

Office of the
Advocate for Children
and Young People

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Consultation Report

What children and young
people experiencing
homelessness have to say



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ACYP Consultation Report

What children and young people experiencing homelessness have to say

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About ACYP

ACYP advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare and well being of all children and young people in NSW aged 0-24 years. We speak up for children and young people to ensure that their rights are respected and their points of view heard by decision makers. We engage with the children and young people of NSW and listen to their feedback and input. The role of ACYP is to influence and initiate positive change.

Some of ACYP's functions include:

- 1.** Make recommendations to Parliament, and government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services that affect children and young people.
- 2.** Promote children and young people's participation in activities and decision-making about issues that affect their lives. Conduct, promote and monitor research into children's issues and monitoring children's well-being.
- 3.** Promote the provision of information and advice to children and young people.
- 4.** Prepare, in consultation with the Minister, a three-year whole of government Strategic Plan for Children and Young People.

New South Wales Consultations

Children and young people were consulted from the following regions:

Mid North Coast, Metropolitan Sydney, Southern region & Central Coast.



Summary

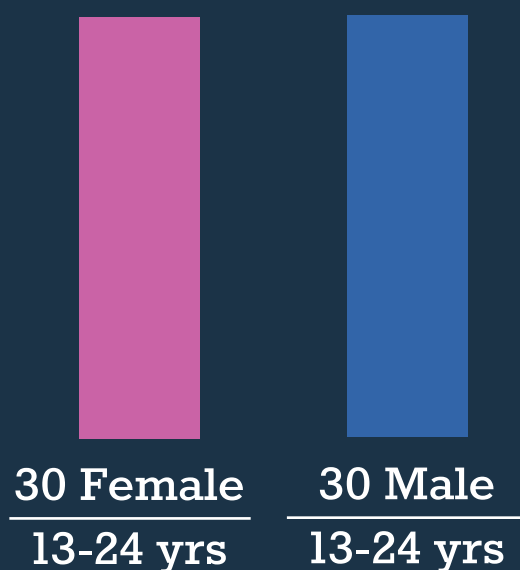
In October and November 2016, the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) undertook ten consultations with sixty children and young people 30 male, 30 female from four regions of NSW to discuss their experience of homelessness. Children and young people were consulted from the following regions: Mid North Coast, Metropolitan Sydney, Southern region and the Central Coast.

All of the information provided was de-identified. The consultations were not video or tape recorded.

In total, 60 children and young people aged 13-24 years took part in small group discussions.

They answered the following questions:

- What is working well for children and young people?
- What is not working well for children and young people?
- What is/is not working well in relation to Link2 Home?¹



¹Link2home is the information and referral telephone service for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless across Australia <http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/help-with-housing/specialist-homelessness-services/find-a-service/link2home>

Many young people reported reaching out to a service only once they had reached crisis.

They spoke about the need to have the right information about how and where to access services much earlier. “ I spent weeks on the street cause I didn’t know where to go or what was available.”



Key Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Develop a state-wide campaign, led by children and young people to increase community awareness of youth homelessness and its impacts on young lives.

Recommendation 2:

Increased awareness of support services available to children and young people using social media, print advertisements and through schools.

Recommendation 3:

Increased workforce training in relation to respectful engagement with children and young people.

Recommendation 4:

Increased youth specific services available to children and young people affected by violence.

Recommendation 5:

Increased availability of services to children and young people after hours and on weekends (i.e. a 24/7 drop-in centre in Sydney).

Recommendation 6:

Mechanisms to ensure children and young people have the means to travel safely to and from accommodation (i.e. provision of travel vouchers).

Recommendation 7:

Provisions for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness to obtain their drivers licence including reducing the costs associated with learning how to drive and linking them to learn-to-drive programs (i.e. PCYC). Insurance concessions for SHS cars which allow young people to use them.

Recommendation 8:

Increased life skill programs delivered in schools for children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness to prepare them for independent living and adulthood.

Recommendation 9:

Improvements made to the Link2home service to ensure children and young people feel respected and supported, including less wait times.

Recommendation 10:

Greater support for children and young people affected by drug and alcohol addictions including access to youth detox clinics and rehabilitation facilities increased workforce capacity to support young people with complex needs.

Recommendation 11:

Greater mental health supports from Government and non-government services, particularly in relation to acknowledging the impacts that poor mental health has on every facet of a young life.

