

# Under 16 Homelessness Taskforce

## Ministerial Advice Summary



December 2019

# **Preface/ Acknowledgements**

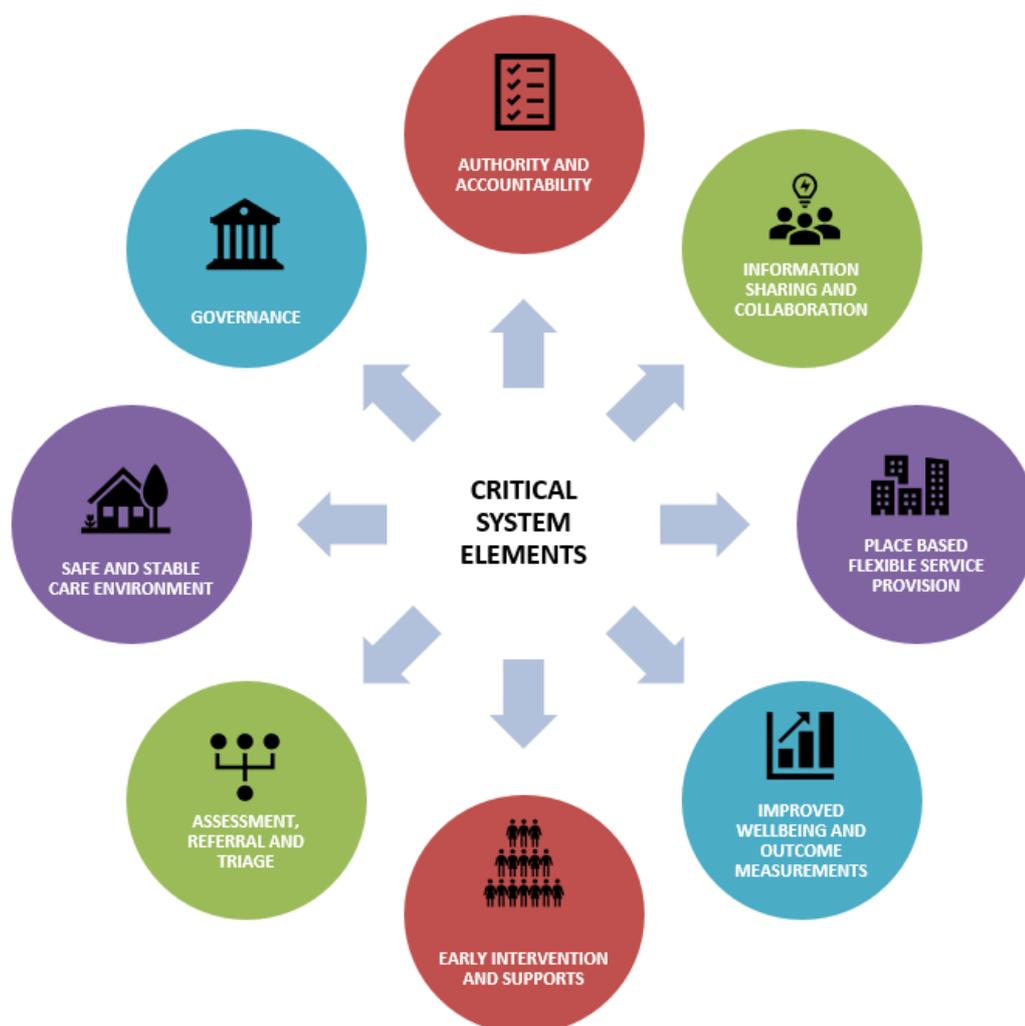
Members of the Taskforce would like to thank all the children, young people, parents, carers, service providers and members of the State Service who participated in this process. Without your support, honest and open feedback this advice could not have been created.

