



Social  
Futures



Submission to  
Commonwealth Parliament inquiry  
into homelessness in Australia

June 2020

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## About Social Futures

Social Futures is a regionally based not-for-profit operating for more than 40 years. Our service footprint reaches across more than 50 per cent of NSW and we are experts in tailoring programs to fit our diverse local communities.

We create positive social change in regional Australia, working directly with individuals, families, communities, organisations and governments across our focus areas of homelessness and housing, youth and family, community inclusivity and programs that promote genuine participation for people with disability.

We are a regional leader and work alongside our partner organisations to strengthen and build capacity within the community services sector by providing training, development and advocacy.

In 2018-19 Social Futures supported over 20,000 participants through our programs and services.

Social Futures is a leading provider of housing support services in Northern NSW. We deliver specialist homelessness services across the Northern District of NSW including Tweed, Byron, Ballina, Lismore, Kyogle, Richmond and Clarence Local Government Areas.

Our Connecting Home program works with people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, to achieve long-term housing goals.

Connecting Home Youth and Northern Youth Project also assists young people (16-24 years old) by intervening early to prevent homelessness or assist people who are already experiencing homelessness to break the cycle of homelessness.

Social Futures delivers a number of early intervention and prevention programs designed to work with children and young people around mental health and wellbeing, drugs and alcohol, and reconnecting them to their families, education and communities.

## Recommendations

### **Maintain increase to JobSeeker and student payments**

Recommendation 1 - Increase pathways for people to access and sustain housing through the private rental market by maintaining increased JobSeeker and student payments and increase rent assistance.

### **Social housing investment**

Recommendation 2 – Make significant investment in supply-side with a focus on ongoing growth of social housing stock at a minimum of 15,000 new social housing dwellings every year for the next 10 years.

### **Planning and allocation of resources**

Recommendation 3 – Undertake careful planning to ensure that allocation of resources to increase affordable and social housing stock as well as funding for specialist homelessness services is targeted to the areas that need it (including regional Australia) to enable people to remain in their communities and access the support they need.

Recommendation 4 – Ensure planning and allocation of resources responds to the very high over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the homeless population, with targets and strategies designed in consultation with communities.

Recommendation 5 – Ensure a systemic regional delivery approach to all specialist homelessness services and social housing providers to accurately track and capture the incidence of homelessness within communities and provide for equitable, coordinated and needs-based allocation of resources.

### **Service delivery**

Recommendation 6 - Invest in Housing First models with a greater focus on medium and long term housing provision as well as crisis and transitional accommodation. For people with complex needs, a history of trauma and/or multiple episodes of homelessness, support duration should exceed 12 months and up to three years to ensure housing outcomes are sustained.

### **Early intervention and prevention**

Recommendation 7 – Expand investment into early intervention and prevention programs such as Reconnect and community of school and services (COSS) models.

Recommendation 8 - Increase funding for community based mental health and drug and alcohol programs with a particular focus on early intervention for children and young people under 18 years.

Recommendation 9 – Increase investment in youth-specific social housing and alternative housing models that provide support in regional areas and move away from youth refuge models.

Recommendation 10 – Increase resources nationally to provide support for young people exiting out of home care or institutional care including custodial settings.

## Introduction: housing and homelessness in regional Australia

While much of the nation's attention remains focused on housing issues and rough sleepers in metropolitan areas, many regional communities are experiencing significant and growing housing stress and high rates of homelessness with a combination of risk factors such as low incomes, high unemployment, lack of public transport, higher rates of welfare dependency and social disadvantage. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians living in regional areas, these issues may be compounded by continuing racial discrimination and the legacy of past policy.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience homelessness at a much higher rate (361 persons per 10,000) than the total Australian population (50 persons per 10,000). At the 2016 census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were significantly over-represented in homelessness estimates (20 per cent) and in supported accommodation (14 per cent) while comprising just three per cent of the total Australian population. It is important to note that despite improvements in enumeration strategies, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the incidence of homelessness are both likely to be under counted in the Australian Census.<sup>1</sup>