Recommendation 12:

Greater support for young people to navigate the rental market, and ensure they are prepared to enter the private rental housing market and independent living.

Recommendation 13:

Greater opportunities for young people in regional areas to access education and training through online courses.

Recommendation 14:

When a young person feels that they are progressing and connecting into services, education and employment that they have the opportunity to remain at the service beyond three months.

In response to what is needed, children and young people reported;

“More houses for the homeless”, “more services for people in need”, “more people working less people homeless” and “help people on the streets so they can get everything they need”.



Overview

The number of children and young people experiencing homelessness, as well as the availability and access to affordable housing² is a significant issue for the NSW Government and children and young people.

According to the 2015-2016 Specialist Homelessness Services report, forty nine per cent of all people accessing Specialist Homelessness Services in NSW were between 0-24 years³. The actual number of children and young people experiencing homelessness is likely to be much higher⁴.

Children and young people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness encounter challenges across various life domains including education and learning, housing, employment, health and wellbeing and interpersonal relationships⁵ They are more likely to be engaged with the Out of the Home Care (OOHC) and Juvenile Justice systems⁶; engage in risk taking behaviours including drug and alcohol misuse and are often reliant on welfare. The prevalence of violence and abuse, trauma and poor mental health is high among young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness⁷.

In recent years, the NSW Government has demonstrated significant commitment to reducing youth homelessness. This is evident by the increased allocation of funding to support the homelessness service system; the Premier's decision to include youth homelessness as one of his twelve priority areas; and the indicator in the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2016-2019 which is concerned with increasing the rate of young people transitioning into long term accommodation⁹.

Housing and youth homelessness is a significant issue for all children and young people. During the development of the NSW Strategic Plan for children and young people, the Advocate consulted with over 4,000 children and young people. When asked about their main priorities, homelessness consistently ranked in the top ten issues that children and young people wanted to see addressed.

When combined with housing affordability, it was within the top five. In response to what is needed, children and young people reported "more houses for the homeless", "more services for people in need", "more people working, less people homeless" and "help people on the streets so they can get everything they need".

Supporting children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness is complex as they require much more than a roof over their head. They require access to education and employment, social and emotional support, safe and stable housing, access to timely and appropriate health services and sufficient income to transition successfully out of homelessness. Furthermore, as every pathway into homelessness is unique, it is important that a targeted response is provided, which meets the specific needs of the individual.

There are various misconceptions about homelessness within the broader NSW community. Youth homelessness has been portrayed as 'a choice', 'deserved', and 'a consequence of young people's drug and alcohol addictions', 'criminal behaviours' and 'poor mental health'¹⁰. Yet we heard markedly different stories. In all of the consultations, children and young people

2 SGS Economics and Planning, 2016

3 <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2015-16/>

4 Australian Bureau Statistics 2011

5 MacKenzie et al, The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia, Research Briefing, 2016

6 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2012. Children and young people at risk of social exclusion: links between homelessness, child protection and juvenile justice. Data linkage series no. 13 Cat. no. CSI 13. Canberra: AIHW

7 J P. Edidin, Z Ganim, S.J Hunter, N.S Karnik, The Mental and Physical Health of Homeless Youth: A Literature Review. Child Psychiatry Hum Dev (2012) 43:354-375

8 Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2016-2019, July 2016

9 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/premiers-priorities-list/reducing-youth-homelessness>

10 <https://youthoffthestreets.com.au/2016/04/11/myths-and-facts-about-youth-homelessness/>; <http://www.thecourier.com.au/story/2201787/break-down-homeless-youth-misconceptions/>

When asked about voice, children and young people reported feeling “invisible” and “disrespected”. One young woman, who had been experiencing homelessness since age 14 reported;

“I’m 20 now and this is the first time I’ve ever been asked to do anything like this”



spoke about their aspirations for “finishing school”, “getting my licence”, “getting a good job”, “saving some money” and “being able to rent an apartment”. They spoke about wanting to grow up within a loving family and wishing they had a “normal childhood”. Children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, without the necessary social and emotional supports, encounter significant challenges in fulfilling these life goals.

Violence against children and young people was reported as a major issue in eight of the ten consultations. Violence is one of the primary drivers of youth homelessness, and children and young people often reported not feeling safe in their family home.

