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To the Social Housing and Homelessness Services Unit;

On behalf of the Youth Coalition of the ACT (Youth Coalition), I would like to thank the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS) for the opportunity to comment on chapter 4 of the *Road Map* Discussion Paper (Discussion Paper).

## **1. About the Youth Coalition of the ACT**

The Youth Coalition is the peak youth affairs body in the ACT. Comprised of 90 members, programs, and individuals the Youth Coalition is responsible for representing and promoting the interests and wellbeing of people aged between 12 and 25 years and those who work with them.

The Youth Coalition is represented on many ACT Government advisory structures and provides advice to the ACT Government on youth issues as well as providing information to youth services about policy and program matters.

A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions for young people and youth services. The Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT.

## **2. Support to the Submission of the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS)**

The Youth Coalition recognises the importance of housing to the ACT Community and in particular to young people and as such we believe that the opportunity to comment on Housing Support Services as outlined in Chapter 4 of the Discussion Paper is important. Having reviewed both the Discussion Paper and the ACTCOSS Submission to Chapter 4 of the Discussion Paper, the Youth Coalition broadly supports the content of the ACTCOSS Submission.

The Youth Coalition has identified a number of areas for further consideration, outlined below.

### **3. Response to Social Inclusion Agenda**

The Youth Coalition supports the ACT Government's vision that housing support services for public, community and private housing tenants will develop a social inclusion focus that will enable increased social, civil and economic participation in the community and sustainable tenancies.

The Youth Coalition commends the ACT Government's ongoing commitment to community inclusion, and, imbedding community inclusion policy and practice across ACT Government. The Youth Coalition believes that having a set of principles underpinning the implementation of all Chapters of the Discussion Paper would be complimentary to the ACT Governments vision.

The Youth Coalition calls for the following principles to underpin the way forward for ACT homelessness services and related services:

- Rights Based;
- Equity and Access;
- Participation;
- Integration;
- Early Intervention and Prevention;
- Evidence Based; and,
- Accountable.<sup>i</sup>

#### *Rights Based*

The Youth Coalition strongly supports the inclusion of human rights within all ACT Government policy. A human rights-based approach is a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights.

Under a human rights-based approach, the plans, policies and processes of the way forward for ACT homelessness services and related services would be anchored in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established and supported by both international and domestic law.

#### *Equity and Access*

'Equity' in policy making, can be defined as the allocation of resources to ensure that all people have supports to access and seek equal outcomes. Many people, especially young people experience disadvantage due to a range of structural and systemic issues; and may require specific supports to access equal opportunities.

In further developing the Discussion Paper, it is vital that a principle of 'equity' is integrated into all aspects of its development, implementation and evaluation; in order to ensure that all people, especially young people, have the opportunities to seek equal outcomes.

### *Participation*

Participation gives people the opportunity to have a say about what is important to them, allows them to 'own' decisions made about their lives, increases self confidence and skills, and empowers them. Participation should be meaningful and this can only occur when people are adequately informed and supported in their involvement, and their contributions are valued and purposeful.

The Youth Coalition calls for the ACT Government to ensure that participation – in particular youth participation – models, policies and practices are identified and utilised in the further development of the way forward for ACT homelessness services and related services.

### *Integration*

In order to develop effective whole-of-government policy, it is important that the way forward for ACT homelessness services and related services develops synergies with other key ACT Government and national documents, and reflects an integrated approach in its further planning, development, implementation and evaluation.

### *Early Intervention and Prevention*

'Early Intervention', in policy-making, has been defined as 'a strategy that enables individuals to gain assistance before the situation becomes chronic and denies them access to those possibilities the community takes for granted'.<sup>ii</sup>

The Youth Coalition believes that it is important that the way forward for ACT homelessness services and related services is developed in consideration of early intervention and prevention principles, especially for young people aged 12 – 25 years.

### *Evidence Based*

'Evidence Based Policy Development' has been defined as being 'based upon research that has undergone some form of quality assurance and scrutiny.'<sup>iii</sup> The Youth Coalition would like to commend the ACT Government on taking an evidence based approach in Chapter 4 of the Discussion Paper and urges the ACT Government to ensure that this approach is maintained throughout the way forward for ACT homelessness services and related services. It is crucial that the ACT Government continues its commitment to 'evidence based' policy development.

