



commission for  
children and young people  
and child guardian

27 June 2008

Thank you for providing the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (the Commission) with the opportunity to comment on the homelessness discussion paper '*Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness*'.

The Commission is an independent statutory agency with a mandate to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

In responding to the Green Paper, the Commission will focus on the needs and best interests of children and young people who are represented in disturbing numbers in the discussion paper. The Green Paper suggests that half of all homeless Australians are identified as being under 24 years and 10 000 are children.

Of major concern to the Commission are the highly vulnerable young people who become marginalised and fall between the gaps of mainstream services and cycle between different youth services, live on the streets and find themselves on a trajectory into chronic homelessness. The Commission is aware that children and young people who find themselves in this situation are not an homogenous group and traverse individual paths into homelessness that require individualised responses to address their needs and promote their longer term interests.

The Commission's work with young people gives it a unique insight into the life experiences of Queensland's most vulnerable young people.

**Summary of Commission views:**

- a review of homelessness should include:
  - national discussions between relevant government agencies and the service delivery sector to develop an integrated model that can respond to the complexity of needs facing homeless people
  - an independent assessment of the costs of proposing adequate SAAP services across Australia and a commitment to provide realistic funds for crisis and long term accommodation
- the development of an integrated case management approach that provides a personalised and tailored response to assist, mentor and encourage vulnerable young people
- greater collaboration and flexibility to address service gaps between mainstream services and the homeless service sector and promote access

for children and young people

- increase the supply of appropriate accommodation through national discussions between governments, the community sector and business
- engagement with at risk children and young people to inform the development of more effective prevention and early intervention

### **Have we got the principles right?**

While the Commission agrees that the proposed principles are important they should include specific reference to the safety and best interests of the child as paramount in decision making.

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* include a number of provisions which seek to protect the rights and best interests of children in relation to safety, health, education and security, all of which are at-risk when a child or young person is homeless. Of particular importance with regard to a national homelessness framework are Article 3, *the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration*, and Article 27.

Article 27.1:

- commits State Parties *to recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development*

Article 27.3:

- where within their means State Parties *take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.*

Principle 2 of the discussion paper suggests that *Preventing the causes of homelessness is a main focus*. While prevention is crucial the *main focus* must also commit to reducing current levels of homelessness.

The Commission is concerned that the proposed principles do not reflect a strong commitment to reduce existing homelessness and service shortages as well as the causes of homelessness.

### **Reform options**

It will be important to engage all relevant government agencies as well as the service delivery sector in discussions about the policy outcomes sought and how to develop integrated models that have the capacity to respond to the complexity of needs that surround homelessness.

While each of the proposed three options include positive elements they require further integration to address both the short and long term needs of the homeless. In the Commission's view reforming the current SAAP model is just one part of the response to address the continuum of homelessness, particularly for highly vulnerable children and young people who have become marginalised and are no longer accessing mainstream services and developmental supports or services.

The Commission considers it important to include separate and explicit approaches to address the needs of young people as a priority in the development of a national framework.

In the Commission's view it will not be possible to bring about the changes that are hoped for without a significant investment to address supply shortages and fund prevention and early intervention initiatives that tackle the causes of homelessness, particularly for young people.

If legislative changes are proposed as part of the reform they should encapsulate the best interests of the child as well as a human rights approach.

### **Service gaps have real implications for children and young people**

It is well documented that young people who have been in the care of the state are overrepresented in the population of young people accessing SAAP services and youth services.

In 2007-08 the Commission conducted interview surveys with young people who have been under child protection orders but had left their approved placement to live in a 'self-placement' without approval from the Department of Child Safety. This audit of self-placement was conducted by the Commission's Community Visitors who regularly visit children and young people in care and those in residential support services and youth detention to monitor their safety and well being and to provide them with a reliable avenue to raise any issues or concerns which they may have<sup>1</sup>.