Perhaps most importantly children and young people highlighted their need for supportive and respectful relationships with Government and non-Government services, adults and peers. When children and young people are provided with the right supports, at the right time, for as long as they individually need, they have the very best chance of successfully transitioning into adulthood and independence. In the majority of the consultations, children and young people reported feeling “disrespected” and “invisible”, by workers, services and the broader system. One young woman, who had been experiencing homelessness since age 14 reported, “I’m 20 now and this is the first time I’ve ever been asked to do anything like this”.

There are elements of the current service system, which are working well for children and young people. In eight of the consultations “supportive workers and services that go out of their way” were spoken about favourably. When speaking about his caseworker, one man reported “he gave a suit, which got me a job, and I am sure I wouldn’t have gotten the job without his help”. In two of the consultations, young people reported positive outcomes after seeking help from the police.

Conversely there are parts of the system

that aren’t working as well as they could. In every consultation children and young people reported needing support much earlier. Children and young people reported remaining in unsafe situations as a consequence of not knowing where to go for help or what services were available in their area. When services and supports are provided early, before a child or young person disengages from school, and before complete family breakdown occurs, there is enormous potential to positively change the trajectory of a young life.

In several of the consultations, children and young people reported feeling worried and anxious about where they were going to go after their initial three months had expired in the refuge. Young people who were working towards their goals, had secured employment, and were making concerted efforts to get their lives back on track, spoke of feeling very concerned about facing another perilous and uncertain housing situation.

It was also reported that the support system is complicated and children and young people are experiencing significant challenges in trying to navigate it. Children and young people reported needing concurrent supports across various domains (i.e. health, education, housing, employment, and financial), and the difficulties in obtaining the right support at the right time. They reported feeling frustrated when services penalised them for not turning up to appointments on time, which could have been a consequence of not having the means to travel to the appointment or not feeling physically or mentally well enough to travel to the office on the day.

When asked about what wasn't working well, children and young people spoke about not having enough to eat, skipping meals and taking drugs to avoid feeling hungry.

“Starvation is a really big issue”



Methodology

The consultations followed the ACYP Working with Children and Young People Risk Management Policy and Guidelines.

Services were provided with information in advance, which outlined the background to the consultation process and how the information would be disseminated. This information was also provided to the participants at the beginning of each consultation.

Every consultation commenced with The Advocate introducing himself, the work of the Office and the consultation process. Participants were then invited to introduce themselves. Participants were informed that they were free to leave at any time during the consultation and that any information provided would be de-identified. ACYP did not record the names or any other identifiable information against any of the information provided by the participants.

The consultations were informal and were held in a common area of a youth service, either in a head office or within a refuge. In all of the consultations, children and young people sat in a circle with the Advocate and policy advisor. In some consultations a staff member(s) from the service was present, while for other consultations all staff left the room. This was at the discretion of the children and young people and service management. Two ACYP staff were present with the children and young people at all times during the consultations.

Upon conclusion of the consultation, the Advocate informed each group of children and young people that the information they provided would be fed back to them via their service along with a copy of what other children and young people reported around the State.

Staff members from the service spoke with the Advocate prior to meeting with the children and young people and at the end to give a summary of what was raised in the consultations. Eight services in four regions of NSW were contacted in relation to the consultations. The services were contacted based on their location and general client mix.

Children and young people spoke favourably of support workers, who “stuck their neck out”, “bent the rules” and went above and beyond their core responsibilities to meet the needs of the child or young person.



Themes

I. Support Workers

The importance of support workers to children and young people, whether they were FACS caseworkers, NGO caseworkers or any other support service workers, was spoken about in every consultation. Children and young people spoke favourably of support workers, who “stuck their neck out”, “bent the rules” and went above and beyond their core responsibilities to meet the needs of the child or young person. This was consistent with earlier consultations undertaken by the Advocate with children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness for the development of the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2016-2016.

When children and young people spoke about supportive and respectful workers, they referred to workers who would “drive me to appointments”, “call and remind me to take my medication”, “help me plan and set goals, and support me to reach them”.

Children and young people spoke favourably of workers, who regularly checked in “to make sure I’m alive”, and who they felt truly listened, and who didn’t place unattainable expectations on them.

Some young people reported negative experiences of support workers within Government and non-government agencies. When children and young people spoke about unsupportive workers, “not being listened to” was often mentioned. In relation to this, one young woman reported that “if they listened to me and my brothers, I wouldn’t be here now”.

