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Better Futures Review  
Youth Policy and Programs  
Office of Communities  
GPO Box 7060  
Sydney NSW 2001

via email

Monday, 29 August 2011

## **Submission to the comprehensive review: The future direction of the Better Futures Program**

### **Introduction:**

- I. YAPA is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. For the purposes of our work, we define "young people" as between the ages 12-25 years in line with the *Youth Advisory Council Act 1989 NSW*, and similar to the original definition of young people contained in the July 2001 Better Futures Framework (For further discussion, refer to paragraph 3.1, below).
- II. YAPA is pleased to contribute to this consultation process as the recognised peak representative for young people and youth services in NSW. Both of our membership groups have a high stake in the outcomes of this review, and we are pleased to provide a perspective that encompasses much of what young people and the services that support them provide as feedback to YAPA for the purposes of our work.
- III. Furthermore, YAPA is pleased that this consultation has been undertaken to be consistent with the goals, principles and techniques for consultation developed by the International Association for Public Participation, as

suggested to the Minister by YAPA in discussions around framing more effective youth participation. The IAP2 framework draws parallels to similar frameworks in the field of youth participation, such as Hart's Ladder of Participation. We look forward to seeing how contributions from young people, youth services and the wider community ultimately affect the outcome of this review.

- IV. YAPA welcomes the articulation of principles contained in the NSW Government's Social Policy Framework, "Smarter, Stronger, Healthier, Safer" (SSHS) as the framework within which the Better Futures will align. In particular, the primary importance of prevention and early intervention in SSHS cannot be understated. However, it is important to note that both concepts of "prevention" and "early intervention" only have meaning in context. That is:
  - a. an approach can only be seen as preventative with reference to the unwanted outcome it is attempting to prevent; and
  - b. an intervention is only "early" when compared to other possible interventions at later stages in the lifetime of the issue that is to be addressed, where most often this latter intervention is after undesirable activities and circumstances are more entrenched.
- V. Furthermore, the SSHS principles of valuing local decision-making whilst committing to openness, transparency and accountability, promising to deliver the highest quality and equitable services to all, and the rights of individuals to make informed choices and accept responsibility, have all framed our discussion of Better Futures below. For the last principle, we interpret "individuals" as referring to the client group and therefore we see this as an articulation of the importance of young people having some understanding and ownership over the programs delivered to them. This is further discussed in response to Question 2 in the discussion paper.
- VI. The Better Futures funding program is highly regarded by the youth sector for its stated purpose to support vulnerable young people. However, it is the opinion of YAPA that the program has never reached its potential and

significantly derogated from the initial intent of the program as outlined in the 2001 “action framework for vulnerable young people in NSW”.

- VII. The content of the submission below is informed by YAPA’s ongoing discussions with the youth sector and young people on issues of importance to them, feedback specifically on Better Futures at two key fora co-hosted by YAPA during this consultation process, and findings from the soon to be launched “*Youth Work Snapshot 2011: YAPA Survey of Youth Services & Workers in NSW*”<sup>1</sup> (hereinafter the “YAPA Survey”).

## 1. Better Futures funding priorities

- a. *Should Better Futures funding continue to focus on the broad policy area of vulnerable young people or on specific issues and/or opportunities? These could include education, employment, juvenile offending, homelessness, self-harming behaviour, domestic violence, sexual assault, or substance abuse?*
- b. *If Better Futures funding focuses on a specific issue or issues, should this be for a fixed period of time?*

- 1.1. As noted in the discussion paper, Better Futures was launched in July 2001 as an “action framework for vulnerable young people in NSW” in response to needs identified for this target group after the NSW Drug Summit. It is important that Better Futures remains focussed on the needs of vulnerable young people, even though YAPA suggests that wherever possible strength-based approaches should be encouraged. Even our most vulnerable young people have strengths that can be built upon, and the Better Futures procurement process should ensure that funding is allocated to such projects whenever appropriate to the circumstances that young people present with.
- 1.2. It should be noted at the outset that vulnerable young people do not present to services with single issues, and service providers continuously work to ensure their services are able to address the many and varied needs of the young people that access their support. Therefore limiting the focus of funding to "priority issues" may be

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Non-residential generalist youth services were targeted from YAPA’s networks to take part in these surveys. This comprised a Youth Worker Survey with 564 total respondents and a Youth Services Survey with 254 services as respondents. Most questions were optional and therefore the number of respondents per question is noted wherever possible.

counterproductive and prevent service addressing specific needs presented by their vulnerable clients, who are in most need of Better Futures support.

