

ACYP Submission into the 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry

About ACYP

The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare, well-being and voice of all children and young people aged 0-24 years, with a focus on the needs of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Under the Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014, our activities include:

- making recommendations to Parliament, and Government and non-Government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services that affect children and young people;
- promoting children and young people's participation in activities and decision-making about issues that affect their lives;
- conducting research into children's issues and monitoring children's well-being;
- holding inquiries into important issues relating to children and young people;
- providing information to help children and young people; and
- preparing, in consultation with the Minister responsible for youth, a three-year, whole-of-government Strategic Plan for Children and Young People (Plan).

Further information about ACYP's work can be found at: www.acyp.nsw.gov.au.

Introduction

The Advocate welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the independent expert Inquiry into the preparation for, causes of, response to and recovery from the 2022 catastrophic flood event across the state of NSW.

In 2020, following the devastating bushfires across the State, the Advocate undertook an extensive piece of work to understand the experiences of children and young people in disaster. While this project commenced directly in response to the 2020 bushfires, the findings of the project speak to a broader context of children and young people's experience of disaster – including insights relating to preparation, response and recovery from natural disaster in many forms; from floods, droughts to bushfires.

The 2020 project led to the Advocate and members of the ACYP team going to disaster affected areas of NSW and speaking directly to more than 400 children and young people face-to-face about their experiences of disaster. This was followed up with quantitative polling of a further 1,000 children and young people, as a representative sample from across the State. In conjunction with this, the Advocate also engaged Deloitte Australia to undertake a desktop analysis of the effects of previous disasters and on children and young people.

The combined results of this research informed the development of the '[Children and Young People's Experience of Disaster Report](#)' (Disaster Report). This report gave children and young people a platform to inform decision makers and service providers about how to best continue to support their needs before, during and after a disaster. The report also highlights the ways in which children and

young people want to be included in the planning and implementation of solutions that relate to disaster preparedness and recovery as well as how to further support them now and into the future.

In this short submission we seek to draw the attention of the Inquiry to a number of key findings from the report which will mainly focus on disaster preparation, recovery and response. We have also attached a full copy of the Disaster Report for the Inquiry's information.

Mental Health Services & Mental Health

Disasters have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. The loss and damage to homes, assets, livelihoods, wildlife and the environment cause deep distress. Positive mental health enables children and young people to live full and creative lives and deal with life's challenges. The absence of appropriate social supports to develop and maintain positive mental health presents an additional risk factor for children and young people in times of disaster.

In ACYP's previous consultations, across all locations, children and young people discussed the impact of living through disasters on their mental health and wellbeing. Some talked about feelings of isolation due to being separated from friends and family and not being able to socialise.

As a result, children and young people often raised the need for mental health supports at the time of disasters. For some, it was as simple as the adults in their lives reassuring them that things will be okay:

"I would say reassurance. Reassuring them that everything's going to be okay."

Several groups reported that their schools had provided additional mental health supports during the disasters. These included extra school counsellors; opportunities to talk to each other in special assemblies; and also identifying children and young people most impacted by the disaster and offering them practical assistance and trauma support:

"When we did go back to school we had a big talk about it...we had a big assembly...we all went round saying what happened and if our house got damaged or anything. And if we wanted to say anything or not."

A protective factor that children and young people identified as important was schools and teachers who focused on welfare and wellbeing of students. This provided them with a sense of safety during a disaster, which led to them feeling supported. However, participants in our consultations also reported wanting supports to be available constantly during disaster situations rather than having set times.

"So more [support] people while it's happening. Not just after it's happened. Probably where you could go all the time. Not just certain hours."

Children and young people also identified that a lack of supports in some schools had the potential to lead to a loss of opportunity for children and young people to access mental health supports, which intensified mental health concerns during and post disaster.

When children and young people did speak positively about mental health supports that were available during the disasters; they typically discussed peer to peer support. Children and young people reported that they liked having the opportunity to discuss things with their peers that were going through the same situation; as opposed to discussing their feelings with an adult stranger:

“I’ve tried 17 different counsellors and nothing was helping me, I went to Youth Insearch and I don’t know what it was but the peer-to-peer conversations that we have there is what made a lot of us more...”

