



RESEARCH, POLICY AND ADVOCACY UNIT

POLICY REPOSE

A WAY TO GO FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

**Jesuit Social Services submission to the
Australian Government's *Which Way Home?*
Homelessness Green Paper consultation**

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Introduction

Jesuit Social Services congratulates the Australian Government for the commitment to developing a more effective national approach to homelessness as part of a broader social inclusion agenda. For the disadvantaged young people, families and communities we work with, the 'Which Way Home?' Green Paper includes some very significant and positive suggestions.

In particular, we support:

- Promotion of better 'joined-up' multidisciplinary approaches to service delivery focussed on tailored support to each individual through improved integration of housing and 'mainstream' support services including employment, pre-employment and training, mental health, substance abuse, child protection and justice (Foreword; Principle 7 on page 63; page 65);
- Recognition that people with particularly complex needs often need ongoing support to maintain their accommodation, their relationships and their engagement with the community, and that this support can be effectively provided through a 'wrap around' approach that focuses on the individual and all their inter-related needs (page 54).
- Identification of the need for action to provide better housing and support at key points of transition, including leaving state care, and leaving prison or juvenile justice institutions (page 28 and Principle 8 on page 63).
- Recognition of the need to address the various forms of locational disadvantage identified in our research 'Dropping off the edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia' (Vinson 2007) and by the Australian Government's Social Inclusion Board (page 27).
- A clear focus on the need to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness and recognition that more intensive support may be required for the large group of young people aged 21-25 years who have poor work and/or education histories, entrenched health or behavioural issues or other complex needs (page 66).
- Recognition of the important role that social enterprises can play in providing unique opportunities for 'hands-on' work experience as part of long-term approaches to assisting people with training and employment (page 67) and encouragement of further business sector involvement in providing assistance with homelessness, particularly in relation to employment related initiatives (page 13 and Principle 1 on page 63).

Our major concern with the Green Paper is:

- The narrow focus on reform to homelessness service models without any reference to plans to achieve the recognised need to "increase the supply of safe, well-located and affordable housing" (page 13). The reality of homelessness in Australia is that unless substantial new investment is made by government in the provision of long-term housing options through actual, affordable housing stock, especially public and social/community housing, any reforms to models of support provided through homelessness services will only be able to achieve modest outcomes at best.

Introduction (continued)

Our other concerns include:

- Failure to adequately address the housing and support needs of young people with an intellectual disability, an acquired brain injury (ABI) and/or a learning disability. Of particular concern is a group of young people whose disability is assessed in the 'grey area' just outside the eligibility criteria for state/territory government disability support systems. These young people often fall between the gaps of existing service systems and miss out on getting appropriate support at critical points in their young adult years. In situations where there is no or little family support, these young people are particularly susceptible to becoming involved in a cycle of prolonged homelessness.
- Failure to acknowledge the need for more flexibility in the style of public and social housing available for refugees and new arrivals with large families.

About Jesuit Social Services

Jesuit Social Services works collaboratively with others to engage disadvantaged young people, families and communities and the wider society to promote health and wellbeing and to address social exclusion.

We work in some of the most difficult and demanding areas of human service, including crime, addiction, mental illness, suicide bereavement, long-term unemployment and entrenched social disadvantage.

In addition to our well known services for young people (including Brosnan Youth Services, Connexions and Gateway), we are involved in local communities in various parts of Victoria and Western Sydney. We also have a longstanding involvement with the Vietnamese community and a strong partnership with communities from the Horn of Africa.

If you were to spend an hour or two with each of the participants in our Youth Justice and Link Out programs at Brosnan Youth Services, the counselling and outreach services of our dual diagnosis program Connexions, or the 'social enterprise' kitchen, arts studio or any of the other employment and training programs of our Gateway service, some simple and straightforward solutions to homelessness would be clearly evident.

In addition to housing issues, the young people we work with tend to have a range of inter-related, complex needs including a history of interrupted schooling, little or no positive experiences of employment, substance abuse issues, mental health difficulties and in many cases, involvement with the criminal justice system.

Unfortunately, very few of the young people we see have family support readily available. Indeed in many cases, family experiences such as domestic violence or sexual abuse have been significant contributors to the young person's current difficulties.

By any measure, the young people we support are amongst the most disadvantaged citizens of our society.

Our submission is guided by their experience.

Amongst other things, experience tells us:

Exiting from prison (youth or adult correctional facilities)

"If I have to go to one of those places again (private boarding house) you may as well just book me back in here. The violence in those places is bad news. I know I won't cope, you know I won't cope, so why are you telling me that's where I have to go?"

Danny, aged 20 in discussions with his case worker prior to release from prison. His experience points to the need for major improvements in the availability of suitable housing for people exiting youth and adult justice facilities.

Lack of long-term permanent housing options for young people

"On Youth Allowance you've got no hope getting a (private rental) flat on your own, no hope what-so-ever".

Melissa, aged 19 who has been happy living in Transitional Housing but is worried about the lack of options when she'll be required to leave. Her experience points to the need for better options on exit from Transitional Housing (and generally better options for long-term housing) including improvements to public and social/community housing, rent assistance and the Centrelink youth incomes system.

Housing and support - investing the time needed for each individual

"If it wasn't for them (youth support workers) sticking by me, I would never have made it. It took me ages to get my act together, but they believed in me and they never gave up on me even when I stuffed up".