- 1.3. Whilst Better Futures is a relatively small funding program in government terms, from the perspective of the youth services sector this \$3.1 million represents a significant proportion of untied money available for general youth programs in NSW. It is also more holistic and youth-appropriate in scope than other federal and state government funding sources for youth programs (such as those programs noted in the “Scope” section of the discussion paper). Considering the issues of vulnerable young people are often more complex than educational disengagement, entering and re-entering the juvenile justice system, keeping out of the statutory care system, etc., the ability of programs to provide holistic service delivery should be maintained wherever possible, including in Better Futures. The flexibility allowed by Better Futures and the length of time allowed for services to establish themselves in communities and create trust and rapport with target groups is also a factor that allows Better Futures to punch above its weight with a relatively small amount of money.
- 1.4. More broadly, feedback from the youth sector highlights that inadequate funding and tight rules relating to many funding sources means that the sector is not able to be flexible enough in its delivery of services to meet the multiple and complex needs that exist for young people. As one worker noted in the YAPA Survey:

*“Young people do not fit onto the boxes most governments expect.  
The services need to be more flexible”*

It is suggested that more funding programs should be able to accommodate this, and that Better Futures should be used as a model for flexibility in social service procurement.

- 1.5. Also, feedback to YAPA shows that services and projects are able to create real value in small amounts of money. This may also be shown

by many of the projects funded for small amounts through Better Futures.

1.6. Indeed, YAPA's own small grants program providing up to \$5,500 for youth-led, community based projects under the Youth Participation Grants Program showed how meaningful work could be done utilising small amounts of Better Futures funding per project. Similarly, there are services funded with small amounts of Better Futures funding that are able to address niche concerns in their local area, and the Better Futures enhancement program targeting high school aged young people with one-off grants for projects capped at \$50,000 indicated there are a number of programs that could be successfully implemented with smaller amounts of money. Better Futures should continue to have a level of flexibility in the amounts of funding made available to services.

1.7. Turning to the issue of timeframes, according to many workers contributing to the YAPA Survey, the lack of core funding for services and a tendency for project funding to be short-term creates a lot of insecurity, instability, inconsistency and duplication throughout the youth sector. It also does not enable services to become well known in the community and to establish stable, consistent and trusting relationships with young people:

*“The added stress and pressure in regards to the funding is constantly hindering the ability of agencies to plan ahead and lock in services. This in turn means we are not able to assure young people that we will be there for them long term if they let us into their lives to help. How unfair is that to those that are already marginalised?”*

1.8. Services also take time to develop the most appropriate model of service delivery within a given community context, as well as to develop rapport with groups of young people and the community at large. This allows them to deliver more effective services over time. Limiting the amount of time that a service would be able to focus on a particular issues in a given location might therefore be

counterproductive and YAPA suggests such limitations should not form part of the new Better Futures program.

- 1.9. It may be a simple observation, but many funding programs appear to be designed in a fashion that is ignorant of the reality that young people grow up. Therefore addressing an issue with a particular cohort of young people will not solve the issue for all young people in the area, and a different cohort presenting with the same issues may need the same service. Time limits on funding programs often create unnecessary barriers for services providing support to a new cohort, using the programs and staff skills that have proven effective with the most recent cohorts.
- 1.10. In relation to issues identified for possible work, YAPA wishes to note that whilst the discussion paper is correct that we have identified the issue of access for young people to a licence due to the 120 hour supervised driving requirement as a major policy issue, we do not by any means believe that Better Futures should focus on an issue such as providing funds to access motor vehicles, as this is not the highest order issue that we have identified on behalf of vulnerable young people. The real need for change in roads policy that we have advocated for is a reduction in the 120 hours requirement itself, not a costly program to overlay a policy failure of the previous government. The added benefit of this change is that it would cost the NSW Government virtually no money to implement and is not likely to result in a reduction in the safety of young drivers.
- 1.11. The YAPA Survey shows that of 191 services, 91.5% reported that ATSI youth use their service. Of 74 service respondents, the most common requests from ATSI youth that services were unable to meet most often concerned homelessness, brokerage and relief funds, criminal justice, alcohol and mental health respectively.
- 1.12. It is worth noting that young ATSI clients made up the largest pool of clients from the minority groups listed by those services responding to the YAPA Survey (n=191). Young people of CALD background