# Executive Summary

- The number of unaccompanied children, under the age of 16, who are presenting to homeless services is increasing. Available data suggests that 98 children aged between 12-15 years presented alone (without an accompanying adult) to homeless shelters in Tasmania, which has increased by 39 per cent over the last two years.
- It is clearly arguable that these children are the most vulnerable in our society, they have no care and no financial means, making them highly exposed to predation, physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse and detention.
- No service sector or agency has explicit accountability to address the care and wellbeing needs of these children. As a result, these children often fall through the gaps of service provision, and the problem is hidden.
- Service providers have indicated that the age these children are presenting to shelters is getting younger, and that they are presenting with increasing complexities.
- There are gaps and limitations to the current service response for these unaccompanied children.
- Given the complex issues faced by these children and their age, the Taskforce has identified that the problem is not *'homelessness'* but rather, *'carelessness'*. **That is, this is a cohort of children who are currently surviving without the stable care, protection or shelter needed for adequate physical, social and emotional development**
- While data on this cohort and their characteristics is limited, available data indicates, the number of children in this cohort appears to be small and the problem is solvable.
- Consistent with Australian research findings, the findings from consultations undertaken by the Taskforce Secretariat with Tasmanian children, parents and service providers found that the leading reasons these unaccompanied children leave their home predominately were family relationship breakdown, exposure to family violence, trauma, abuse and neglect.
- By not addressing these issues, these children face an increased risk of intergenerational disadvantage. The Tasmanian government and community will bear the increased service costs over the life course of these children.
- The Tasmanian government also has an obligation as outlined in international conventions, national frameworks and state legislation, as well as a moral imperative to provide children with care, protection and a stable home environment.
- There are a number of points of interaction between Government Agencies and children that should trigger a coordinated and integrated response where children are identified as being at risk, most notably these include, children disengaging from education, children that come to the attention of Tasmanian Police and the Youth Justice System, children presenting to Homelessness Services, children that are identified in our family and youth service system, children presenting to adolescent health services, and children in Out of Home Care.
- The Taskforce Secretariat consulted with over 300 people, including children and young people (aged between 11 and 18 years), who had experienced homelessness, parents or carers of young people who had experienced homelessness, service providers that work

with homeless children and young people, peak organisations and members of the general public.

- Experience of family violence was common, as was personal and parental mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse. Service providers corroborated research findings that *'Family relationship breakdown'* and *'family violence'*, *'trauma'*, *'abuse and neglect'* were the leading causes of Under 16 Homelessness.
- Service providers stressed the need to resolve which service sector(s) and agency(s) have accountability for these children and their families. The three most important services to support families of children/young people were *'family supports'*, *'family mediation and counselling'*. *'Long term family support'* and *'family mediation and counselling'* were identified as the key things required for a child or young person to return home, if it was safe to return.
- After consideration of best practice research and feedback provided during the consultation process, the Taskforce has heard and agree that any response will require immediate action for known issues and long-term evidence and place-based solutions. The Taskforce identified eight 'critical service system elements' required to better respond to unaccompanied children under 16 in Tasmania. To solve this problem, it is important to address each of these critical elements.



# Next Steps

The Taskforce acknowledges that many actions detailed in this advice require additional development and that over the long term, co-design of a redesigned service sector needs to occur with Government, Community Sector, parents/carers and unaccompanied children who are under 16.

Given the complexities and level of strategic thinking and engagement required to progress these actions, the Taskforce recommends that the Tasmanian Government establish a project team within the Department of Communities Tasmania to manage the implementation process.

Proposed initiatives that have been recommended for the 'Next Steps' are outlined in more detail in the next section of this advice. These have been grouped under three key action areas, which include:

## Proposed Immediate Initiatives (Next 12 Months)

### Action for known Children

1. Immediately establish a point of authority and accountability for responding to the immediate needs of children under 16 that are unaccompanied.
2. The piloting of Care Teams to provide an integrated triage and assessment system which is based on the child and youth wellbeing framework.
3. Increase capacity across the current service system to undertake individualised case coordination/case management and advocacy (including after hours) for children under 16 who are currently known to services across the three regions of Tasmania.
4. Scope the utilisation of existing services such as the Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Service or Housing Connect as the single assessment, referral and triage point for unaccompanied children under the age of 16 years, including training staff to provide a response and educating the community on the broader role of this service.
5. Take immediate action to integrate the response for these children across existing service systems based on the six domains of wellbeing, including consideration of appropriate models of co-location.

### Building a Solid Foundation

6. Government endorsement of the guiding principles (Appendix 8) created by the Taskforce, which will help inform any future policy development.
7. Establishment of a policy design group that will consist of representatives from government, consumers and the sector.
8. Continued promotion of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework, and finalisation of the Outcomes Framework for Child and Youth Wellbeing.
9. Agreement on appropriate governance and reporting requirements for implementation of Taskforce recommendations.