While some inroads have been made in reducing the rate of homelessness in remote areas, rates of homelessness in many areas of regional and remote Australia remain high with significant pockets of social disadvantage.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the growth in homelessness in metropolitan and urbanised areas may be due to people leaving remote and regional communities to gain access to services and support. Inadequate specialist homelessness service (SHS) capacity along with a lack of appropriate social housing investment in some areas may be driving movement of homelessness into urban clusters and masking the origins of the homelessness.<sup>3</sup>

Moving to a new town or big city when you are struggling to find housing or employment work in your own community is not the panacea some people may think. Moving means a loss of vital support networks – networks that are often key to finding stable work and housing - and can exacerbate existing traumas and mental health issues. And while people may initially move to inner city centres to access support, they often ultimately end up in the areas with the most affordable housing, on the edges of urban centres, far away from employment opportunities and services – leading to greater concentration of social disadvantage.

It is vital that the allocation and supply of affordable and social housing, as well as funding for SHS and key early intervention services, enables people to remain in their communities and access the support they need. Careful planning is needed to ensure funding and resources are allocated where they are needed and remain agile and flexible to deliver the right housing mix and support needed in different regions and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2018) Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness 2016. Cat No. 2049.0.

<sup>2</sup> Parkinson, S., Batterham, D., Reynolds, M. and Wood, G. (2019) *The Changing Geography of Homelessness: A Spatial Analysis from 2001 to 2016*, AHURI Final Report 313, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, [www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/313](http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/313)

<sup>3</sup> Parkinson, Batterham, Reynolds, and Wood (2019).

While we know the risk factors that may lead an individual to experience homelessness, the biggest driver of homelessness in Australia remains housing affordability, and its affects are felt by communities in remote and regional communities as well our capital cities.

## Homelessness in Northern NSW

Social Futures is a leading provider of SHS in Northern NSW from Grafton to Tweed. We also have a long history of delivering early intervention programs for at risk young people.

Northern NSW suffers from chronic homelessness issues. Like many regional communities, it is characterised by relatively low incomes, lack of employment opportunities, high welfare dependency, significant pockets of social disadvantage, limited stocks of affordable housing (especially in the coastal areas) and a lack of regular public transport. The Northern NSW region has an above average Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population at 4.4 per cent compared to the national average of 2.9 per cent.

This combination of high rents and a critical shortage of available rental accommodation has created severe housing stress among a considerable portion of the community, forcing many into homelessness. With the growth in tourism in some coastal communities, property values have soared and increasing numbers of dwellings are used as short term rental accommodation for visitors and tourists, further reducing available and affordable housing stock for people in the private rental market.

The Richmond Federal Electorate was ranked third highest across the whole of Australia for rental stress at 43 per cent (7,390 households).<sup>4</sup> Housing stress is particularly high among renter households at 38.8 per cent compared to 28.4 per cent for NSW and 28 per cent for Australia.<sup>5</sup> The four least affordable local government areas for renters in regional NSW are located within the Northern Rivers.<sup>6</sup>

The average monthly rental vacancy rate for the Northern Rivers over the 12 months to April 2020 was 1.8 per cent. This is a very tight market compared to Sydney where the vacancy rate is 3.4 per cent. There is substantial pressure in regional housing markets in NSW with most of the regional markets surveyed recording average monthly vacancy rates of 2 per cent or less over the same period<sup>7</sup>.

While the Northern Rivers only represents 4 per cent of the NSW population the region recorded 18.7 per cent of the State's rough sleepers on Census night in 2016 (up from 18.4 per cent in 2011).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Everybody's Home (2018) *Everybody's Home Campaign*.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) *ABS Census of Population and Housing data housing stress analysis* (as per the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling definition of housing stress).

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, M. (2018) *The Affordable Housing Income Gap: A new way to measure housing affordability 2018 report*, Compass Housing Services, Newcastle.