(n=109) and young people with a disability (n=119) made up the second and third largest groups of clients for the services who responded to these questions. Therefore, whilst largely generalist and universal in their eligibility criteria for access to services, a large proportion of services are already working towards addressing the needs of particularly vulnerable groups. YAPA wishes to note that support for these services in better addressing these needs could also be supported through training in cultural competency, and partnerships with Indigenous, CALD and disability focussed organisations, although this would go beyond the proposed brief for the Better Futures program.

- 1.13. Whether or not Better Futures is restricted to certain issues over a period of time or not, it is important that Better Futures does not duplicate work in areas where it would be more appropriate for larger sources of funding to be applied. A key example is in relation to education provision, which YAPA believes is one of the highest priority areas where vulnerable young people could use additional support within the mainstream system. Despite this, YAPA would not support education being the main priority of Better Futures considering other possible sources of support for vulnerable students that exist within the existing education budget (e.g. expansions of Links to Learning and the Priority Schools Program) or through philanthropy (e.g. NAB Schools First Program), etc.
- 1.14. In line with the principles of the NSW Government's Social Policy Framework, Better Futures should value local decision-making and community partnerships. In this instance, the best way to ensure this is to place a premium upon applications that demonstrate existing connections to the local community and current provision of services to young people in the areas in which the proposed project is to operate.
- 1.15. Whilst there is certainly some value in direction being provided by the Better Futures procurement process to services wishing to target

certain needs, there is often a disconnect between the experiences of services on the ground and their ability to stick to a centrally concocted funding mandate. If Better Futures is to be a viable funding source for smaller towns in rural, regional and remote NSW, a restrictive, issues-focussed funding model is not an option. Where a service provides the only support to young people in a particular geographic area, its ability to silo its work in line with funding requirements is often trumped by the fact that no other organisations exist to fill the significant gaps in service provision that local young people face. In these circumstances, flexibility is key.

- 1.16. Maintaining a broad and flexible approach also gives better opportunities to address involve the views of young people to take some responsibility in planning to address their own needs and the needs of their peers. This might be very difficult if the priorities were set centrally and thus without being informed in each instance by the views of local young people.

## **2. Youth engagement**

- a. *What is the best way of ensuring that Better Futures funding applicants genuinely involve young people in the planning and delivery of a Better Futures project?*
- b. *What are the best ways of ensuring the ongoing involvement of young people in projects funded through the Better Futures program?*

- 2.1. It is YAPA's observation that our ability to know whether effective youth participation in service design and delivery by both government and non-government agencies in receipt of Better Futures funding has been difficult to ascertain in the past, particularly where the program was administered regionally by government officials. YAPA does not have a hard and fast solution to this issue to suggest, as the issues with this in the past are complex, multi-layered and rely upon transparency from the government that has not always existed within Better Futures funding processes. However, accountability of Better Futures funding recipients in demonstrating youth participation in a

meaningful way needs to remain at the core of the program into the future.