Tom, aged 23 whose journey into stable housing and employment came after 18 months of intensive support that included dealing with mental health and drug issues and when those were stabilised, links to suitable pre-employment training in a social enterprise. His experience tells us about the housing benefits that will flow from more realistic timeframes and a better range of models for pre-employment support.

Valuing all young people and encouraging young people's strengths and abilities

"I have always been good at art, but when I got depressed and involved with drugs, I didn't care about anything. I was in real trouble for a lot of years. When I got referred to the arts studio, it took me a while to get back into it, but gradually I found myself feeling motivated to try a few things and looking back now, I realise how lucky I am that those people in the arts studio were there to help me out".

Anna, aged 22, who is now doing a course in multimedia and has a part-time job. Her experience tells us about the importance of valuing each and every person and encouraging young people's strengths and abilities.

The disability gap

"The disability people say his disability is 'too mild' to qualify for their services. He needs intensive support, but he doesn't seem to qualify for it anywhere. Everybody seems to have an excuse why he shouldn't be their responsibility".

A community worker reflecting on the prospect of finding housing and support for a young man with a 'mild' intellectual disability leaving the prison system.

Recommendations for White Paper priority action areas

1. Investment in permanent long-term housing options

In addition to promoting the availability of more low cost private rental housing, the Australian Government should make a substantial new long-term investment in the availability of permanent long-term public and social/community housing.

2. Rent Assistance and Centrelink youth payments reform

The Centrelink youth payment system should be reformed to provide more adequate rates of payment for independent young people. The arrangements for rent assistance for young people should be improved to ensure that private rental is a viable option for young people on income support.

3. Housing for those exiting youth and adult justice facilities

The Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments, should initiate substantial new investment in the availability of supported transitional and permanent housing options for people exiting youth and adult justice facilities.

4. Better range of housing and support options for young people

The continuum of housing and support options available for young people should be extended to include more services with the capacity to provide intensive whole-of-life support over long periods of time encompassing mental health support, drug and alcohol issues, life skills and employment and training support.

5. Making 'Joined-up' and 'Wrap Around' service delivery a reality in practice

Principle 7 (page 58) "Joined-up service delivery ... Program funding and program boundaries must allow governments and funded organisations to take a multidisciplinary approach to addressing people's needs" should be immediately implemented by funding a range of new and enhanced services that demonstrate a commitment to delivering the benefits of a 'joined-up/wrap around' individualised approach for people with multiple and complex needs.

6. Housing and better pre-employment services, including social businesses

The Australian Government should initiate a range of new pre-employment programs for young people modelled on the Jesuit Social Services Gateway service where young people are supported to deal with the full range of 'life issues' whilst developing social confidence and connectedness and exploring employment related skills and interests. These new initiatives should include support for social businesses that provide work experience for disadvantaged young people.

7. Housing and support for young people with a disability

The housing and disability sections of the Australian Government and state and territory governments should work together to improve the provision of housing and support to all young people with a disability, including specific strategies to address the needs of young people 'at the margins' of eligibility for disability services.

8. Public and social housing for refugees and new arrivals with large families

The type of public and social housing available for refugees/new arrivals should include options suitable for large families.

Conclusion and further notes re 'joined-up/wrap around' service delivery

The disappointment: Lack of attention to investment in long-term permanent housing

As indicated earlier in this submission, our major disappointment with the 'Which Way Home?' Green Paper is the lack of attention to strategies to increase the supply of safe, well-located and affordable permanent housing.

In addition to initiating improvements to the operation of homelessness services, any genuine homelessness strategy must focus on improving the provision of long-term permanent housing through an increased supply of affordable housing stock, especially public and social/community housing. It is hoped that the White Paper will include a strategy with specific commitments to substantially increase government investment in public and social/community housing.

There is also a role for more astute investment by government to increase the availability of affordable private rental housing. Ideally, private rental should be a viable option for all young people not in a position to live at home and be supported by family.

The positives: Building on existing positive models of housing and support

We are pleased that the Green Paper has acknowledged the benefits of:

- Better 'joined-up' multidisciplinary approaches to service delivery focussed on tailored support to each individual through improved integration of housing and support services including employment, pre-employment and training, mental health, substance abuse, child protection and justice;
- A 'wrap around' approach for people with particularly complex needs that focuses on providing long-term support for all inter-related needs, including more intensive support to be made available for the large group of young people aged 21-25 years who have poor work and/or education histories, entrenched health or behavioural issues or other complex needs;
- Better housing and support at key points of transition, including leaving state care, and leaving prison or juvenile justice institutions.

Twin challenges for government: Beyond silos and reaching the most disadvantaged

At Jesuit Social Services, the young people we work with have a range of complex needs often including a history of interrupted schooling, little or no positive experiences of employment, difficult family circumstances, substance abuse issues, mental health difficulties and in many cases, involvement with the justice system. We strive to provide our services in a holistic manner that takes into account a person's full range of life circumstances and respects and values the dignity and potential of every individual.

We have implemented this 'joined-up/wrap around' holistic model despite the difficulties associated with government funding being organised according to a 'one-issue at a time' silo framework. We thoroughly endorse Principle 7 of the Green Paper: joined-up service delivery outcomes for our most disadvantaged citizens would indeed benefit from better government approaches to joined-up policy and program funding.

Perhaps a most useful way for government decision-makers to develop and implement joined-up policy would be to come and meet with some of our participants and witness how our 'joined-up/wrap around' services work in practice. The key is to understand and appreciate the totality of every individual and to build government policy from this real-life human understanding.