<sup>7</sup> REINSW (2020) *Vacancy Rate Survey Results 12 months to April 2020*, available at [www.reinsw.com.au/Web/Members/Property\\_data/Vacancy\\_Rates\\_Survey.aspx](http://www.reinsw.com.au/Web/Members/Property_data/Vacancy_Rates_Survey.aspx).

<sup>8</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2016) *Census of Population and Housing 2016, Quick Stats*.

## Housing affordability in the private rental market

**Recommendation 1 - Increase pathways for people to access and sustain housing through the private rental market by maintaining increased JobSeeker and student payments and increase the rent assistance.**

With low levels of housing affordability and low rental vacancy rates there are limited opportunities for people experiencing homelessness to obtain and sustain affordable tenancies and break the cycle of homelessness.

The cost of basic essentials, and particularly housing, has risen at a significantly higher rate than unemployment benefits which were last increased in real terms in 1994. Prior to the changes brought in to support payments during the coronavirus pandemic, fifty-five per cent of people receiving JobSeeker payments were living below the poverty line.<sup>9</sup>

According to the national housing campaign *Everybody's Home*, two in five people remain in rental stress even after receiving rent assistance.<sup>10</sup>

Renter households on fixed incomes in regional communities like the NSW North Coast have been highly vulnerable and carrying considerable stress within our housing system for some years. Now they are on the front line of Australia's economic crisis, with many at risk of homelessness. A permanent increase to the rate of the JobSeeker and student payments of at least 30 per cent would offer relief to thousands of Australian households in precarious private tenancies.

### Private rental market – not a solution for everyone

Even with an increase to benefits, the growing unaffordability of the housing market will continue to lock many people out of private rentals.

Every year the Anglicare *Rental Affordability Snapshot* analyses dwellings advertised for rent in locations across Australia and reports on their affordability and suitability for low-income households on defined fixed incomes. In North Coast NSW (Tweed to Port Macquarie) 955 properties were advertised for rent on the snapshot weekend of 21 March 2020. Of the properties advertised and included in the snapshot:

- only 19 properties (2 per cent) were suitable for a couple on the aged pension without placing them in housing stress
- just one property was suitable for a couple both on JobSeeker Payment with two children<sup>11</sup>
- eight properties were suitable for a single person the Age Pension
- two properties were suitable for a single person aged over 21 years on Disability Support Pension
- nine properties were suitable for single parent on minimum wage with Family Tax Benefit A and B with two children

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Council of Social Services (2019) *Raise the Rate campaign*, available at [www.raisetherate.org.au/](http://www.raisetherate.org.au/)

<sup>10</sup> Everybody's Home (2020) *A better deal for renters*, available at [everybodyshome.com.au/](http://everybodyshome.com.au/)

<sup>11</sup> Note: defined as one child aged less than five years and one aged less than ten years.



- 205 properties (21 per cent) were suitable for a couple on minimum wage with Family Tax Benefit A and B with two children
- 24 properties (three per cent) were suitable for single person on minimum wage
- no properties at all were found to be suitable for single parent households on Single Parenting Payment or JobSeeker Payment
- no properties were suitable for a single adult on the JobSeeker Payment or Youth Allowance, including those on Youth Allowance in a share house.<sup>12</sup>

When the Australian Government announced a temporary six-month increase to some government payments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Anglicare reanalysed their 2020 rental market snapshot data to consider what would happen to affordability of private rental accommodation if the increases in payments were made permanent. Anglicare found that while welfare increases have given some households badly needed relief, the rental market in North Coast NSW is still failing people on the lowest incomes. Their analysis found a person out of work can afford less than two percent of rental properties available even with their payments doubled. A person on the aged pension can afford just one per cent of rentals and none were suitable for a person on Disability Support Pension.