Children and young people saw the value in speaking with peers that had gone through the same experiences as them and also wanted to know what to do to help their friends if needed:

“Talk to other people about what you experienced and try to find someone that has already experienced something like that and just tell them how you feel.”

Other groups of children and young people that did not have similar support groups available in their areas reported they would have liked to have this option:

“I think there should be a service by kids for kids.”

In our consultations, it was widely agreed that mental health support needs to be provided to children and young people long after a disaster has ended. Children and young people expressed that the trauma still continues without the disaster being active:

“Emotional support...even the impact afterwards. People are still stressed about it today. There’s still a large impact on them.”

Children and young people were very clear that mental health supports should be available free of charge after a disaster event. Some suggested that all children and young people that have experienced a disaster should attend a mental health session to normalise the process of everyone:

“Free counselling sessions or everyone goes to a session so no one feels left out or embarrassed.”

Linked to the idea of normalising help-seeking, some children and young people suggested that there should be awareness campaigns after a disaster to make getting help seem “normal”. Others thought that services could proactively check-in with children and young people to see how they are feeling:

“Groups or facilities catering specifically for checking on the wellbeing of young people.”

Some groups of children and young people spoke very positively about mental health support services that they had come into contact with post-disaster events. They reported that mental health services such as headspace had received additional funding to provide outreach clinical support to young people in disaster affected towns;

“It was also helpful to talk to someone that had experienced something scary to know how to react or know how they felt.”

In our previous research, children and young people were asked to create a model of what mental health services may look like for them. For them, mental health needed to be provided immediately following a disaster to both equip young people with training to help their peers but also to provide them with a channel of communication to ensure their feelings of isolation can be minimised.

Children and young people said this service should be provided by recognised mental health providers and organisations. It should be available in both larger groups at evacuation or community centres or smaller groups or individual counselling for those that preferred that method of support. Providing both these methods would allow the counsellor and recipient to build rapport and trust. This service should continue for an agreed upon time between both parties and could potential involve checking in with the recipient at intervals in the future.

The benefit of this service would allow young people to learn and grow from what they have experienced, develop techniques to overcome grief, build resilience and support their peers. In the longer term, this service could also lead to decreased rates of depression and anxiety.

Provision of timely and accurate information

Linked to the provision of mental health supports during and post a disaster to reduce the anxiety felt by children and young people was the provision of continuing and accurate information.

Children and young people reported that the provision of information in the lead up to the disaster helped to reduce anxiety and reassure people:

Many spoke favourably about the various channels through which they had accessed information. These included all forms of media: social media; television and radio news and newspapers; text messages; the Bureau of Meteorology website, the Floods Near Me App as well as face to face community meetings:

“Community gatherings and seminars, we had the authorities coming in telling people what they need to do to prepare their house, what you should be preparing for.”

Other children and young people felt that the provision of information prior to disasters reaching their communities could have been more accurate and up to date. Sometimes this was attributed to technological issues when information was being accessed digitally. This was especially relevant for young people living in more remote areas:

“The App was not always accurate...it wasn't always correct. It wasn't updated for a couple of hours.”

Some young people raised the importance of being able to access accurate and current information particularly for those young people that live on their own. Mostly they agreed that social media or an App just for young people was the best way for them to receive this information.

Other young people said they would have preferred more face to face meetings in the lead up to the disaster. Those that had experienced these reported finding community leaders very helpful in keeping people informed and maintaining a sense of calm:

“More meetings with like, ‘This is what we expect to happen’, maybe having, ‘this is what you can do if you have to stay at home or you’re caught out in it’.”

Schools repurposed as evacuation centres

Within our consultations, schools were identified as appropriate evacuations centres because they were a familiar environment for many children and young people with familiar personnel and many were already resourced with activities for children and young people.

Children and young people had several recommendations that were specific to evacuation centres that were accessed during the most recent flood disasters, which schools were uniquely positioned to meet. These were around the need for evacuation centres to be safe and child and youth friendly; supervision and support for children and young people in evacuation centres and the physical comfort provided in the centres.