## Service System Redesign

10. Commit to a co-design of the service system with relevant Government agencies, the sector, peak bodies, young people and their families for each aspect of a new service system model.
11. Commit to funding of a secretariat that is dedicated to the codesign and implementation of the redesigned service system.

## Proposed Long-Term Initiatives

### Action for known Children

12. Identify specific service requirements for communities, for example, family support services that build on strengths and focus on family preservation, co-designed 24/7 response centre/support hubs, crisis, medium to long term care, outreach housing and supports, etc.
13. Pilot a child centred and co-ordinated case management service system that is based on the child case and care plans and tracked through an appropriately designed case management system.
14. Identify place-based services/initiatives that could be prioritised across each region (including remote and regional Tasmania).

### Building a Solid Foundation

15. The policy design group will focus on aligning the legislative, regulatory and service responses. This would include:
  - Review and provision of advice to the Minister on the legislative and regulatory mechanisms available to make the health, wellbeing and developmental needs of vulnerable and unaccompanied children a priority for all government agencies;
  - Review and provision of advice to the Minister on the regulatory provisions that could assist in the development of a safe, effective, robust and flexible service system that is underpinned by appropriate service standards that can be delivered by an appropriately trained workforce;
  - Review and provision of advice to the Minister on how to monitor and report on the economic and social investments and value that are being generated by the service system through implementation of the Taskforce initiatives;
  - Review of service commissioning models to allow for a demand driven, flexible client centred and place-based approach with appropriate outcomes and impact measurement that will support ongoing and flexible investments; and
  - Provision of advice to the Minister on the legislative authority required to support decision making for children under the age of 16 where no effective guardian is available.
16. Strengthen provisions for authority and accountability achieved through the development of a clear policy position (overarching policy framework and possible legislative changes).

17. Offer national leadership by developing the first inclusive child and youth homelessness strategy in Australia to address child and youth homelessness (up to the age of 24). The strategy should include:
  - A vision to ensure that no Tasmanian child will be without care for their health, wellbeing and development irrespective of their circumstances.
  - A mission to ensure that every Tasmanian child who is homeless or at risk of homelessness has access to safe, caring and developmentally focussed services that ensure the health, wellbeing and development of that child by 2023.
  - A goal to codesign flexible, demand driven, client centred and regionally defined place-based service systems that meet the vision and mission by December 2023.
18. Improved understanding of the current system through the mapping the state and commonwealth direct investment into addressing the absence of care for children.
19. Develop agreed standards for organisations/individuals working with unaccompanied children under 16.
20. Consider new mechanisms to improve data sharing and collaboration across government and community sectors.
21. Incorporate outcome measurements into existing and new funding agreements.
22. Improve linkages with education and other data sets to raise flags earlier that a child may be at risk.
23. Strengthen provisions for data sharing achieved through technology, legislative and/or policy mechanisms.
24. Develop an integrated database and case management system that can access data and information from across all of the relevant service systems in order to ensure the best possible care and service co-ordination options are provided for children who are at risk.
25. Ongoing monitoring and reporting on Taskforce recommendations.

### **Service System Redesign**

26. Establish a co-design and implementation group which will be comprised of relevant government agencies, key service stakeholders, young people and their families. This group would be co-chaired by the Department of Communities Tasmania and a community sector representative. This redesign process will consider existing Government reforms, including:
  - The Youth at Risk Strategy;
  - The Affordable Housing Strategy;
  - Strong Families, Safe Kids;
  - Out of Home Care Foundation Project;
  - The review of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services;
  - The reform Agenda for Alcohol and other Drugs;
  - Safe Homes, Safe Families; and
  - The Department of Education *Student Engagement Action Plan 2018 – 2020*.

27. The reshaping of existing services or commissioning of new services to address community need. This may include piloting of the following promising programs (dependent on community need):
- Pilot the “Geelong Project” model with selected schools to create a focus within the service system on early identification of risk, intervention and prevention.
  - Pilot a “Lighthouse” like model which has a Housing First approach for children who are homeless and are able to live in a shared house with trained carers who live on site.
  - Pilot a “Safe House” response model to meet crisis and emergency accommodation needs in regional areas using existing available capacity in approved homes with trained and available carers.
28. Consideration by Housing Tasmania to reprioritise housing stock to support initiative 27.
29. Communication and education with relevant stakeholders to ensure a clear understanding of the revised service system and referral pathways.

## Attachments

Under 16 Homelessness Taskforce Ministerial Advice