Anglicare found the Coronavirus Supplement leaves couples with children somewhat better able to compete in the private rental market, with an out of work couple with two children seeing an eight per cent increase in affordability, while single parents on government payments see little benefit to private rental affordability with just four of the 955 listings considered suitable and affordable. A person on Youth Allowance looking for a share house can afford less than one per cent of rental properties listed with increased payments.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Anglicare North Coast (2020) *Rental Affordability Snapshot 2020 North Coast NSW*, Anglicare North Coast, Grafton, available at [www.anglicarenorthcoast.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Anglicare-Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-2020-NSW-North-Coast.pdf](http://www.anglicarenorthcoast.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Anglicare-Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-2020-NSW-North-Coast.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Anglicare North Coast (2020).



## Social Housing: an impact investment

**Recommendation 2 – Make significant investment in supply-side with a focus on ongoing growth of social housing stock at a minimum of 15,000 new social housing dwellings every year for the next 10 years.**

There is increasing evidence that the private property and rental markets do not work effectively for many of the most vulnerable Australians. Supply-side responses to housing are critical to preventing and resolving the homelessness crisis in Australia. Significant ongoing investment in social housing is needed if support services are to be effective.

Waiting lists for public housing remain long and there has been a decrease in capital investment in social housing each year since the 2012–2013 financial year, with the supply of social housing failing to keep pace with household growth.<sup>14</sup>

Analysis from UNSW City Futures Research Centre and Everybody's Home found Australia will need over one million new social and affordable homes by 2036. Nearly one third (316,700) of those will be needed in NSW; 99,700 of those outside of Greater Sydney.<sup>15</sup>

The Northern Rivers has a significant social housing shortfall with just 3 per cent social housing compared to an average of 4.2 per cent for regional NSW. In Richmond-Tweed 6,500 social dwellings and 3,500 affordable dwellings are needed immediately. A further 3,800 social and 1,600 affordable dwellings are needed now in Coffs Harbour-Grafton.

While the NSW Government has signed up to a global agreement to halve street homelessness by 2025, and provided funding for three Assertive Outreach pilot programs, significant financial investment and policy measures to support the development of social and affordable housing from all levels of government are needed to break the cycle of homelessness in our communities.

Two recent reports undertaken on behalf of peak housing and homelessness groups showcase how investment in new social housing alongside maintenance and renovation of existing housing stock provide a pathway for a social housing led economic recovery (Economic Impacts of Social Housing Investment and Supporting Economic Recovery in NSW).<sup>16</sup>

Both these reports showcase how impact investment models can harness private capital, reducing the cost to government to build affordable homes and achieve sustainable outcomes for individuals and families.

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<sup>14</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2019) *Housing assistance in Australia 2019*, available at [www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2019/](http://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2019/); and Pawson, H., Parsell, C., Saunders, P., Hill, T. and Liu, E. (2018) *Australian Homelessness Monitor 2018*, Launch Housing, Collingwood.

<sup>15</sup> Troy, L., van den Nouwelant, R. and Randolph, B. (2019) *Estimating need and costs of social and affordable housing delivery*, City Futures Research Centre, Sydney; and

<sup>16</sup> SGS Economics and Planning (2020) *Economic Impacts of Social Housing Investment*, Community Housing Industry Association, available at [www.communityhousing.com.au/](http://www.communityhousing.com.au/); and Equity Economics and Development Partners (2020), *Supporting Economic Recovery in NSW: Investment in social and affordable housing is critical to supporting jobs today and families into the future*, NSW Council of Social Services (NCOSS), Sydney, available at [www.ncoss.org.au/policy](http://www.ncoss.org.au/policy)

## Resourcing regional Australia

**Recommendation 3 – Undertake careful planning to ensure that allocation of resources to increase affordable and social housing stock as well as funding for specialist homelessness services is targeted to the areas that need it (including regional Australia) to enable people to remain in their communities and access the support they need.**

**Recommendation 4 – Ensure planning and allocation of resources responds to the very high over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the homeless population, with targets and strategies designed in consultation with communities.**

**Recommendation 5 – Ensure a systemic regional delivery approach to all specialist homelessness services and social housing providers to accurately track and capture the incidence of homelessness within communities and provide for equitable, coordinated and needs-based allocation of resources.**

The housing and homelessness support system is currently highly fragmented. Without a coordinated approach, the limited resources available are often not targeted to where they are most needed.