On two occasions, young people reported their experience of going to the Police Station in the very first instance and receiving assistance from Police.

A young woman, who reported regularly self harming (as a means of coping) spoke of how her case worker was not

as supportive as she could have been. Children and young people spoke about being disrespected by workers who behaved, “as if they’re the boss”.

II. Life skills

Many young people felt that they were not sufficiently equipped with the skills needed for life as an adult.

They specifically mentioned feeling unsure about:

- Paying bills and taxes
- Household chores including washing and cleaning
- Cooking
- How to read and understand the fine print in contracts
- Managing real estate agents and landlords
- Preparing for a job interview and applying for a job
- The practical steps to get into university, TAFE or employment
- How to plan for and manage assessments and general time management

Children and young people referred to specific programs being run within refuges which were assisting with building skills across these areas which they appreciated.

III. Food

Food and nutrition is a significant issue for children and young people experiencing homelessness and was mentioned in six of the consultations. Some children and young people reported positive food related experiences in services, “When workers buy the food that I want, it makes me feel good” and “when services let you take food home”. Children and young people spoke favourably about food banks and food vans; however this was mainly

Young people reported the challenges they experience in trying to afford market rent even with a rental subsidy provided by the SHS

“After rent is taken out, I have no money left to buy other things I need like food”



reported by those in Sydney as there are less services providing free food in regional NSW.

When asked about what wasn't working well, children and young people spoke about not having enough to eat, skipping meals and taking drugs to avoid feeling hungry. "Starvation is a really big issue" with one young woman reporting her experience of being hospitalised due to lack of food.

Some reported feeling unwell after being given food that was mouldy and well past the expiration date by services they were accessing.

Children and young people felt that healthy food was very expensive and out of their reach. When food vouchers were provided, it was reported that they were only accepted in stores where food and non-perishable items were significantly more expensive than other stores within the local area, and fresh food including meat and vegetables was either not available at all or very limited in supply. One young woman reported her experience of "living off cheeseburgers for \$6 a day" as she had no financial means to make healthier or alternate food choices.

The availability and accessibility of food is a major issue for children and young people in regional areas as there are often less food outlets available within the local area. Without the means to travel 15-20 kms (no public transport) to do their shopping, children and young people spoke of very limited options to buy groceries. It was reported that food outlets in regional areas often closed in the early afternoon and didn't trade over the weekend, which limited their ability to buy groceries. As a result, and in a number of consultations, children and young people spoke about their experiences of being "hungry for days".

IV. Activities

Children and young people spoke favourably about services that offered fun

activities and social events that they would otherwise not be able to engage in. Children and young people also spoke positively about services that involved them in the decision making processes and organisation of activities offered.

A few of the activities that were mentioned included: going to the movies, sailing, BBQ's and going to the beach. One young woman reported that activities such as these "make me feel I am part of a family" with another reporting that it "takes away the depression for an hour or so".

Conversely, children and young people reported feeling disrespected by services with overly restrictive policies. One young man reported his experience of a service refusing to allow him to organise any activities outside the refuge for six weeks. He was only allowed to participate in activities organised by the service. He felt his agency and freedom had been taken away.

In six of the consultations, young people reported feeling very socially isolated and felt a need for more positive safe places for children and young people to go. This was particularly important for children and young people living in violent households "if there were services, I could at least socialise, instead of staring at the ceiling all day".

V. Housing

The issue of inadequate housing options was raised in ten of the consultations. When services had access to various housing options and were able to transition children and young people from crisis into medium and longer term properties, a positive experience was reported.

Medium term housing was reported as a major issue. One young family had been waiting for suitable housing for three years.

For those old enough to be living independently or within a supported living

Others spoke of their experiences of sleeping on public transport.

“Sleeping on trains isn’t safe, there are often domestic violence situations on trains, but it’s safer than on the streets”.



arrangement, there were many concerns about the cost of the private rental market. Young people reported feeling anxious about the transition from subsidized rent to independence. Even with the support of the service, young people reported difficulties in covering their basic needs after paying housing costs. “After rent is taken out, which is highly subsidized, I have no money left for the week”.

Children and young people reported couch surfing, sleeping in parks, sand dunes and on the streets.

Others spoke about the hierarchy of sleeping rough and which public areas they felt were more or less safe to sleep. “Sleeping on trains isn’t safe... but it’s safer than on the streets”. “Buses aren’t safe either, drivers are powerless, but they’re more safe than trains”.