The Commission's self-placement audit provides some understanding of young people's experience of homelessness and reveals critical service gaps and barriers to service access for vulnerable young people.

The young people were asked about their reasons for self-placement, the impacts of homelessness on their life, and their views about homelessness and what would assist them to address some of their concerns. Their responses highlight the extent of their marginalisation from mainstream services and the critical need for a more integrated approach to help them establish new independence.

Young person F is 13 years old  
23.05.2007

F had been living in a youth shelter for about two months following the breakdown of family respite care through the Department of Child Safety. He had previously been in the care of the Department but returned to his mother when he was 11. F was living in conflict with his family, did not have a relationship with his father and did not feel safe to return to his family home because of his mother's new partner. F advised that:

- he had not been to school for four months
- would like to go to school but had no books
- had recently had contact with his father but could not stay with him because he lived in a boarding house
- did not want to return home to his mother and her partner because the

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<sup>1</sup> The Queensland Community Visitor Program has a legislated role under the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000* to monitor the safety and wellbeing of children living in alternative care in Queensland. In 2007-08 Community Visitors regularly visited over 6,200 children and young people in foster homes and other kinds of alternative care.

partner did not want to know F, did not talk to him or make eye contact and had hit him

- he had told police everything but the police took him home because his mother's partner made up lies.

F has no income and would most likely not be eligible for Centrelink income support.

The experience of F is similar to that of other young people featured in the attached case studies who were also part of the audit and spoke of:

- involvement with the child protection and juvenile justice systems
- moving between youth shelters and the streets and only having intermittent contact with support services
- tenuous or no contact with mainstream services, particularly education or training
- having no income because they do not meet the age eligibility or have been breached by Centrelink, for things such as not having appropriate identification (see case study D)
- not necessarily wanting contact with their parent/s or do not want to return home because they do not feel it is safe to do so
- have disengaged from education for long periods of time

A young person's hierarchy of needs changes dramatically when they are homeless. Education for example becomes secondary to finding a place to live and getting enough to eat. While reengagement with education, training or work are critical to long term outcomes they can be meaningless to a young person without a stable place to live.

Individual mainstream services are not able to provide the holistic support that young people like F need and often lack the decision making flexibility to support collaborative intervention at the local level. As a consequence connections aren't made and young people like F fall through the gaps. Of particular concern to the Commission are those young people who are aged between 12 and 15 years who are homeless and unable to access income support and other essential services through SAAP or Centrelink.

### **Someone to help make the links and navigate the maze**

The Commission recommends the development of an integrated model to support young people who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness. An integrated model would include a thorough assessment and referral process where each young person is personally mentored and assisted to negotiate the education, training, health and support service maze in support of their future development.

The Commission does not underestimate the challenge this task presents but without better integration and ongoing mentoring and assistance to negotiate a tailored way forward, young people at-risk of homelessness are working against all odds.

It will be important to identify a single person (case manager) who can build a relationship with the young person and get to understand their needs, preferences and circumstances as they coordinate access to 'joined up' services that are matched to personal needs. Without this level of support young people who are at-risk and seriously vulnerable can be left unassisted to chart their future and negotiate the service maze of health, welfare, education, training and employment and through the process will have to tell their story repeatedly.

One suggestion is to build on best practice in the area of case management and integrated service delivery to fund trials in high need locations in every state. Queensland has developed a Needs Based Planning and Resource Allocation Framework (NBPRAF) that could help to identify target locations in Queensland.

### **Prevention and early intervention - increasing connection points and building on success**

As a starting point, increased investment is required in existing prevention and early intervention programs which have successfully improved both support and developmental outcomes for homeless children and young people. For example, programs and support resources linked to schools, such as the Federal Government's Reconnect program and Queensland's Youth Support Coordinators, have demonstrated success in providing support for at risk youth in schools and have contributed to the reduction in numbers of homeless youth aged between 12 – 18 years<sup>2</sup>. These and other programs with demonstrated improved outcomes for homeless youth should be built upon and expanded across all Australian states.