- 2.2. As mentioned at paragraph 1.16 of this submission, real involvement of young people requires the opportunity for real decision-making to be made at the local level based on young people's input. Therefore, it would be counterproductive for a funding program that supports real participation by young people to be restricted by decisions made centrally and therefore without the input from local young people identifying local priorities and their solutions.
- 2.3. In order to allow for effective youth participation, the funding allocation process should also ensure that different types of evidence are valued, including evidence sourced directly from service users that may not have the rigour of academia applied to it and not peer reviewed. Whilst YAPA values and relies upon the slowly expanding library of peer reviewed academic evidence available on effective youth service provision, and indeed works to contribute to it, there is a great deal of knowledge within services across NSW about good youth work practice. However, this knowledge base is often devalued in decision-making circles. It is YAPA's view that in lieu of academic research in youth work (when compared to other social service sectors) that due consideration should be given to this kind of evidence in any funding process. By placing clear value on client surveys and other practice based data, youth participation is more likely to become a natural part of the service design and delivery process.
- 2.4. Some service providers are unclear on the type of youth participation that they could and should engage in with their client groups, and this should not preclude good services proposing quality programs for young people simply because they are unclear on the expectations on youth participation included in funding requirements. Funding guidelines should help facilitate the skills and understanding of services in delivering youth engagement in service design and delivery, by highlighting various options such as action research and

being clear on the types of youth engagement and participation that would be appropriate for working with different client groups, particularly where vulnerable young people are more difficult for workers to engage.

- 2.5. Issues relating to the most effective participation of young people in youth service design and delivery has been a hot topic for the sector over a number of decades. The YAPA Survey indicates that a number of services have faced the challenges of engaging their often challenging clients in this work, with 37.1% of 70 services having young people involved in project steering committees and advisory groups, 30.0% of 70 services having young people involved in social action and advocacy groups (peer education or research (28.6%), and on management committees or boards (18.6%) and one service reporting that they engage young people on interview panels for new workers. This indicates that these types of activities involving real and direct youth participation are possible at the service level and should be encouraged by Better Futures.
- 2.6. Funding could also be made available under Better Futures for direct youth participation projects with a focus on engaging vulnerable young people wherever possible, as with the YAPA Youth Participation Grants Program (YPGP), or a hybrid version of the YPGP and the Aboriginal Youth Leadership Project previously administered through the youth affairs team in Community Services. Services could also be encouraged to act as an intermediary between young people and accessing Better Futures funding, with a small stream of funding for vulnerable youth participation and leadership to be made available.

### 3. Target age group

- a. *Should the Better Futures program target specific age groups? If so, what age group(s) should be targeted and why?*
- b. *Should the \$3million available in the Better Futures budget be notionally divided between various age groups - say 9-12 years, 13-15 years and 16-18 years?*

- 3.1. YAPA continues to focus its work on the varied needs of young people aged 12-25 years. This is broadly in line with the legislative definition of young people under the NSW Youth Advisory Council Act 1989 NSW. YAPA members include a number of services working with particularly marginalised and vulnerable young people in the 18-25 age bracket, including many young people that would otherwise be engaged in the youth homelessness service system. For many of these young adults, the opportunities that might be afforded to other young people before they turn 18 years have not been afforded to them due to family and community dysfunction. YAPA believes it was for this reason that the original definition for young people under the Better Futures framework as it was developed in response to the NSW Drug Summit was 12-25 years. This group of young people often fall through the cracks of other social support systems, including youth homelessness, out of home care and juvenile justice systems (of which, the latter two cut off completely at the age of 18 years). Furthermore, several responses to the YAPA Survey noted that this is a very difficult transition to adulthood, where expectations suddenly increase and social supports are often summarily removed.
- 3.2. Based on feedback from 74 services, the largest group of young people currently accessing non-residential youth services in NSW is the 15-17 year age group (41.6% or 18,493 clients) followed by the 9-14 year age group (26.9%). It would be a concern to YAPA if 41.6% of current services users were suddenly unable to access the benefits of Better Futures funding if the target age was made more restrictive.
- 3.3. However, YAPA does not believe with the current allocation of funding that an expansion of the age range is in the best interests of

government, the sector, or young people in the current age range. The target age range for the program as a whole should remain 9-18 years, with both procurement and accountability systems in place to ensure an even spread of service delivery across the ages, so long as this "notional" division does not prevent services that are appropriate across two or more of these notional groupings from being accommodated in the funding procurement process. Further discussions on the issue of funding for services for young adults aged 18-25 should be progressed (see Other comments "C.", below)

