



**REPORT ON THE CONSULTATION WITH YOUNG
PEOPLE REVIEWING THE PROPOSED
ACT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS ACTION PLAN**

Acknowledgements

Justin Barker conducted the consultation and compiled this report.

We would like to thank and acknowledge the young people who participated in this consultation for generously sharing their experiences, time, and insight.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT is the peak youth affairs body in Canberra and is responsible for representing the interests of people aged between 12 and 25 years of age, 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. The Youth Coalition actively promotes the well-being and aspirations of young people in the ACT with particular respect to their social, political, cultural, spiritual, economic and educational development.

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Introduction

This paper reports on the findings from the consultation reviewing the proposed ACT Youth Homelessness Action Plan. The Youth Coalition of the ACT facilitated a consultation with young people who are or have been homeless in the ACT.

The purpose of the consultation was to provide feedback and test the proposals against young peoples' experiences of homelessness, service delivery, and their perceptions of the proposed Youth Homelessness Action Plan's responses to youth homelessness.

Whilst the consultation's primary aim was to gain insights into young peoples' opinions on the Youth Homelessness Action Plan, it also provided a means for participants to express their broader opinions about service delivery and, ultimately, to make their own recommendations for improving services to better meet the needs of homeless youth.

Profile of Participants and Methodology

Interviews were conducted with ten young people to obtain feedback on the proposed ACT Youth Homelessness Action Plan. The participants had all been previously involved in the consultation process addressing the ACT Youth Homelessness Strategy which culminated in the 'Telling It How It Is' report published by the Youth Coalition in 2004.

Five of the ten participants were trained as 'pathfinders' and interviewers for this project – these young people acted as peer researchers who not only informed the research with their personal input but also engaged with other young people and their experiences of homelessness. These participants proved an immeasurable resource for this consultation given their personal and interpersonal knowledge of homelessness and experiences with service provision.

The participants have come from the wide range of life circumstances and living conditions that are included in definitions of homelessness: from primary homelessness through to tertiary homelessness. Many of the participants have traversed all of the conditions that span this spectrum of homelessness.

The participants were aged 16 to 23, four were male and six female.

The interviews were semi-structured as they followed the Objectives and Actions of the proposed Youth Homelessness Action Plan. The participants were not restricted to narrow responses. The interviews followed the momentum of the participant's discussions and dialogue, which led to broader and more qualitative feedback. Furthermore, most of the interviews were conducted in pairs as this provided grounds for conversation and debate, which led to more constructive and extensive commentary and allowed greater participation.

The Views of the Young People

The qualitative nature of the consultation methodology resulted in a range of comments, questions and suggestions regarding the proposals. However, despite the diversity of the participants there was a striking consistency in the broad issues and themes that arose in addressing the proposed Objectives and Actions of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

The reader will also notice that many of the issues and themes that were brought up are closely linked and interdependent.

The following commentary on the findings of the consultation will outline the broad issues highlighted by participants. This has the dual purpose of not oversimplifying the insights the participants provided and, simultaneously, limiting the size of this report in order to retain its potency.

The views of the participants will be structured by the Objectives and Actions of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

Overarching Themes

There were several general themes which emerged throughout the interviews:

- a general scepticism regarding service providers and Government initiatives;
- the reputation of services being developed primarily through ‘word of mouth’;
- the reliance of young homeless people on their peer group; and
- a perceived lack of support for young homeless people from formal services.

These issues permeate every Proposed Objective and subsequent Action. Furthermore, both implicitly and explicitly, the young participants highlighted that these themes could be adopted to improve service delivery. The themes are underscored by the negative experiences of young homeless people – in terms of life experiences and experiences with service delivery.

Of these issues, two warrant particular attention, as they were consistently raised by all participants:

1. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE YOUNG PEOPLE’S BEST RESOURCE

A continual theme that arose throughout the consultation was that young people relied most heavily on their peers – other young people. The most trusted referrals were from friends or workers visiting the host houses of ‘couch surfers’.

As noted below, the word of mouth of other young people can undermine the utility of services. Similarly, a good reputation of a worker or organisation is the most reliable and potent referral. This was related back to the issue that young people were not informed enough about services – the more young people know about services, the more they will use them. Thus, participants indicated that young people as a resource were under utilised.