Children and young people reported that the idea of having to leave your home and stay in a centre with many other people is quite daunting, thus providing a familiar environment and personnel was important:

“I can imagine that it can be quite scary for young kids and young people. I’ve never been to one of those centres. I hope I don’t have to.”

As a result, they discussed the need for evacuation centres to be child and youth friendly. This included having activities to keep occupied; making supports available; physical comforts and being able to keep pets with families in the centres. There was also discussion around the need for more psychological support to be accessible in the centres as people often entered evacuation centres in shock and distressed:

“I think it would be nice if...they had a centre or something, like a building where you could just go if you had to be evacuated...and there be a whole bunch of activities, yoga mats and things that you could do; and talk to people as well about how you feel.”

In some locations, children and young people also discussed the need for more evacuation centres to be available. These children and young people described situations where the centres were filling up quickly and people were panicking that they would have nowhere to stay.

When visiting the Northern Rivers in March 2022 the Advocate visited both the evacuation centre and the recovery centre. When speaking to a young person who had been in the evacuation centre they shared that they had wanted to be able to support other people in the centre and connect with their community, but also noted that as a young person (under the age of 18) they spent approximately 7 days in the centre without access to housing. They also did not feel there was adequate support for them as an individual (not part of a family unit) in the evacuation centre.

Educate Children and Young People about Disaster

In our consultations, many children and young people discussed the need to learn about different disasters and what to do in disaster situations. They agreed that school was an ideal setting for this to occur. Children and young people reported that this education would not only assist them with knowing what they should do; it would also help them remain calm when faced with a disaster situation:

“They could just educate them. So it’s not so scary. You just know how bad it can be and what to do.”

Children and young people spoke about wanting both practical knowledge about how to respond in an emergency as well as a deeper knowledge about how disasters occur:

Provide Greater Schools Supports during and post disaster

Some consultation groups reported wanting their schools to be more supportive during disasters. Specific things mentioned were: more assistance for the students impacted the most; providing regular mental health check-ins with students; and more understanding and leniency from teachers and compensation for HSC students, including lowering university entrance marks for young people that had suffered trauma during disaster.

Other children and young people expressed frustration at having to keep coming to school during disasters, either due to health hazards or because they were concerned about leaving their families:

“You always have the fact that while they’re at school, they also have no idea what’s happening back at home. What’s going to happen? Should I be there or not?”

Students that attended schools that had given students time off expressed appreciation for this:

“The school gave us the day out of school because school wasn’t the priority; the priority was about our safety.”

However, there were also senior high school students that underwent school closures and were upset that they had not been provided with an alternative given that they missed out on valuable learning time:

They could have made an online option for all the kids because there was a lots of kids all over Australia missing out on that very important time.”

These senior students felt significant school-related stress with disasters causing disruptions to schooling.

Also raised by children and young people was the need for Government to provide additional assistance for children and young people to continue their schooling after disaster events. This was especially the case for children and young people that had lost their homes and all their possessions:

“Helping those that lost housing and school stuff; providing free school items for those affected.”

When children and young people spoke positively about school support at the time of the disasters, they discussed finding it helpful when teachers provided students with relevant information and attempted to reassure students and calm them down.

Some children and young people also reported that school provided a place of normalcy. The routine and structure helped them to focus on life outside the crisis at the time.

Housing and Accommodation

In ACYP’s previous disaster consultations, children and young people frequently raised the importance of immediate practical assistance that had been provided to those most directly affected by disasters, including the provision of emergency accommodation to families.

However, not all children and young people reported experiencing this type of support. For example, some children and young people reported having nowhere fixed to stay during the disaster:

“So after the Monday we moved about three times that week. And then ended up moving about seven times throughout those holidays. To get a safe spot, a proper house you could stay in for a while.”

Young people living out of home rely on the affordability of the rental market. The quantity of low-cost, private rental accommodation reduces after a disaster, leaving young people particularly vulnerable.

In our quantitative research one of the areas of concern raised in response to the longer term impacts of disaster was loss of property and economic issues, which included financial stress, increased cost of essential items and housing affordability, whether this be their own property or short and medium term accommodation during and post recovery.