The AHURI report into the geography of homelessness found that there is a 'substantial mismatch between the distribution of homelessness and SHS capacity.'<sup>17</sup> Most service capacity for accommodation and support is located in and around inner capital city areas with less capacity in regional and remote areas. But many regional and remote areas like Northern NSW, are struggling with significant housing stress and high rates of homelessness.

In the past year Social Futures Northern NSW SHS service supported almost 30 per cent more people than funded to (2836 vs 2194). When so many additional people are accessing a service it makes it difficult to deliver the intensity of support needed for individuals and families to sustain housing outcomes leading to people cycling in and out of SHS.

The AIHW found that in 2018–19, SHS across Australia had an average of 253 unassisted requests per day or a total of 92,300 for the year. The most common reason these services were unable to provide assistance in these cases was due to a lack of available accommodation.<sup>18</sup>

A lack of affordable housing stock and access to SHS in regional and remote areas may in fact be shifting homelessness into metropolitan and urban centres over time and concentrating social disadvantage.

Commitments to increase affordable housing supply (including social and public housing) must include careful planning and consideration of where new stock is needed and not just a focus on the headline numbers.

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<sup>17</sup> Parkinson, Batterham, Reynolds, and Wood (2019).

<sup>18</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2019) *Specialist Homelessness Services annual report 2018–19*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, available at [www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shs-annual-report-18-19/](http://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shs-annual-report-18-19/)

It can be tempting for governments to meet their supply targets by purchasing bulk stock in cheap new developments in metropolitan areas. However in order to be effective, new housing stock must be targeted to the areas with high need for affordable housing, including regional Australia, ensuring that people can remain in their communities and access services, transport and employment.

Investment also needs to respond directly to the very high over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the homeless population. Targets and strategies to support better housing outcomes need to be designed in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and delivered in collaboration with communities.

## Housing First

**Recommendation 6 - Invest in Housing First models with a greater focus on medium and long term housing provision as well as crisis and transitional accommodation. For people with complex needs, a history of trauma and/or multiple episodes of homelessness, support duration should exceed 12 months and up to three years to ensure housing outcomes are sustained.**

Whilst a range of SHS exist to support people experiencing homelessness into housing, the lack of appropriate affordable housing stock means permanent, long term housing is often unachievable.

Without a systemic approach, including an increase in affordable housing stock, people experiencing homelessness will continue to cycle in and out of homelessness. This will be at considerable personal cost to the individual and their families, and significant and ongoing cost to government.

Housing First is widely recognised as an effective model in responding to homelessness amongst different population groups. While there are variety of delivery models, a Housing First approach prioritises providing secure housing for people experiencing homelessness. Once housing is addressed, support workers can address complex needs such as mental health, employment and training or drug and alcohol issues from a foundation of stability.<sup>19</sup>

Evidence from across the US, UK, Canada, and Europe suggests that Housing First models result in 80-90 per cent of people remaining housed after two years.<sup>20</sup>

The Housing First approach has demonstrated that it reduces the use of crisis services and institutions, and improves people's health and social outcomes<sup>21</sup>.

This evidence is supported by similar outcomes from NSW Housing First programs including Michael's Intensive Supported Housing Accord, Platform 70 and Common Ground Sydney.

In order to be effective, housing first models require availability of affordable housing stock.

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<sup>19</sup> Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) (2018), *What is the Housing First model and how does it help those experiencing homelessness*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, accessed June 2020, available at [www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/what-is-the-housing-first-model](http://www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/what-is-the-housing-first-model)

<sup>20</sup> Gaetz, S., Scott, F., and Gulliver, T., (2013) *Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness*, Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press, Toronto.