More broadly, the participants often felt that they would benefit from training in aspects of early intervention, such as in basic mental health and suicide prevention.

2. WORD OF MOUTH AND KNOWLEDGE OF SERVICES

One of the most striking aspects of the consultation was the great affect common knowledge or myths about services have on their effectiveness. Word of mouth is the most powerful tool in preventing people from accessing services. The proliferation of stories regarding Housing ACT, Centrelink, Care and Protection and non-government organisations is the most significant impediment to these services providing support to those in need. Likewise word of mouth can be a helpful resource in improving access and support.

More broadly, services – from refuges, through to outreach and all Government organisations – were seen to have a problematic approach to dealing with young people, and were presented to have a culture of service provision that treats young people as problematic. This assumption entails an adversarial approach to young people. This sense of services not working *with* young people was referred to often throughout the consultation (see Objectives 1.1 and 2.2).

Objective 1.1: Establish mechanisms to support integrated service responses and delivery.

Action 1.1.1: Build on the Turnaround Good Practice Framework to improve service coordination between youth homelessness services in the ACT.

This proposed Action (and Objective more broadly) brought up issues of coordination between services and the notion of ‘hanging in’ or ‘continuity of support’. Services were considered to be poorly coordinated. Similarly, there was a lack of ‘continuity of support’ or ‘hanging in’: in other words, services did not offer ongoing support let alone refer clients onto relevant services. The consequence of these issues most overtly resulted in:

people leaving one service to find themselves on their own again: back at square one.

In light of these opinions, building on the Turnaround Good Practice Framework was seen as an important development.

Action 1.1.2: Establish new protocols between youth SAAP services and Care and Protection to outline the roles, responsibilities and capacity of all parties in responding to young people who are or may come under care and protection.

and

Action 1.1.3: Conduct joint training with stakeholders to ensure all parties are aware of their roles, responsibilities and capabilities as identified in the YSAAP/Care and Protection protocols. Training will be conducted at least every six months.

These were seen as significant actions, however brought up a more important issue for the participants. This proposal was met with a wide range of reactions to what were seen as the ‘roles, responsibilities and capacities’ of Care and Protection and their unclear relationship to YSAAP. The point continually raised was that young people – service users – needed to know more about the roles and responsibilities and the relationship between services and Care and Protection, for example, mandatory reporting:

What should they be doing anyway?

Do they do anything but take peoples kid's away and make their lives difficult...what about prevention. I need support to be able to keep my kid. They only do stuff when it is nearly too late and then it's taking your kids from you.

One young woman explicitly noted that she does not use *any* services as she was unclear what their relationship was to Care and Protection. This was framed by her personal experiences as a child affected by Family Services and her immanent fear of having her daughter taken from her. This sentiment was shared by all of the interviewees who had had interactions with Care and Protection/Family Services. Moreover, even those who had no interaction with Care and Protection had been advised by their peers to avoid contact with them and services believed to be linked to them (see *Word of Mouth and Knowledge of Services*).

Whilst all received this proposed Action positively it was the lack of knowledge about services of service users that was seen as an important issue. This sentiment then led to the interviewees noting that they were often unsure of their rights generally and the roles and responsibilities of all services more broadly.

Action 1.1.4: Conduct a quarterly youth homelessness forum between all youth services. The agenda of this forum will be focussed on achieving the actions of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

This proposal was often received as a forum that held services accountable to their roles and responsibilities. In this guise this Action was well received and all the young people interviewed felt that 'youth representatives' should be encouraged to attend. These youth representatives were suggested as a means by which service users could voice their concerns regarding service provision and have it addressed via their representative:

Young people should hold them accountable.

They have to listen to young people. They are the ones that know what is actually happening.

It was suggested that the focusing on achieving the proposed actions was a self-fulfilling agenda as services would not admit to their lack of compliance and were unlikely to speak up about other services that did not work to fulfilling the actions of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

Objective 1.2: Increase focus on prevention and early intervention in order to reduce the incidence of youth homelessness.

Action 1.2.1: As part of Breaking the Cycle's communication strategy, develop and distribute a series of homelessness risk indicators for use as an early intervention tool.

This proposed Action was met with a consistent questioning as to what 'homelessness risk indicators' were. The participants were aware that a large variety of people from diverse circumstances become homeless.