On the visit to the Northern Rivers in March 2022 the Advocate met with two young people in Ballina. They were currently sharing space with the young man’s father in a caravan in a park. The young women expressed that she did not feel safe, and that they had been trying to find accommodation where they could live together. At the time of writing this report the Advocate has been informed that the young woman has left Ballina and moved to Queensland where they could access housing, and they have started TAFE. These young people had been living independently in Lismore when the floods hit, albeit in a converted theatre that had rooms that had been leased to a variety of cohorts of people. Consideration must be given to young people (those under the age of 18) who are living independently in terms of how we support them into appropriate, stable housing.

In our consultations, children and young people spoke about issues relating to the delay in being able to access their homes or improve their living conditions through limited access to assistance such as insurance companies.

In our consultations, some children and young people reported that insurance companies were not providing sufficient support to families. They spoke about insurance companies making people wait eight days for insurance policies to come into effect. As a result, some children and young people

reported that their families' insurance claims were not being accepted or processed. Other young people raised the fact that insurance is not affordable for everyone:

“Some places, people didn't have insurance, some people couldn't afford it.”

Interpersonal Relationships

Disasters have significant impacts on family life and peer relationships, affecting the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

In our consultations, many children and young people reported wanting time with their families to reconnect. They discussed not having seen their parents and other family members for many weeks either due to family members volunteering, or being separated in different evacuation sites and homes:

“Just spending time with their family that they haven't seen...their dads were...some of them didn't see them for 50 days straight.”

Participants in our research, spoke about how observing stressors in their parents was leading to their own anxiety. They developed a model where mental health services pro-actively reached out to parents to reduce the burden young people placed on themselves having to support both their parent's mental health and their own.

This model would be conducted by qualified mental health practitioners and services contracted by Government to deliver free of charge mental health services. Given that there is no universal treatment for mental health, families would have to be contacted individually to seek their interest in the service and to develop a mental health plan. This plan would include frequency of check-ins with a baseline of weekly check in for 3 months following the disaster.

The benefit of a service such as this is that the mental health responsibility will be shared by family members and mental health professionals, decreasing burden on children and young people.

Within our consultations, children and young people also acknowledged that family can be a support network for them in times of disaster. For this to occur, they acknowledged that families need to be provided with information and opportunities to plan for and respond to disaster. There was widespread agreement across children and young people that families need to have disaster plans in place to know exactly what they are going to do in case a disaster hits. This included knowing how to protect their homes and properties; at what stage they would need to leave their homes; where they would go and what and how many of their belongings they would take with them:

Some children and young people suggested that disaster information packs should be prepared by Government and delivered to every household so that people can be prepared. They discussed that there should be online and hardcopy versions and that it should include what to do in different disaster situations; if you need to evacuate what documents to take with you and what clothes are important to pack:

“Things like information packs that you can get...if it gets dropped in every single mailbox or digitally then that way everyone’s got the information...what to prep if you aren’t in immediate danger. If you’re in immediate danger what to do.”

One group had the idea of creating another book in the “Dummies” series:

“A dumbed down version of everything. If there was like...You know those for dummies books?”

This group also identified the importance of any emergency information pack being accessible to all people:

“There should be options as well for culturally and linguistically diverse people...able to change the online version of the information. Able to change the language and stuff on it.”

Children and young people were particularly concerned about not wanting to lose things that were most valuable to them and their families. Having a disaster plan in place meant being able to save precious items.

While it was acknowledged that families do provide support to children and young people, in our consultations, there were children and young people that felt the adults in their lives could have been more supportive and provided them with the reassurance they were seeking:

“During such a big event I think children needed a lot more support than they were getting, because adults were just freaking out about what was going on and they weren’t listening. And they were more frantic, and their kids were clearly upset and stressed.”

In addition to support in the form of reassurance, children and young people also wanted adults to support them by giving them accurate information in a calm manner:

“I think having someone there that you can talk to...and tell you the proper thing, but without the panicked view of it.”

In ACYP consultations, children and young people made it clear that during and after a disaster the Government needed to prioritise ensuring the support networks around a young person, including their family and peers had adequate support.

Across all locations, children and young people discussed the enormous stress they experienced during the various disaster situations. Some reported seeing their parents, teachers and neighbours panicking; which heightened their own anxiety:

“It would have been helpful if people weren’t screaming as much in my street.”

