models, and integrated service delivery. The Mental Health Commission of NSW should continue to lead strategy development, supported by robust governance mechanisms that bring departments together and hold them accountable for outcomes. Transparent reporting and regular evaluation are essential to track progress and drive continuous improvement.

Policy, funding, and system design

Departments must develop and implement policies that prioritise prevention, early intervention, and equity. This includes sustained investment in community-based, culturally safe, and youth-friendly services. Funding models should shift from rigid, clinical-style approaches to flexible, place-based grants that allow organisations to tailor services to local needs. System design must be informed by evidence and lived experience and remove financial and bureaucratic barriers to access.

Co-design and genuine engagement

Agencies must embed co-design with young people, families, and those with lived experience at every stage from policy development to service delivery and evaluation. This means not just consulting but sharing power and decision-making. Youth advisory groups, peer-led initiatives, and participatory design processes should be standard practice across departments.

Workforce development and support

Government must invest in building a skilled, diverse, and trauma-informed workforce. This includes recruiting peer workers and staff from priority communities, and providing ongoing training in culturally competent, youth-friendly, and inclusive practice. Workforce development grants should support non-clinical practitioners—such as youth workers,

art/play therapists, and community navigators—to deliver evidence-informed wellbeing supports.

Integration and navigation

Departments must ensure services are integrated and easy to navigate. This includes embedding warm referral pathways and information sharing across agencies to reduce fragmentation and improve continuity of care. Services should be accessible through multiple channels—digital, in-person, outreach, and school-based—and designed to meet people where they are. Regional coordination hubs can help broker relationships between schools, health services, and community groups.

Addressing social determinants

Mental health is shaped by broader social and economic factors. Departments such as Education, Communities and Justice, Planning and Housing, Transport, and Treasury must recognise their influence on the social determinants of mental health. Stable housing, inclusive education, accessible transport, and financial security are foundational to wellbeing and must be prioritised in policy and service design. Agencies should work together to deliver targeted support for those most at risk, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, CALD, and low-income communities.

Monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement

Departments must collect and use data—including from young people and families—to monitor progress, evaluate impact, and inform continuous improvement. This includes evaluating non-clinical interventions through co-designed metrics, not just clinical symptom scales. Innovation funds should be established to support small community providers in trialling new engagement methods, such as digital platforms, mobile outreach vans, and arts-based initiatives.

In summary, NSW Government departments and agencies must lead, coordinate, fund, co-design, integrate, and continuously improve a mental health system that is accessible, equitable, and centred on the needs and voices of young people and communities. The Mental Health Commission of NSW should remain at the forefront of Strategy development, supported by a governance framework that enables cross-sector collaboration and holds departments accountable for delivering outcomes. This structure must ensure that responsibility for implementation is shared and transparent, with mechanisms in place to monitor progress and drive continuous improvement. This cultural shift is essential to building a system that promotes wellbeing across all communities—not only in clinical settings, but in schools, homes, workplaces, and other everyday environments.

How will we know that we are making a difference?

To determine whether the Strategy is delivering meaningful change, NSW must measure both the outcomes and lived experiences of children, young people, and families—across all communities and service settings. This requires a combination of clinical, operational, and wellbeing indicators, alongside qualitative insights that reflect how children, young people, and families engage with and perceive the system.

Quantitative measures: Tracking system and service performance

Quantitative measures should assess both system-level performance and service-level impact. These include:

- Reductions in suicide rates, emergency department presentations, and hospital admissions
- Improvements in wait times, continuity of care, and early access to support, and

- Engagement with programs such as Kids Helpline @ School, My Circle, and other peer-led or school-based initiatives.

Data must be disaggregated by age, location, cultural background, gender, and neurodiversity to ensure equity and identify gaps—particularly for priority cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, CALD, neurodiverse, and rural young people.

Additional indicators should include:

- Number of children and young people engaging in evidence-based early interventions (e.g. Kids Helpline @ School can provide this data)
- Number of young people accessing support before reaching crisis point
- Uptake of community-based and outreach services
- Workforce diversity and capacity, including peer workers and culturally competent staff
- Participation in youth advisory groups and co-design processes, and
- Service retention and follow-up rates across sectors.

Together, these metrics will provide a clearer picture of whether the system is becoming more accessible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of young people.

Qualitative measures: Understanding lived experience

Equally important are qualitative measures that reflect how young people experience care. Regular feedback from service users—especially those from historically marginalised groups—should be used to evaluate whether services are inclusive, youth-friendly, and culturally safe. Lived experience must inform every stage of evaluation, from defining success to shaping service improvements.

Recognising diverse definitions of wellbeing

Different cohorts of young people define mental health and wellbeing in different ways. For some, it means feeling safe and connected; for others, it may involve stable housing, access to education, or freedom from discrimination. Young parents may prioritise family attachment and parenting support, while LGBTQIA+ youth may seek inclusive environments free from stigma. Evaluation frameworks must reflect this diversity and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.

Indicators of meaningful progress

We will know the Strategy is making a difference when data shows that more young people are engaging with social and educational experiences, accessing support early, staying engaged with services, and reporting that their needs are being met. Improvements must be visible not only in system-level metrics, but in the everyday experiences of young people—particularly those who have previously been disenfranchised, excluded or underserved.

Accountability and continuous improvement

To ensure transparency and accountability, NSW should establish a public dashboard that tracks progress against key indicators and includes youth-led evaluations. Innovation funds should support community organisations to trial new engagement methods and co-designed metrics. Success must not be defined solely by clinical symptom reduction, but by whether young people feel supported, empowered, and able to thrive in their communities.

We welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission, please do not hesitate to contact Tracy Adams, CEO of **yourtown** via email at advocacy@yourtown.com.au.