- 3.4. This is particularly important as feedback from YAPA members indicates that the administration of Better Futures by CS regional staff resulted in a skew of projects towards the younger end of the 9-18 age range, due to the focus of CS staff as lead decision-makers in funding allocation processes. YAPA welcomed the \$2million Better Futures enhancement package in financial year 2010/11, allowing grants of up to \$50,000 for projects targeting high school aged young people, as this served to address a significant gap in the delivery of the existing program. However, being a one-off funding allocation does not address the structural imbalances in funding available under Better Futures and notional allocations, if implemented correctly, could address this apparent skew of project funding allocations.
- 3.5. Indeed, statistics across markers of the wellbeing of young people show that there are a number of transition points throughout adolescence where intervention is required, and when these interventions are required do not necessarily link to the age of the young person in question (i.e. some young people "grow up" faster than others in many respects, particularly if their circumstances are not consistent with what we might hope to be a normal childhood and early adolescence).
- 3.6. There is a statistical spike in numbers of young people entering the out of home care system at the age of 14 years, which may be explained by the need for young people to test boundaries at this age. Whilst this

is accepted as a natural consequence of adolescent brain development, it nevertheless results in an increase in family conflict the further vulnerable young people enter into adolescence. As such, a focus on younger people in the 9-14 age group is likely to miss supporting young people going through this transition and beyond.

- 3.7. Whilst YAPA does not disagree with the view of the "The Missing Middle" report<sup>2</sup> that the 9-14 age group deserves consideration of additional sources and levels of funding, it would be highly inappropriate if the Better Futures mandate ceased to cover the full 9-18 age range.

#### **4. Administration and allocation**

- a. *Should Better Futures be a centrally administered grants-based funding program or should funds be allocated by regional staff of government agencies to address the issues they have identified in consultation with the youth sector, as local priorities?*
- b. *Are there other ways of managing the Better Futures budget to ensure that strategic priorities and issues are addressed?*

- 4.1. It has been an observation of YAPA that there continues to be a tension between the desire to provide new and innovative service to address existing and emerging needs versus the need to keep existing programs that are delivering positive outcomes going. This may include the reallocation of funding from existing services to other services in order to address an identified need (n.b. this is essentially one of the approaches alluded to in the text of Question 1, being a funding program targeted at specific issues for a fixed period of time. As stated in response to Question 1 above, YAPA supports a model for Better Futures funding allocation that allows flexible funding over longer periods to address broad needs of vulnerable young people). Funding allocation decisions should give due value to the ongoing connection to the community and client group that highly valued existing services would have built up over the duration of their service

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<sup>2</sup> NSW Parliament, Committee on Children and Young People "Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW: The Missing Middle" September 2009

provision. This recommendation does not suggest that the status quo should be maintained in all circumstances, nor that good services that exist in areas might not make way for significantly better ones that are most likely to deliver the best results for young people. However, funding models that place models that have been tried and tested under local conditions on equal pegging with models that only exist on paper fail to assess programs fairly. They also do not take into account the damage that can be done to young people and their communities when services are set up for limited periods of time, after which the local community must attempt to pick up the pieces or the service is allowed to fold, which often results in a reduction in the ability of the community and its young people to place their trust in services when similar services have been forced to abandon them.

- 4.2. This approach is also consistent with a result-based model that focussed on whether young people are actually better off from their interactions with services, rather than focussed on what a model on a funding application says it might be able to do. Due value needs to be given to existing programs that have been shown to be successful at delivering outcomes for young people and communities.
- 4.3. Based on YAPA's understanding of the current structures within the NSW Office for Communities, and the apparent inconsistencies and failures that resulted from CS regional allocation of Better Futures funding, YAPA does not believe allocation by regional bureaucracies are likely to deliver the best outcomes for young people. YAPA believes that local communities should be able to assist a central decision making process, whether through direct participation in decisions or by providing other information or advice for a consistent, centralised process to consider.
- 4.4. It is YAPA's observation that part of the problem with the disjointed history of Better Futures is due to its focus and administrative processes changing at the behest of each of the six former Ministers for Youth holding responsibility for it in the period from its inception to

the 2011 election. This comprehensive review should be used as a point to ensure that the program and its strategic directions are less susceptible to the whims of responsible ministers into the future.