It is therefore not surprising that children and young people spoke of a wide variety of supports that were helpful to them during the disasters or that they would have liked to have available to them. Children and young people expressed gratitude for support they had received from a wide range of

people including their parents and wider family; friends; volunteers; rescue services; celebrities and the world in general:

“Parents were probably the most useful source.”

Community Cohesion and Community Recovery

Disasters impact the ability of communities to come together to participate in arts, sports, culture and community events and diminishes community cohesion, potentially leading to collective trauma.

The desire for activities and things to do during disaster situations was widely discussed among groups of children and young people. The availability of activities was said to serve several purposes; including providing a distraction from the disaster; relieving boredom and promoting community togetherness.

Some other ideas for activities put forward by children and young people were that youth groups could take children away for a while; using local youth centres as a place for young people have a break or time out; and holding more community events and fundraisers.

Community cohesion, including family, friends and the wider community, was identified as a protector factor by children and young people. This assisted them with the provision of supports during and disaster and in the recovery and rebuilding of community. A lack of community cohesion not only provides a lack of support but it also leads children and young people do not feel communities can work together to tackle the crisis.

The negative impact on children and young people of these back to back disasters with no opportunity for community healing cannot be underestimated. Providing access to sports and recreational activities is important for children and young people during and post disaster because it can act as a distraction, lead to greater connection with peers and reduce social isolation.

Children and young people spoke about simply wanting to have fun after the disasters had passed. The arranging of community events and activities that bring people together to support each other in informal ways was seen by young people as vital to improving the sense of wellbeing and resilience in the community:

“A concert, like a disaster aid or whatever...when kids are down, some kids don’t speak. Because they don’t really want to. So maybe if they want to go and have a good time and listen to music. Some arts and crafts. Just spend time with friends.”

Children and young people also reported wanting similar events and activity days at their schools as a way to support each other and restore a sense of normalcy.

Children and young people said that they wanted to focus of community events to be on strength and resilience, not just about victims. One group of children and young people suggested a local public holiday when people did not have to go to work or school. The purpose was to acknowledge how stressful the experience had been and how hard everyone had to work without having a break. They suggested that community events could be held in the holidays.

Innovative solutions and investment must be undertaken by the Government, business and community sector in recovery to restore loss of arts and sporting events alongside social cultural and community events. These avenues of play, connection and expression are critical for the recovery of children and young people after and during prolonged disaster. In designing and implementing these solutions that sector should look at appointing a youth development office or the like, to engage children and young people in the programs. These may include, local festivals and events, school holiday programs, such as PCYC “Fit for Life” program that was rolled out in Mogo and community art spaces.

In our consultations, communities were seen as an important support network for children and young people during and post disaster.

Across almost all locations, children and young people discussed the way communities came together to provide unconditional support to each other:

“It’s just that sense of community...I know it’s really bad here, when we have all these natural disasters, but at the same time you can also see the community coming together.”

Unfortunately in more isolated communities, some young people felt that they were not afforded the support they would have liked from nearby towns:

“It was like one town was struggling and the other town was like ‘That’s not us so we don’t have to worry about it’.”

Children and young people in communities that were struggling were much more likely to speak about pre-existing challenges which they felt compounded their experiences of the disasters. They described the vulnerabilities in their communities that were exposed and amplified as a result of the disaster. Some children and young people spoke about the impact of multiple, sustained disasters on the overall resilience and capacity for their communities to bounce back.

Children and young people in these communities discussed the aspects of social exclusion they already experienced and their fears about being left further behind as their community tackled the impact of the disasters. They expressed a clear view that for recovery efforts to have long term success, these broader systemic issues within in their communities need to be addressed:

“More needs to be done for the communities that suffer every year to make ends meet and continue to be ignored. It’s not fair and it’s not right.”

Another community aspect that emerged in our consultations was the lack of communication between residents of the community and evacuation personnel in terms of what was going on during evacuation. Participants voiced a need for social cohesion in disaster response to ensure that everyone is working together.

The group emphasised that it was critical post disaster to have phone access to a real human with live disaster information. This was to ensure consistent information dissemination within the community. The model that participants decided on 24/7 advice and direction post disaster helpline.