One young woman spoke of her experience of being placed a long distance from her original community and school by FACS as this was the closest available placement at the time. She reported commuting two hours every morning to school and three to four hours home as the availability of public transport in the afternoon was much less frequent.

VI. Transport

Fare evasion on public transport was reported an issue for children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. With very limited income or no income at all, children and young people are sometimes having to travel without valid tickets. Children and young people also reported receiving fines for sleeping on trains, buses and station platforms. Children and young people expressed concerns about safety on public transport and were supportive of increased Police or train guard presence on trains and stations. In regional areas, the challenges and costs associated with travelling are even greater with high transport fees and offering fewer concessions.

VII. Gaps in the service system

Throughout the consultations, children and young people identified gaps in the current service system. In eight consultations children and young people reported significant challenges in trying to access help and support outside business hours. Children and young people reported being kicked out after dinner, late at night or on weekends, when the majority of services aren’t open. In many of the consultations, children and young people reported the need to be able to access a safe space after hours. In three of the Sydney consultations children and young people reported that a 24 hour/7 day a week drop-in centre was needed, complete with crisis beds, social workers, food, counsellors and internet facilities. Children and young people reported the need for a safe place where you didn’t need to book a bed in advance. This was consistent with what children and young people experiencing homelessness reported in previous consultations with the Advocate.

Children and young people reported that they often first reached out to a service once they were already in crisis. They spoke about needing more support earlier.

Young people reported wanting more family support programs, which allowed children and young people to remain connected to their family, while ensuring their safety. It was reported this could be face-to-face or online. Similarly, respite services are an important option for children and young people and may help to prevent long term family break down. Young people spoke about the need for safe options to go to escape violence in the home.

One young man reported that “when I stayed I would fight with my parents which never ended well.” He would leave home during tough times, and found it challenging to always be reliant on a mate for a place to crash. He reported, “feeling really bad when I can’t give anything to my mates when I crash at their place.”

Violence was one of the major themes throughout the consultations. Children and young people feel greater recognition is needed in relation to the violence and abuse they are experiencing in their homes, and that greater respect and support is needed to overcome the trauma endured.



He felt that it was important for young people to remain connected with their families, and for them to feel safe in doing so. Respite services, in conjunction with family support programs provide families with greater opportunities to work through their grievances and increase the likelihood that children and young people can remain in the family home.

Young people reported that there are significant gaps in the system for children and young people accessing detox and rehabilitation facilities, Juvenile Justice and post release accommodation.

For example, one young man spoke about leaving a detox facility and being refused help by several youth accommodation services, due to his “high needs”.

Young people reported that too many young people with complex drug and alcohol and mental health needs were in homelessness refuges that should be in rehabilitation services.

Young people reported that the support available to them, if they had complex drug addictions was not adequate, nor available, or had long waiting lists.

One young man reported “I’ll go to juvey if I’m homeless, can’t get kicked out of juvey. If I get arrested, at least I have a roof over my head and a feed. They look after you in juvey”.

Young people reported that many parts of the support system weren’t supportive of young people with complex mental health needs. One example that was reported was regarding appointments with job providers and Centrelink. Young people reported the challenges they experienced in attending appointments due to their poor health, which then led to payments being cut or withheld. One young man reported, “The system is set up so that once a young person has a job and a house then they’re fine. But I’m not fine, I have all these issues that I can’t cope with and then because I can’t cope I can’t work and I lose

my house.”

Children and young people reported wanting a more flexible system that was accommodating and responsive to their mental health needs.

In one consultation, young people raised the issue of not being able to wash their clothes or themselves, and suggested coin operated washing machine facilities and showers would be useful. These services could be located in central areas frequented by children and young people (i.e. Central station or other major transport hubs).

Violence was a major theme throughout the consultations. Children and young people feel greater recognition is needed in relation to the violence and abuse they are experiencing in their homes, and that greater respect and support is needed to overcome the trauma endured.

Young people spoke about the process of receiving money or a letter from victims services, “Money isn’t enough; we live with this everyday”.

Young people spoke favourably of workers who acknowledged that “Domestic Violence is against young people, not just physical violence between mum and dad”. However in the majority of experiences shared by children and young people, it was reported they felt disrespected by some of the workers in the service system.

