

21 November 2023

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Lodged via Parliament of Australia website

Dear Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Re: Inquiry into the Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry into the Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Equity) Bill 2023.

headspace welcomes the introduction of this bill and considers that this provides an important opportunity to strengthen Australia's approach to supporting the health and wellbeing of children, young people and future generations. In preparing this submission, we sought the views of the headspace Youth National Reference Group (hY NRG).

About headspace

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. headspace has 154 centres across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas, and offers online and phone support services and digital resources through eheadspace.

headspace provides resources for young people and their families to help create an understanding of anxiety as a result of climate change (referred to as eco-anxiety and climate anxiety in the broader media), to build resilience and coping strategies, and to help family and friends understand their role in supporting young people to manage the impacts of anxiety. These resources include:

- [Understanding anxiety about climate change](#) – this resource provides actions young people can take to help cope with anxiety about climate change, people they can turn to for support, and ways to contribute to helping the environment.
- [Supporting your young person experiencing anxiety about climate change](#) – this provides practical advice on how to support young people to understand their experiences and find ways to manage the impacts of anxiety and build resilience.

Where a young person's concerns about the impact of climate change are interfering with their every-day life, headspace provides support via both in-person (centre based) and online (eheadspace) programs. We also provide support for young people following extreme weather events, and have expertise in helping young people and their families respond to bushfires, floods and other natural disasters.

Climate change is impacting on the mental health and wellbeing of young people

As the climate changes, we are likely to see higher incidence of anxiety, depression, ecological grief and loss, and wider social impacts, due to both natural disasters and slower environmental changes.¹

¹ Cunsolo, A., Aylward, B., & Harper, S. (2022) Rapidly increasing climate change poses a rising threat to mental health, says IPCC. *The Conversation*, 1 March.

The impacts of natural disasters will be particularly acute for First Nations young people, given their unique connection to Country.²

We already see an impact on the mental health of young people. Many people are worried about climate change and its effects on the planet, the community and their lives. Concern can lead to feelings of hopelessness about the future, helplessness that there is nothing that can be done, guilt about not doing enough, and anger that governments or the community are not doing enough.

Climate change is a constant source of anxiety for me and many young people, as we feel powerless to affect real change when those in positions of power don't listen to us when making decisions that affect our future. There is a deep sense of guilt: guilt that we should be doing more and guilt that what we are already doing isn't enough. I feel hopeless. Disempowered. Angry. Tired. Overwhelmed. To hold onto hope only to be slapped in the face repeatedly is just exhausting. Our changing climate is always on my mind and close to my heart.

I think about climate change as I drive alone to work, knowing that I am contributing to the consumption of finite resources like fuel and emitting greenhouse gases into our fragile world.

I think about climate change every time I use a tap, water my garden or take a shower because I know we are going into a season of drought and water is a precious resource that shouldn't be wasted.

I think about climate change when I wake up to a thick smoke haze filling my lungs, my chest tightening at the thought of the young people I work with having to evacuate their homes due to the threat of out-of-control bushfires.

I think about climate change when I imagine my future children, as I hope that the home I have chosen is safe from threat and that my children don't resent me for bringing them into a world of uncertainty.

I think about climate change every time it rains and the "what if." What if it floods? Am I prepared? Am I safe? Are my loved ones safe? Am I ready to endure the gut-wrenching pain of my community again?

Climate change is a permanent lump in my throat; a perpetual knot in my stomach; an unceasing source of anxiety in my life. Climate change is my reality.

headspace National Youth Reference Group Member

A member of hY NRG described their anxiety about climate change as a constant companion:

This anxiety has been described as 'climate anxiety' or 'eco-anxiety'; these feelings are a normal, adaptive response to a serious problem. Climate anxiety can interrupt the daily functioning of young people, affecting many areas of their life, including academic, vocational, social, emotional and health.

"Climate change is not a threat, it is a reality for our world, whether people choose to acknowledge this or not. As an educated young person who is aware of the very real risks that climate change poses to our only home, I know that climate change is one of the most significant factors impacting my mental health."

headspace National Youth Reference Group member

"The threat of climate change impacts mine and my peer's mental health by taking away our hope for a future. Its distressing. The Australian people's mental health, especially the young people,

² Orygen Institute (2023) *Position statement: Climate change and youth mental health*, [Position statement: climate change and youth mental health - Orygen, Revolution in Mind](#).

will only suffer more and more the longer climate change prevention is put off. We need to take action now.”

headspace National Youth Reference Group member

Young people’s concern about climate change is growing

In headspace’s most recent National Youth Mental Health Survey, half of the young people surveyed (50%) worry that our country/government is not doing enough to address the issue. A further two in five (41%) felt fearful of the future due to the impact of climate change. The young people ranked climate change as the third biggest concern for young Australians, behind the cost of living or financial stability, and housing and affordability.