Within this model, the Government could contract an organisation run the live chat or hotline service. Alternatively, all the information and resources could be placed on a specific landing page for children and young people on Service NSW. This service could integrate with geolocation tagging on a mobile device to allow coordinators to provide personal and accurate directions.

A service like this would empower children, young people, families and community to make informed decision in disaster situations.

Children and young people also discussed wanting recovery and rebuilding efforts to be led by communities themselves, rather than directed by centralised part of government located in the metropolitan area. They were clear that individual communities knew what would work best for their members and should be allowed to develop their own solutions:

“The community, government and individuals working together to help each other.”

For some children and young people, it was important to raise their own money to do their bit for their community:

“My mum and me made cakes and we went to...Tamworth...and we took our cakes with us and we started selling them. We were raising money and we got \$365 and we gave it to charity.”

Linked to the desire for community control over recovery and rebuilding, there were children and young people that expressed frustration at the length of time it was taking government to allow communities to clean up after the floods. Young people spoke about not being permitted to clean up their properties until the correct clean up bins were delivered. Others reported waiting months for necessary equipment to be delivered:

“My pop, he requested some equipment and it was eight weeks before you got an answer, and even then he didn’t get it, so maybe just more availability.”

Another aspect of community control during and post disasters raised by children and young people was ensuring communities had enough emergency supplies to be prepared for disasters. Some discussed running out of food, water and fuel:

“We ran out of diesel and no one could use their cars for several weeks...store fuel I guess for disasters.”

Children and young people stressed the importance of communities and Government taking time to learn from the disaster experience and putting things in place to prevent similar disasters from occurring in the future:

“They [Government] can help and reflect on the events that just occurred the rundown of the process and reflection on how we can be better prepared.”

Children and young people reported wanting time for them and their communities to process the traumas experienced. Some felt that the experience of back to back disasters had prevented them from being able to do this:

“I think the floods decimated the community ... we just hit rock bottom and haven't recovered yet.”

Another aspect of community recovery that was raised by children and young people was the role the media could play in raising the profile of communities affected by the disaster.

In some locations, children and young people discussed the need for the media to raise the profile of their communities in disaster. They felt that people living in Sydney, in particular, did not have an understanding of how dire the situation is for many living in rural areas during disaster events. This conversation highlights the sentiment that young people in rural NSW often feel less important than those in city areas:

“Just once again, we get little to no recognition of our area.”

Having a Voice

Many children and young people reported feeling unheard and not having opportunities to participate in disaster management and response.

In our consultations, many children and young people reported that their ideas were typically disregarded simply due to their age:

“The Government needs to know that we have views and emotions too. And we know how to speak too. And we should be recognised as human beings as well.”

The desire to have their views, ideas and concerns heard by adults was repeatedly raised by children and young people across all locations. It was clear from group discussions that children and young people had their own ideas with regards to disaster prevention and what they wanted in order to feel prepared for a disaster; although felt that Government and others do not give them opportunities to voice these:

“I think children have more passionate...and fresh ideas.”

Some children and young people were involved in youth-driven projects and spoke very positively about these. For example, one group discussed their involvement in sustainability initiatives at their school that was being run by students as a way of addressing the broader issue of climate change.

It was very clear from the group discussions that children and young people were not only asking for their own voices to be heard. Rather, they wanted Government and other decision-makers to be listening to their entire communities with regards to the best action to take to prevent a disaster or to be prepared. Their conversations were very much around what was best for their community as a whole, not just for children and young people:

“We could use our skills together, their skills of business and how things operate and we have the knowledge of the younger generation’s opinions and voice.”

Children and young people were very clear that they wanted opportunities to voice their ideas and concerns in the aftermath of a disaster. In particular, they reported that the Government should talk to and hear the advice of children and young people that have experienced disaster events firsthand. This included being able to sit and talk about what happened and what will work for them moving forward:

“Let young people do the planning for helping other young people.”

Children and young people also discussed wanting to be involved in the recovery and rebuilding of their communities. Some had ideas for community redesign:

“Something that would make it look like the disaster was never there. Beautifying it.”