Young people felt there was too much emphasis on family restoration, even in situations where significant violence was reported and known to authorities. One young woman spoke of being hospitalised for three days after being beaten by her parent. She was returned to the violent household upon discharge from the hospital, against her wishes.

The lack of youth specific violence related services was raised in eight of the consultations and was identified as a major gap in the service system. Children and

Children and young people with complex needs reported more support is needed,

“The system is set up so that once a young person has a job and a house then they’re fine. But I’m not fine, I have all these issues that I can’t cope with and then because I can’t cope I can’t work and I lose my house.”



young people reported significant violence and abuse and in two consultations exploitation.

Schools are well placed to monitor family situations where children and young people might be at risk of violence and abuse. Some schools in NSW are already undertaking risk assessments of students however there are opportunities for schools to play a bigger role in ensuring the safety of the children and young people and linking them into services earlier.

VIII. Mental health

Children and young people spoke about their mental health concerns in most of the consultations. Depression, anxiety, and trauma were most often reported.

Headspace is working well for some children and young people, with one young man reporting that “Headspace has kept me alive”. It was also reported that Headspace offered a beneficial service to young people who didn’t feel comfortable accessing a mainstream doctor. In some regions however, there are wait lists, which is problematic for children and young people who need more immediate treatment. In certain cases, particularly in crisis refuges, children and young people may not be engaged with a service long enough to wait for an appointment.

In five of the ten consultations, young people reported being unable to work due to experiencing poor mental health. One young man spoke about being “terrified of police, employers, anyone with authority.” He hasn’t been able to work for four years.

Children and young people reported that mental health services are frequently diagnosing their behavioural issues as mental health issues and that in many cases they were offered medication. They reported feeling like there were not enough alternative approaches available. One young man reported, “I feel like an alien cause I have to take these meds everyday”.

IX. Awareness of services available

In nine of the consultations, children and young people reported not feeling confident about what services were available in their local area. Children and young people often don’t access a service until they are in crisis.

One young man reported that he “spent weeks on the street because I didn’t know where to go or what was available”.

This was a common theme across all regions. Many reported staying in unsafe situations for much longer than they wanted to, simply because they had no idea of what to do or where to go. “I didn’t know about the service, I wish I had known earlier”.

Children and young people reported the need for greater access to information and for the information to be available much earlier. While there is a lot of information currently available it is dispersed across various Government and non-government websites, making it challenging for a child or young person in crisis to access, or if access to the Internet is limited.

Children and young people reported being kicked out of home unexpectedly, and finding themselves on the streets with no idea of where to go. Although the majority of children and young people reported having a phone, the issue of limited or no phone credit was a major issue. Young people spoke about the importance of having a phone, yet also reported that the phone was often the first thing sold in an emergency or when money was needed to buy basic items including food.

In nine consultations, children and young people provided suggestions about how information could be distributed to better meet their needs. In Sydney, the overwhelming majority of children and young people felt that advertisements on popular social media sites including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Snap Chat would be beneficial. It was also

Children and young reported wanting more information about how to access services via social media sites including Facebook , Instagram and YouTube as well as and radio and TV.



reported that commercial radio would be an effective mechanism to get messages to children and young people. In some regional areas, children and young people agreed social media would be an effective platform, and they also suggested TV advertisements would be more useful than radio. Other suggestions were links on Twitter and advertisements on Seek.com which would be seen by young people while searching for employment. Others suggested that large advertisements promoting a helpline or website would be helpful for children and young people who are looking for support. Locations included bus shelters and train stations (i.e. Central station in Sydney) and other major transport hubs, at shopping centres and on the back of toilet doors.

Many children and young people felt that there are significant opportunities for schools to better support children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. In addition to one-on-one support with school counsellors and other school staff, children and young people suggested that information should be provided to students about the issue of youth homelessness and the support services available in the local area. It was suggested that the issue be discussed in PDHPE class from year 9 and Link2Home cards should be distributed in school. One young man's response was "lots of kids are being kicked out from my school, so knowing more about where to go and what to do would be really helpful". By openly discussing the issue, schools could play a significant role in reducing the stigma often felt by children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and could lead to accessing services much earlier. This is consistent with previous consultations with children and young people who reported youth homelessness and housing to be major issues in their communities.

X. Financial support

In eight of the ten consultations, the issue of income was raised and was of significant

concern. Children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness feel stressed and anxious about their financial insecurity.

For younger aged children, there was the issue of not having access to any income at all. Those that were ineligible for financial support reported having to "search the streets for coins to buy food."