### *Accountable*

Accountability requires 'ensuring that there is a systematic process to assess the impact of law, policy and practice on children - in advance, during and after implementation'.<sup>iv</sup>

The Youth Coalition strongly urges the ACT Government to ensure that all processes of accountability in relation to the way forward for ACT homelessness services and related services are clearly defined, planned and implemented to ensure the long term sustainability of the services and continued support for tenants.

#### **4. Response to Housing Support Services**

*Are the resources in the current sustaining tenancies program directed to those most in need and available when they need it?*

The Youth Coalition would like to commend the ACT Government on considering the need for sustaining tenancies programs to be delivered on a regional basis providing support to public and community tenants living in specific suburbs. The Youth Coalition also believes that the expansion of the delivery of service to include support to private rental tenants is vital in the current economic and social climate.

The Youth Coalition notes however, that there is a lack of recognition of young people in the context of the sustaining tenancies program. Young people are continually over-represented in figures highlighting housing stress.<sup>v</sup> The private rental market in the ACT is the most competitive and difficult to access, with rent rates in the ACT the highest of all the major capital cities.<sup>vi</sup> High average incomes for some ACT residents distort figures of affordability, and the disparities are easily overlooked.

Maintaining public housing is vital and plays an important part in providing a continuity of service to young people in the ACT. For those in homelessness services (formerly Supported Accommodation Assistance Programs (SAAP)), public housing is a key exit point and with long waiting lists, homelessness services provide a very high cost service to young people who are not necessarily in need of it simply because young people who can maintain their own tenancies are unable to secure a property.

Young people moving out of home, out of care and out of supported accommodation currently have few supports to ensure their transition to independent living is successful and they are able to live sustainably in an independent environment. The provision of sustaining tenancies program support to young people would have a positive impact on their capacity to sustain their tenancies and avoid falling into the 'cycle of homelessness'.

*How can sustaining tenancies programs create long term positive outcomes for the individual?*

Over the past 20 years the affordability of housing has deteriorated – decreasing by 140 per cent between 1986 and 2006. In 1986, 3.6 years of average income was needed to purchase a home; by 2006 the purchase price required 7.0 years' pay. The total stock of public housing has declined and rental vacancies have reached an all-time low. Extensive media coverage in 2007 highlighted 'a crisis of affordable housing' and the issue was prominent in the 2007 Federal election.<sup>vii</sup> The provision of sustaining tenancies programs is vital in ensuring that individuals, especially young people, avoid the 'cycle of homelessness'. The long term positive outcomes are embedded in the concept that supporting people to remain in tenancy provides long term housing stability, in turn reducing the number of people entering homelessness due to lack of capacity to maintain a tenancy.

*How can sustaining tenancies initiatives reach those in the private market facing mortgage stress who are increasingly at risk of homelessness? How can these programs become an integrated part of the service system?*

The reach of sustaining tenancies initiatives will be determined by the framework and resourcing of these initiatives, as will the integration of these initiatives into the service system. The Youth Coalition strongly urges the ACT Government to ensure that resourcing to these initiatives is not reduced and that the initiatives are underpinned by the principles of:

- Rights Based;
- Equity and Access;
- Participation;
- Integration;
- Early Intervention and Prevention;
- Evidence Based; and,
- Accountable.<sup>viii</sup>

*How can long term outcomes be created through Tenant Initiated Grants (TIGs)?*

The Youth Coalition recognises the value that TIGs have had in empowering tenants to participate in their environment and make it a better place. However, the Youth Coalition notes that there has been a limited range of proposals, many of which have focused on community rooms and events.

Long term outcomes may be created through TIGs if the appropriate resources and support are provided to tenants throughout the application process and beyond. The concept of long term outcomes can only be measured if there is a long term vision for TIGs.

The Youth Coalition calls for increased support for tenants in relation to TIGs, especially young people, who often find it challenging to navigate the housing system and are often unaware of opportunities such as TIGs.