Once again, children and young people also demonstrated that they think about their whole communities by recommending that Government provides opportunities to hear from all local people, especially the older generation as they have lived through similar disaster events in the past and have a great deal of knowledge about what to do.

Children and young people highlighted the lack of volunteering opportunities available to them during disaster events. It was clearly evident from their conversations that they would really like to be able to help out their own or other communities in need to lessen their sense of helplessness or anxiety:

“People always want to feel needed, right? So, actually letting people know what they can do to help.”

Children and young people also suggested some other ways that they could volunteer and help out those in need:

“In your local community, if these families need help...they give you a list, you do the shopping and you give it to them.”

In our consultations, children and young people spoke about the importance of having opportunities to share their stories with peers and the broader community. Creating these mechanisms either through Youth Liaison Officers within local government or platforms utilising technology such as Facebook Live are easy but effective ways to ensure the voice of children of young people is heard.

Alternatively, organisations with the relevant skills and experience to safety and meaningfully engage with children and young people post disaster events, should be funded to carry out this task as a regular aspect of disaster recovery.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that children and young people are especially vulnerable and can be greatly impacted by disaster events. Children and young people's experience of disaster can be vastly different to those of adults. These differing experiences mean that children and young people can have exceptionally innovative ideas in regards to disaster prevention, preparation and recovery.

Children and young people have called for more targeted and tailored mental health intervention, not only for themselves but also their families to address the significant mental health impacts disaster can have. Within the education sphere, children and young people have called for greater education around disaster and integrated mental health supports in schools.

In regards to housing, children and young people have called for greater support to ensure adequate housing following disaster, either in their own property or short-term accommodation.

Children and young people have made it clear that community is incredibly important to their sense of identity and resilience. Disaster recovery must ensure that it prioritise children and young people inclusion in community rebuild and events which foster community cohesion and participation for all.

Most importantly for children and young people is that they are given an opportunity and a platform to have a voice. Children and young people have reported that they feel invisible, forgotten, helpless and unable to influence the world around them in disaster.

This can have detrimental impacts for individual children and young people, and also fails to realise the full potential and contribution they can make to enhance our understanding of disaster. All disaster responses must create platforms for children and young people to share their stories and experiences and to participate in disaster recovery. Children and young people should be supported to do this.

ACYP thanks the Inquiry again for the opportunity to contribute to this important work. Should the Inquiry require anything further, we would be happy to assist. ACYP can be contacted via: acyp@acyp.nsw.gov.au or (02) 9248 0970.

Children and Young People's Experience of Disaster Report 2020 by ACYP

In recent times NSW has experienced prolonged drought, an unprecedented bushfire season and floods. These disasters have directly or indirectly impacted hundreds of thousands of children and young people across NSW.

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) went to disaster affected areas of NSW and spoke directly to more than 400 children and young people face-to-face about their experiences of disaster. This was followed up with quantitative polling of a further 1,000 children and young people.

The combined results of this research informed the development of the ***Children and Young People's Experience of Disaster Report***.

This report gave children and young people a platform to inform decision makers and service providers about how to best continue to support their needs before, during and after a disaster. The report also highlights the ways in which children and young people want to be included in the planning and implementation of solutions that relate to disaster preparedness and recovery as well as how to further support them now and into the future.

Underpinning this is the development of a Disaster Resilience Framework for children and young people.

Some of the key findings in the report include:

- disasters and the life changes that follow have significant impacts on **mental health and wellbeing**
- the destruction and damage caused to **schools** affects access to education, engagement, learning and academic achievement
- disasters can impact the **housing** stability of children and young people including damage to homes and farms as well as displacement and relocation
- disasters can create **youth unemployment** and heavy workloads for children and young people affected by drought and other social and economic issues
- children and young people can feel invisible, forgotten and unable to influence the world around them, they wish to have a **voice** and be involved in disaster recovery
- **connection to land and community** were raised as important concerns.

The 10 recommendation topics in the report:

1. Voice
2. Mental health
3. Practical and financial assistance
4. Evacuation centres
5. Education
6. Access to infrastructure
7. Community recovery
8. Raising awareness
9. Disaster preparedness and information provision
10. Activities and programs for children and young people