As mentioned earlier, lack of financial support can lead to fare evasion on public transport among this group of children and young people.

Young people on welfare reported difficulties covering their basic needs and meals were often skipped in order to pay for, transport, school books or TAFE fees. Young people reported never having any money leftover to "go to the movies or just do something fun". One young man reported not being able to afford his medication. In three of the consultations, young people reported that it was only possible for them to afford rent as they were recipients of multiple welfare payments (child support and disability).

Young people reported the difficulties they encounter due to the inflexibility of the welfare system, "if you miss an appointment with your welfare officer, your payment gets cut". This was particularly relevant for young people in regional areas who have further distances to travel and limited transport options. In one consultation, young people reported feeling uncertain about possible changes to their welfare payments and the unlikelihood of being told in advance.

In two consultations, young people who had come to Australia from New Zealand with their families raised their issues regarding eligibility. For these young people, who are excluded from accessing any kind of financial support and health care, financial independence is impossible. These children and young people are solely reliant on NGO support and one young man reported being taken advantage of by a service because of his dependence on

One young person expressed the following,

“Schools are a safe place for most kids, but they need to understand, work with and support young people with challenging behaviours better”.



them.

XI. Staying connected

Children and young people reported the importance of being able to stay connected to friends and peers. Some children and young people stated that public places that offer Wi-Fi including libraries and some fast food outlets are working well for them. Children and young people also spoke favourably about when services permitted them to use computers for personal use including browsing social media sites. For children and young people that don't have phones, staying connected is much harder.

XII. Learning to drive

Having the ability to drive significantly affects a young person's ability to be independent and particularly for those living in regional areas, it directly affects their employment opportunities. For young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, obtaining a drivers licence is very challenging. For some young people it's impossible. In one consultation, young people reported that they would have to wait until they were 25 years old before they could learn to drive, despite having a desire to learn.

Young people reported that the costs associated with learning to drive, including paying for the written and practical tests and lessons were prohibitively expensive. In lieu of private lessons, it was reported that access to a sufficiently licenced driver or adequately insured car were additional barriers.

It was reported that driving lessons that are included in OOHHC plans are working well, yet there is a discrepancy between the hours allocated in the plan, and the total amount required to obtain a licence. Young people reported difficulties in covering the hours not included in the plan for the same reasons as listed above.

Young people suggested that Specialist

Homelessness Services should be able to teach them how to drive as part of their case management plans. If refugees were granted insurance concessions and could insure their cars for learner drivers, young people in refuges would have greater opportunities to gain their licence.

XIII. Education

Schools

The overwhelming majority of children and young people thought that schools, TAFE and other equivalent learning services should do more to support children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

One young person expressed the following, "schools are a safe place for most kids, but they need to understand, work with and support young people with challenging behaviours better".

Some young people reported receiving positive support from their school counsellor, even when they were no longer at the school. Most however reported feeling as though their school didn't understand how their experience of homelessness was impacting their ability to learn.

In one of the consultations children and young people spoke of an existing relationship between the school and local housing support service and how well this collaboration was working for children and young people in the area.

Higher education

Young people reported difficulties in navigating the TAFE system including completing assessments on time, and felt greater learning supports should be available to those young people that need a bit of extra help. Young people spoke about the limited courses offered by their local TAFE, and that due to the high cost of public transport in the area, commuting to the larger TAFE, which offered a greater

When asked about employment, young people reported,

“Certificates are expensive, I can’t afford to get a bunch of certificates”, and “how can I get experience if I can’t get a job to gain the experience?”



selection of courses, not an option. Some young people in regional areas reported having fewer opportunities to pursue study and work interests than other young people.