Prevention and early intervention programs have primarily been linked to schools because of the link between at-risk young people and their struggle to remain in formal schooling. However prevention and early intervention programs need to extend beyond education to link with the broader range of support services young people and families come into contact with a when they experience family and personal crisis. These include Centrelink, public housing, child protection, health and community organisations.

It is generally understood that young people become homeless when their family is in crisis or stress, for example domestic and family violence, neglect, alcohol abuse, overcrowding and poverty. Centrelink is particularly well placed as a connection point for prevention and early intervention for families including wrap around services for children.

### **Increasing supply**

The Commission recommends that opportunities for national discussions between governments, the community sector and business are created to focus on increasing supply. Although this is primarily a state responsibility, housing affordability and critical shortages in crisis accommodation will require greater collaboration to create new options and innovative approaches to address supply, reliable tenancy, rental assistance, philanthropy and investment opportunities.

Front line workers in Queensland community youth organisations report an increase in the turn-away rates of homeless young people from accommodation services because of supply shortages. While lack of crisis accommodation is an issue they report an even greater need for long term affordable accommodation<sup>3</sup>. As noted previously these issues are particularly pressing for young people aged 12-15 years.

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<sup>2</sup> 2008, *National Youth Commission: Inquiry into Youth Homelessness*, p14

<sup>3</sup> Inner Urban Youth Interagency Meetings (Brisbane), these agencies meet at various centres across Queensland and primarily deal with issues involving young people who are homeless, abuse illegal substances and disengage in education or early/mid teen pregnancy.

Young person M age 16 years  
Date 12.2.2008

M is 16 and has been living on the street and between shelters for two years. Although he is used to this lifestyle he would like to stop using drugs but has no support to do this. M does not want to return to school and would like to get work but this is difficult without stable accommodation.

Highly vulnerable young people's access to stable, appropriate and affordable accommodation is integral to their achieving long term outcomes in other areas of their lives including being able to participate as part of a community.

National housing affordability issues are compounding housing supply problems for homeless and at-risk of homeless people. The discussion paper suggests that families are experiencing the highest turn-away rates of all the client groups entering SAAP<sup>4</sup>.

Genuine investment to increase the stock of public and affordable housing, community housing and supported accommodation must be a priority.

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<sup>4</sup> 2008, The Green Paper; *Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness*, pp20-21

## Additional Comments

<b>Proposed Green Paper Targets</b>	
<b>Targets</b>	<b>Commission's comments</b>
A decrease in the number of people, including young people moving from public housing and private rental to crisis accommodation services	<p>This target limits the focus to entry points i.e. people moving from stable housing to crisis accommodation.</p> <p>An additional indicator should be considered that would measure the overall reduction in long term homelessness as identified in primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness.</p>
An increase in the number of women and children remaining in their own home following domestic and family violence	<p>The Commission agrees in principle as long as there is access for women escaping domestic and family violence to legal, personal and financial supports, particularly in relation to help to secure the family home, such as, changing locks on doors and windows.</p> <p>It is important however, that this target respects the right of women with children to leave the family home if they don't feel safe and provide access to safe crisis accommodation and long-term housing options if <i>they</i> decide that leaving the family home is a safer option for them.</p>
A decrease in the number of people seeking crisis accommodation who first experienced homelessness as children.	<p>Additional funding of early intervention and family supports are needed to support young people to avoid generational homelessness.</p> <p>An increase in the supply of public housing will be essential to underpin this goal.</p>
An increase in the percentage of school-age children who remain in school, education or training after being in crisis accommodation.	<p>This is an admirable goal but it will require a tailored approach to address gaps in mainstream education programs for this group of young people. Formal education does not necessarily have the flexibility to meet the needs of this vulnerable group particularly if their issues are compounded by learning difficulties that need ongoing support.</p>