Recent studies showed similar levels of concern among young people:

- in 2021, young Australians (aged 16 to 25 years) reported feeling anxious (65.0%), sad (64.1%), afraid (61.5%), helpless (59.5%), angry (55.3%), and ashamed (51.4%) about climate change.³
- in 2022, 51 per cent of young Australians (aged 15 to 19 years) identified the environment as the top national issue.⁴ Results from Mission Australia’s youth survey over the last ten years shows young people are increasingly identifying the environment as the top issue.

Young people feel helpless and frustrated

headspace’s survey results indicate young people feel powerless and frustrated. While almost half (46%) of young people were worried whether they’re doing enough to have an impact on climate change, many felt that their own individual actions might not be enough to make a difference anyway (50%). One in five (21%) said they worry about climate change so much that they feel paralysed in being able to do anything about it.

“I worry for the children and young people of Australia and how they are expected to be resilient in the face of such devastating change. I worry for their mental health and how they are expected to take climate change in their stride as they struggle to cope with natural disaster after natural disaster. I worry that young people will lose faith in those that are supposed to serve and protect them.”

headspace National Youth Reference Group member

In 2023, Orygen surveyed young people about climate change and their mental health. Among young people concerned about climate change, the most common factor impacting their mental health was a lack of climate action by government.⁵

Young people will benefit from a statutory duty of care

In the context of increasing natural disasters and other climate changes, governments across Australia should be required to consider the impact of policies and decisions on the climate that will be inherited by children and future generations. Imposing a positive duty of care will require decision makers to consider the impact of their decisions on the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

“This bill is extremely important to all Australian people, to protect our future, our future generations and our mental health. This bill is a net positive for all Australian people. This bill is a major opportunity to put our foot in the door when it comes to taking action against climate change. This bill would mean protection from climate change for us and our future generations. This bill is the liberation we need. I hope for this bill to have long term impact.”

³ Hickman, C. Marks, E. Pihkala, P., Clayton. S., et al (2021) Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey, *The Lancet*, Vol 5, December.

⁴ Leung, S., Brennan, N., Freeburn, T., Waugh, W. & Christie, R. (2022) *Youth survey report 2022*. Sydney, NSW: Mission Australia.

⁵ Fava, N., Gao, C.X., & Baker, D. (2023) *Climate of distress: responding to the youth mental health impacts of climate change*. Orygen.

headspace National Youth Reference Group member

“To say that the Duty of Care Bill is important is an understatement. The Duty of Care Bill is crucial to the health and wellbeing of young people and future generations. The Government has an undeniable duty of care to protect the young people of Australia; the people who aren’t represented in local, state and national elections; the people who are left without a voice. It is our future that we are fighting for and it is about time that the Government listens.”

headspace National Youth Reference Group member

“I hope this bill impacts the way today’s leaders make decisions and helps start a movement in Australia about the way these important decisions are made. The people in power need to put more thought into funding a mining company or how oil and gas companies will destroy our planet and what they are leaving behind once they’re gone. At the end of the day, we either take action or we let the planet be destroyed. I feel like this bill is acting and I completely support that.”

headspace National Youth Reference Group member

A wider conversation about climate change and mental health is also important

Beyond supporting individuals and families, we need a broader community conversation about climate change and mental health, particularly for young people. Creating an environment where the impacts on young people are openly acknowledged will help young people to feel safe having conversations about their concerns for the future, and to seek extra support when they need it.

headspace has also launched a video series that shares the stories of young people who experienced the 2022 floods in New South Wales, to raise awareness about the experiences of young people impacted by extreme weather events.

It is also important to recognise that while young people can take environmental action to feel a sense of control over the issue, climate change requires the Australian Government to take decisive action as well as global community responses. Placing the agency of change solely on young people is unfair.

“The threat of climate change makes me quite nervous about my future and the future of generations to come. Being a young person now is more stressful than ever before. With the added stress of not knowing whether it is going to be too late by the time we can become the decision makers it takes an impact on how we see the world.”

headspace National Youth Reference Group member

*“Climate change makes me feel hopeless in the face of this seemingly insurmountable problem. Climate change makes me, and many other young Australians lose faith in our government due to their lack of action and makes us lose hope for our future. We **need** action from our government!”*

headspace National Youth Reference Group member

Action also needs to extend to an increased research and policy focus on the links between climate changes, the impact on environments, communities and society, and youth mental health.

headspace would welcome the opportunity to discuss climate change and the impact on youth mental health in more detail with the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications.

Yours sincerely

Jason Trethowan
Chief Executive Officer