Not everyone fits the indicators, as they are a diverse group that can't be categorised.

Many of the participants said that they had been unaware that they were at risk of homelessness until it was too late. Whilst this sentiment may be seen to support the need for risk indicators the young people maintained that such indicators would be hard to outline accurately let alone implement effectively. However, despite these reservations, they felt that an increased awareness of possible 'homelessness risk indicators' could assist in preventing homelessness or early intervention.

Action 1.2.2: Develop and implement a brokerage and support service able to provide flexible options to assist young people to sustain temporary accommodation where appropriate, such as 'couch surfing' with family friends or relatives.

It is important to note that this action was seen to be addressing young people staying with other young people, the most common form of temporary accommodation utilised, rather than staying with family. This was positively received as all of the participants had extensive experiences of 'couch surfing.' It was widely maintained that overcrowded temporary accommodation options were the first 'port of call' for young people facing homelessness and was the most important place to 'catch young people before they fall into homelessness'.

Temporary accommodation options were seen as the most favourable option for young people when they first leave home – this is supported by the data

obtained in 'Telling It How It Is.' Moreover, it was seen as a crucial stage in ones transitional housing (or 'career of homelessness').

Many of the people interviewed that had housing (of varying degrees of stability) had numerous people staying with them. They felt that couch surfing was only ever a short-term option if the 'guest' did not receive any support. It was considered important to both the 'host' and the 'guest' that the 'guests' were able to contribute to the house financially and that there was action being taken by the guest that led to them finding further accommodation. This foreseeable end to their visit would make their housing option more sustainable. Thus, it was suggested that host houses, particularly young people housing their peers, needed to know about any services out there that could help their guest(s) (see below *Young people are young people's best resource*). Participants suggested that this proposal target hosts (as referral source) and guests (as recipients of services).

Action 1.2.3: Develop and implement an information package of brokerage and support options available to young people who are living in temporary accommodation arrangements, such as 'couch surfing' with family or friends.

Participants saw this as potentially helpful but were unsure what an information package would look like, and consequently how useful it would be.

The most useful resource people can have is a trusted relationship with a service provided.

'Hosts' felt that the most realistic support was young people referring their guest(s) to a worker or service they were familiar with and which had been proven as being helpful. Nonetheless, participants felt that brochures were generally of no assistance, and that a range of phone numbers was the most helpful option (such as the 'youth card' – credit card sizes referral card).

Action 1.2.4: To improve access for young people in schools, provide outreach Housing ACT gateway services in conjunction with Youth Support Workers in Schools.

I didn't know about housing options until it was too late. I would have escaped a lot earlier if I had known I could stay elsewhere.

This quote refers to awareness about refuges as well as Housing ACT. However, participants also mentioned that all of the proposed actions regarding Housing ACT would only be helpful if:

the waiting list went anywhere.

It is 'common knowledge' that:

Housing isn't worth your time.

Another issue, which arose in discussion on this Action, was that word of mouth and reputation plays a key role in referring young people to services. This issue is discussed above at *Overarching Themes*.

Action 1.2.5: Establish a youth specific Housing Manager and Housing Manager Specialist to work with young people who may require support to maintain their tenancy.

All greeted this Action positively yet some were sceptical about having increased involvement by Housing ACT. When framed by issues surrounding 'couch surfing', participants highlighted that Housing ACT were seen as preventing the sustainability of temporary accommodation arrangements due to insisting that guests have to pay rent. Whilst this may seem reasonable to Housing ACT, young people noted that it brings an end to 'couch surfing' arrangements as the benefits for the hosts are negated due to their guest(s) being unable to help financially after absorbing their contribution to rent.

Nonetheless, the participants felt that young people did have specific needs pertaining to the maintenance of tenancy (see below) that needed to be taken into account. However, the survival tactics of youth 'at risk' – often surviving below the poverty line – were seen to be counter to the interests of Housing ACT.

Action 1.2.6: Undertake training with Housing ACT staff to improve knowledge and skills of working with young people.

The demands and pressures faced by young people, especially young people 'at risk', were seen by all participants as significant factors that led to unstable and chaotic circumstances contributing to insecure tenure. Moreover, these

factors were seen to affect income sustainability. Thus, the proposal of improving knowledge and skills of working with young people was seen as important not only for Housing ACT staff, but also for Centrelink staff.