XIV. Employment

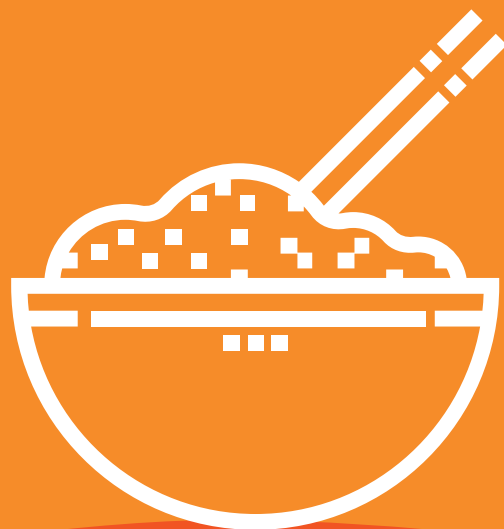
Children and young people reported feeling concerned about their employment prospects. Young people reported that finding work in a small town was always difficult as there were limited jobs. As mentioned earlier, the cost of public transport made it more difficult for young people to travel to a different town to find work. Of the positions that were available in the local area, those in the older age groups (20-24 year olds) spoke about entry level jobs being given to those younger in age as they could be legally paid less by an employer, which made them the preferred candidate. An additional barrier to employment that young people spoke about, was the unrealistic expectations of employers regarding previous work experience and qualifications for entry level jobs. Young people reported, “certificates are expensive, I can’t afford to get a bunch of certificates”, and “how can I get experience if I can’t get a job to gain the experience?”

Employment was a particularly big issue for early school leavers. One young man (24 years) who had disengaged from school in Year 9 reported his difficulty in pursuing further education, and was unable to find any employment. He spoke about having extremely “limited opportunities for life”.

Young people suggested that more work experience opportunities needs to be included in the school system and from an earlier age. This will ensure that when young people finish school, they have the skills necessary to gain employment.

When asked about their interactions with the service system, one young man said,

“A hot meal, just something, I don’t want to be told there isn’t anything they can do for me”.



Link2Home

The Link2Home service was known to forty-nine children and young people, and ten had not heard of the service. Some children and young people reported a positive experience, yet many children and young people's response in relation to the efficacy of the service was that it is not working well for children and young people. Children and young people spoke about having to re-tell their story each time they called the line and the re-traumatisation this caused them.

Children and young people reported mixed experiences of their engagement with Link2Home workers. Some children and young people spoke favourably about workers who "made a real effort to change their situation" by calling other services on their behalf, calling the child or young person back if the call was terminated and giving the young caller's number out to homelessness services so they could call the young person directly. Children and young people viewed these as positive experiences, even in situations where accommodation wasn't provided. Similarly when Link2Home workers returned to the young person throughout the call and provided an update, even when there was no specific outcome to report, young people felt "less anxious", "reassured" and "a little bit supported".

In eight of the consultations children and young people reported long wait times and felt the initial assessment process was onerous. Some children and young people understood that the Link2Home service is limited in its capacity to provide support, given the shortage of physical accommodation available across the State. However they expressed a desire to be provided with some form of support. One young man said, "A hot meal, just something, I don't want to be told there isn't anything they can do for me".

When accommodation couldn't be provided by Link2Home, young people

reported being encouraged to stay somewhere safe and call back at a later time.

On occasions when accommodation was organised by Link2Home, two main issues were raised. The first was in relation to the provision of appropriate temporary accommodation. Young people also raised issues about the safety of some accommodation they were placed in. The second is in relation to the difficulties children and young people encounter in reaching accommodation provided by Link2Home due to limited transport, no money to travel and/or the property being a considerable distance away. Children and young people reported being kicked out of home late at night without any money and having to "hitch-hike", "walk long distances in the dark" and "beg the bus driver for a free ride".

On occasions when temporary accommodation was provided, children and young people reported difficulties in returning to the housing office within the two day timeframe due to limited transport in the area and/or financial means to pay for the transport to travel. This was particularly relevant for young people in regional areas or when the accommodation provided was a long way from the housing office.

In response to the difficulties experienced in traveling to and from accommodation, it was suggested that travel vouchers could be provided to children and young people in need. It was reported that vouchers would need to be available from shops or services with extended trading hours. Suggestions made by the children and young people were dependent on what was available in their area, examples included, Woolworths, 7eleven or Police stations. Other young people felt an opal card that could be topped up remotely by Link2Home would also be helpful.

Children and young people without access

When temporary accommodation was provided, and young people believed they would finally be safe, the following was reported,

“I had drunk people banging on my door at 2am (young woman 16 years) and “my experiences of TA were similar to that of a crack den” (Male 15 years)



to a phone reported difficulties accessing Link2Home. “Accessing the service without a phone was hard” and “It’s ok if I can use a refuge’s phone however when I was younger and without any income, calling was hard”.

It was suggested by young people that Link2Home should provide a ‘live’ listing of the vacancies on the Link2Home website, which would allow children and young people to check the availability online without calling Link2Home.



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