*Is there merit in linking up the TIGs to the Joint Champions Group (JCG), thus creating tenant initiated, allocated and evaluated grants?*

The proposed re-focus of linking the TIG with social inclusion initiatives such as sustainable life skills programs or education and training opportunities or to the JCG may provide stronger avenues of participation for tenants. However, it is vital that the resourcing for both of these is maintained and that there are no cuts in funding. If this is merely a cost cutting measure, then the value of both of these initiatives will be significantly reduced.

*How can community development and life skills programs assist individuals to sustain their tenancies and contribute to better social and economic participation?*

Living skills are personal skills considered necessary for an individual to function on a day-to-day basis. Living skills training encompass a range of models, methods and toolkits that aim to encourage self-sufficiency through assorted experimental and didactic programming delivered at various times throughout a young person's transition into independence.<sup>ix</sup> These living skills are often the taken-for-granted skills of those that have acquired them over a prolonged period of stable and reliable learning that begins from a very young age and continues into adulthood.<sup>x</sup>

Young people in, in particular, living independently have few resources available to them for basic information regarding everyday living skills including skills such as basic home maintenance, financial management, information about insurance, healthy eating and nutrition and information regarding tenancy rights and

responsibilities.

As the omnipresence of the idea of living skills would suggest, and supported by the findings of the *Living Skills and Youth Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (YSAAP) Consultation Project*,<sup>xi</sup> the foundational idea of living skills remains an important aspect of helping young people experiencing homelessness learn to transition out of homelessness. In addition to this, inculcating living skills as part of sustaining tenancies and support may also assist tenants, in particular young tenants, to avoid stepping into the 'cycle of homelessness'.

*Given the significant negative impacts of homelessness, are resources better focused on sustaining tenancies than community development?*

The Youth Coalition is concerned that the ACT Government is attempting to gauge the value of these two very different, yet equally significant programs.

The Youth Coalition believes that in the current climate it is essential to ensure that individuals in both public and private tenancies have access to supports such as the sustaining tenancies program. Equally, the Youth Coalition also believes that community development, especially the provision of living skills training is vital in ensuring that tenants are supported in obtaining and maintaining the necessary skills for the ongoing success of their tenancies and avoiding stepping into the 'cycle of homelessness'.

The Youth Coalition believes that the focus of resources needs to remain spread across these two areas.

## **6. Inclusion of young people aged 15 - 25 as a key target group**

The inaccessibility of the private rental market for young people further highlights the need for a robust public housing sector. Public housing is a key exit point for young people in the homelessness system, but long waiting lists lead to difficult transitions. Additionally, young people who may not have traditionally entered the homelessness system are now doing so because public housing is difficult to access.

At present, the necessary resources and opportunities are not provided equitably, leaving many young people struggling to create a place for themselves. This in combination with the lack of capacity in public housing, as well as the unacceptably long waiting lists for allocation, has led to many young people remaining in homelessness services and medium term/transitional accommodation when they are able to live in less supported accommodation.

The Youth Coalition recommends that young people are an ongoing key target group in the implementation and ongoing function of Housing Support Services.

The Youth Coalition again thanks the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS) for the opportunity to comment on Chapter 4 of the *Road Map Discussion Paper* (Discussion Paper) and we look forward to working with the Social Housing and Homelessness Services Unit to support youth services to continue to have input into the continuing development of these projects.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on (02) 6247 3540 or at [director@youthcoalition.net](mailto:director@youthcoalition.net) if you have any questions or wish to discuss this letter further.

Yours truly,

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  - v Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (2006) Housing Affordability in Australia. University of New South Wales, Sydney.
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  - vii National Youth Commission (2008) Australia's Homeless Youth: A Report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness. Brunswick: National Youth Commission, p1.
  - viii The Youth Coalition of the ACT (2009) Submission to the ACT Young People's Plan 2009-14 Discussion Paper
  - ix Propp, J. Ortega, D M. NewHeart, F. (2003) Independence or Interdependence: Rethinking the Transition From "Ward of the Court" to Adulthood. The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, Alliance for Children and Families, 259.
  - x Youth Coalition of the ACT (2009), Living Skills and Youth Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Consultation Project Paper, p20.
  - xi Youth Coalition of the ACT (2009), Living Skills and Youth Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Consultation Project Paper, p51.