Action 1.2.7: Conduct awareness raising activities with the Child and Family Centres to ensure they are responsive to the needs of young parents who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Again, whilst they unanimously agreed to this Action, the young mothers interviewed continue to avoid many services, including Child and Family Centres, as they feel that they are at risk of being reported to Care and Protection. This reflects the continuing lack of information being provided to young people regarding the roles and responsibilities of services, Care and Protection, and the way they interact. The young mothers felt that they were a marginalised group who were treated unfairly by the broader community and services. This marginalisation was multiplied for those that were poor and experiencing the burden of homelessness.

17-year-old mother of one: We [young mums] get treated like shit. Like we can't look after ourselves...

20-year-old mother of one: Family Services, Housing, Centrelink...they treat me like crap. You just stop asking for help from anyone because you know how they will treat you.

Objective 2.2: Enhance client centred needs assessment, planning and decision-making to support quality outcomes.

Action 2.2.1: Continue service and sector development with youth SAAP and other service systems to develop and distribute best practice guidelines around:

- *Supporting young people to access education, training and vocational opportunities;*
- *Case management;*
- *Informed consent;*
- *Consultation with young people;*
- *Service coordination;*
- *Outreach coordination; and*
- *Gaining client feedback.*

Discussions around the notion of ‘client centred’ brought up concerns that services, both Government and non-Government, were not client centred at all. These issues related back to the lack of ‘hanging in’/‘continuity of support’ (see *Objective 1.1*) and the myths and common knowledge about services. All of these issues stem from a perceived lack of priority attached to the concerns and subjective needs of service users.

These beliefs and concerns led to young people indicating that this Action is a good idea in theory, however, participants felt unconvinced that best practice guidelines would lead to any change in the culture of service provision.

If they are meant to be looking out for us now and aren't, would this change things? I don't think so.

Objective 2.3: Design, deliver and maintain services to effectively respond to the specific needs of young people to break the cycle of homelessness.

Action 2.3.1: Review the pilot program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young women and implement the recommendations of that review.

Participants unanimously agreed to this Action, however it sparked queries into what the pilot program was and why they didn't know about it.

Action 2.3.2: Establish a training and development program within Mental Health ACT where clinicians provide practical support to SAAP workers to improve crisis responses to mental health.

Participants saw mental health support for services as a particularly important Action. Participants felt that referrals and intervention or prevention of mental health issues was often left too late or not done at all.

Action 2.3.3: Provide additional funding to Gugan Gulwan Aboriginal Youth Service to enhance its Reconnect program.

This proposal was unanimously supported but led to all participants asking the question 'who are Reconnect?'

Never heard of them. What do they do?

Action 2.3.4: Respond to the health needs of young people at risk of homelessness through the development of innovative health services as part of a Youth Health Services Framework for the ACT.

This action was not included in the propositions used in the consultation process.

Objective 3.1: Increase the available supply of appropriate, safe and adaptive housing for young people at risk of homelessness and people who are homeless.

All of the responses to the Actions under this Objective are explicitly framed by the need for more accommodation options and a greater supply of housing available to young people.

Action 3.1.1: Make five (5) Housing ACT properties available to community organisations to trial group share arrangements for young people. Three (3) of these houses are to be located in the Belconnen region to address medium term accommodation imbalances between north and south Canberra.

Participants greeted this Action with mixed responses as it was noted that group share arrangements are not suitable for all people but ideal for others.

Action 3.1.2: Survey all community housing providers to:

- 1. Identify the numbers of young people currently residing in community housing, including young people that are exiting SAAP services;*
- 2. Identify any barriers or impediments to greater numbers of young people accessing community housing; and*
- 3. Identify their strategies for improving access for young people.*

and

Action 3.1.3: Include the strategies identified by community housing providers to improve access for young people into future funding agreements to ensure the sector remains a viable housing option for young people.

Participants indicated that both of the above Actions were positive moves to provide more equitable and fair provision of Community Housing. The 'common knowledge' about particular Community Housing organisations is that you do not bother to apply if you are Aboriginal, have previous drug problems, or appear 'rough around the edges'. This relates back to the perceived marginalisation of young homelessness people that is often exacerbated by services that are funded to provide assistance to these very people.