- 4.5. Whilst YAPA supports all efforts to ensure that funding allocations are conducted with a great deal of transparency and processes ensure funding continues to go to areas where impact on young people is achieved, this needs to be counterbalanced with the issue that youth work jobs require a lot of unnecessary administration time, which smaller services find especially burdensome and inequitable.

*“[An improvement would include] less applying for funding to maintain our position and services to young people. It's crazy to think that as youth workers, we would have to chase funding to keep our jobs, instead of spending that time doing our jobs.”*

The consensus amongst those who mentioned this was that this could be reduced if funding periods were longer, there was a tendency towards core rather than project funding, organisations did not have to access multiple small grants and the sector-wide environment was not as competitive.

- 4.6. Concerns have also been raised by service providers involved in the funding application process conducted by the previous government in November 2010 – January 2011, that the funding process set the expectations of services too high, and that the number of services submitting project proposals during a very busy time of year, only to have been delayed by the previous minister, has wasted valuable time that could have been allocated by services to delivering outcomes for vulnerable young people. The number of services and the amount of funding that was sought should indicate that across the sector, a large amount of time and money has been wasted in this process. It is YAPA's view that the funding procurement process should ensure that services do not waste valuable time developing funding submissions that have little or no chance of being considered. A staged funding process, that gathers minimal information from services at the early

stage and additional information from services that pass an initial culling stage, could be the most prudent way to administer to program.

### **Other comments:**

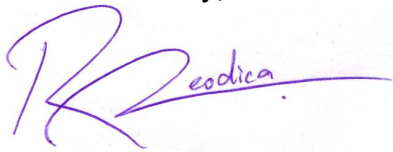
- A. Broad feedback from the sector as shown through the YAPA Survey is that they believe the government needs to inject a huge amount of funding into youth services. There are so many young people out there unable to access services, especially in regional Australia. This is basically because there are not enough services to access and the services that are available are understaffed when compared to the high and broad demands placed on them by local young people and communities and therefore cannot help those that really need it.
- B. As noted in the discussion paper, Better Futures is a relatively small funding program with a small annual budget when compared to other funding programs available to support young people. These include:
  - a. Department of Family & Community Services (Community Services) – Early Intervention and Placement Prevention (EIPP) and Community Builders (i.e. former Community Services Grants Program) funding.
  - b. Department of Education and Communities (Office of Education) – Links to Learning
  - c. Department of Attorney General and Justice (Juvenile Justice) – Juvenile Justice Community Funding program

Whilst the scope of this review is a discussion on the future direction of the Better Futures Program in NSW, there is a broader discussion that needs to occur with the NSW youth sector and NSW young people on the best way for the government to ensure its funding programs more generally reflect the feedback provided to this review and others like it. Youth workers dealing directly with the issues of vulnerable young people repeatedly state that the tendencies of governments to continue to focus on issues for young people in line with bureaucratic systems and

structures that deliver siloed simplicity for government but deliver piecemeal and limited outcomes for young people needs to be addressed.

- C. YAPA also believes that the parliamentary inquiry into young people aged 9-14 years, and the resulting report “The Missing Middle” provides a valuable insight into the issues of concern to young people in NSW, however a similar inquiry should occur into the needs of young people aged 15-18 as a matter of priority, and the needs of vulnerable young adults aged 18-25 years. It is recommended that each of these inquiries are referred to the two Standing Committees - on Children and Young People and on Social Issues, respectively.
- D. YAPA looks forward to continuing this discussion with the NSW Government, through the Minister for Citizenship and Communities. For further information, clarification, etc., please contact YAPA Chief Executive Reynato Reodica at [ce@yapa.org.au](mailto:ce@yapa.org.au) or on 02 9281 5522 ext 1.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'R' followed by the name 'Reodica' in a cursive script.

Reynato Reodica  
YAPA Chief Executive