Action 3.1.4: Progress the establishment of a second boarding house or long term affordable accommodation service for young people, consistent with the evaluation and recommendations of Lowana House.

All participants saw this as a good idea. Those who knew of the existing service (Lowana House) thought of it as a good model. Again, it was acknowledged that it did not suit all young people.

Action 3.1.5: Implement policies for Housing ACT which allow the placement of caravans and demountables in back yards for accommodation.

Participants considered this to be a good suggestion as it potentially provided a means to prevent homelessness and allow temporary accommodation arrangements to become medium term options.

Action 3.1.6: Identify an additional appropriate stairwell within a Housing ACT multi unit complex to be allocated to young people and ensure these young people receive support from the Youth Housing Manager and Housing Manager Specialist.

This proposed Action received the same responses as the other accommodation options, emphasising the need for a greater number and range of accommodation options available to the diverse needs of young people.

Objective 3.2: Assist young people to achieve or maintain their tenure

Action 3.2.1: In consultation with services funded through the Community Linkages Program (CLP), develop reporting mechanisms to reflect the level of usage and accessibility of services to young people for inclusion in the funding agreement.

Many of the young people interviewed felt that it was important for them to be linked into or connected with other people in the community, both young and old. Both research and the subjective views of the participants note the significance of social networks for people experiencing homelessness and the broader conditions associated with youth homelessness. In discussing group share arrangements and accommodation for young people, participants noted that many young mothers and families need support from people that live around them given the lack of family support that is the cause and, simultaneously, the result of homelessness.

Something like the community room at Gowrie Court would be good...I need to get out and meet people and I don't get to do that with [my daughter].

One young woman interviewed had created an informal family day-care for her daughter and her neighbour's children. Because she was unable to afford formal child care, this community support network was vital for her to remain employed. She felt that this support should have been facilitated by other services long ago.

Action 3.2.2: Implement shared tenancy arrangements for young people accessing Housing ACT properties and ensure these tenancies are supported through the Youth Housing Manager and Youth Housing Manager Specialist.

The mixed opinions around shared tenancy arrangements revolved around participant scepticism pertaining to Housing ACT.

They suggested that shared tenancy was a good idea but already existed informally. The pros and cons of these informal arrangements were discussed. Most significantly for the participants, the ability to share one's accommodation with other young people was only sustainable when it had economic benefits, i.e. Housing ACT did not demand rent from all 'guests'.

They saw it as an important survival tactic to have guests in your home, sometimes long-term, without the knowledge of Housing ACT, as this helped people get ahead financially. This issue was, as mentioned above, related to the low income obtained from Centrelink that did not take into account both the time and financial burden of homelessness.

Conclusion

Throughout this consultation the themes that emerged from the participant's responses were intimately interlinked and interdependent. As previously discussed, the principal themes which emerged were:

- a general scepticism regarding service providers and Government initiatives;
- the reputation of services being developed primarily through 'word of mouth';
- the reliance of young homeless people on their peer group; and
- a general perception of a lack of support for young homeless people from formal services.

The most significant outcome of this consultation is that homeless youth need to feel empowered by services that they can trust, that contribute to their sense of worth by acknowledging, through practice, their needs and their strengths. Each of the young people interviewed talked of negative experiences at the hands of services. These experiences were underscored by the fact that for young homeless people, issues of support and trust are paramount as a result of their own negative life experiences. For homeless young people, being able to trust a support worker or a service generally is a key component in improving their life circumstances. However, this trust does not come easily and is quickly jeopardised by negative experiences with services – either first-hand or by word of mouth.

It is important to keep in mind that the very nature of the interviews conducted for consultations give young people a means to voice their concerns about services, and as a result the data collected tends to highlight negative perspectives. Young people also speak of positive experiences with services. However, to dismiss the negative perceptions of clients of any service industry, not-for-profit or otherwise, will continue to be to the detriment of the services and sector.

On advice from the young people at the centre of this consultation, the proposed Youth Homelessness Action Plan will be most effective if it provides young people with knowledge of their rights and the roles and responsibilities of services, and if it grants young people a means to voice their concerns. It is extremely positive to note that these measures are a cost-effective way to

meet the objectives of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan and thus address youth homelessness in the ACT.