<sup>21</sup> Gaetz, S., Scott, F., and Gulliver, T., (2013)

### **Case study: Northern NSW Flood Assistance Program**

Following the floods in March and April 2017 which devastated many communities in Northern NSW, Social Futures was funded to deliver the Northern NSW Flood Assistance Program by the NSW Government.

The program aimed to address the housing needs some of the most vulnerable families experiencing homelessness due to the flood to enable them to remain in their communities and rebuild their lives.

The program was delivered in partnership with North Coast Community Housing (NCCH) and, unlike our other specialist homelessness services, was funded with direct provision of housing as the cornerstone of the program. NCCH headleased private rental properties with flood affected tenants only paying 25 per cent of their household income. The 37 low-income families in the program were able to access affordable subsidised housing for up to three years.

Because of the significant damage following the flood, many of the most affordable houses and accommodation options including caravan parks became unavailable, putting added upward pressure on an already tight private market. The immediate provision of affordable housing to the most vulnerable impacted families not only prevented them from experiencing homelessness in the short-term, but has provided sustainable ongoing housing outcomes for the majority of families, the majority of whom were in housing stress and at risk of homelessness even before the flood.

Social Futures program workers supported these families to access mental health, NDIS and other support services and helped to stabilise their situations.

At the end of the three years of housing support, almost every family has been transitioned into stable ongoing accommodation either into social housing, private rental or remaining in their current property but shifting to paying full market rent.

## Investing to prevent youth homelessness

**Recommendation 7 – Expand investment into early intervention and prevention programs such as Reconnect and community of school and services (COSS) models.**

**Recommendation 8 - Increase funding for community based mental health and drug and alcohol programs with a particular focus on early intervention for children and young people under 18 years.**

According to the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, ‘44 per cent of all individuals who need and seek help from homelessness services are young people and children. About 42,000 (16 per cent) are adolescents and young adults presenting to services on their own.’<sup>22</sup> And the rate of youth homelessness has continued to grow over the past decade.

The social and economic impacts of youth homelessness is high and without the right support, many will struggle with homelessness their entire lives. Young people experiencing homelessness are less likely to stay engaged with school, find jobs, get access to stable housing and maintain friendships than their peers. They are more likely to experience depression, poor nutrition, substance abuse and mental health problems.

According to the 2016 *Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia* report, diverting just five per cent of the young people entering homelessness each year would produce budget savings of approximately \$60 million annually in reduced health, justice and SHS usage.<sup>23</sup>

Studies show that for people experiencing ongoing housing instability, the first episode of homelessness occurred when they were young. That is why early intervention services are so important.

The risk factors for youth homelessness include family conflict and domestic violence, leaving out-of-home care and institutional care settings, and drug and alcohol issues, and are exacerbated by high youth unemployment, inadequate youth benefits and housing affordability. Aboriginal Australians, especially young Aboriginal people are generally over-represented in homelessness services.

Young people are just as much victims of the housing affordability crisis as anyone else. Inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions, financial difficulties and housing affordability stress now make up four of the top six reasons for young people’s lone presentations to SHS services in 2018-2019. Together these four factors make up 45.3 per cent of the main reasons for young people’s presentations to homelessness services.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> MacKenzie, D., Hand, T., Zufferey, C., McNelis, S., Spinney, A. and Tedmanson, D. (2020) *Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people*, AHURI Final Report 327, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, p. 2 available at [www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/327](http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/327), doi: 10.18408/ahuri-5119101.

<sup>23</sup> MacKenzie, D., Flatau, P., Steen, A. and Thielking, M. (2016) *The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia*, Centre for Social Impact, Hawthorne, p. 6, available at [www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/CYHA\\_FINAL\\_REPORT\\_18April2016\\_v0dqGpT.pdf](http://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/CYHA_FINAL_REPORT_18April2016_v0dqGpT.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2019) *Specialist Homelessness Services annual report 2018–19*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

For these reasons it is important that early intervention services aimed at reconnecting at-risk young people with their families, education and their communities are coupled with provision of appropriate social housing for young people.

### **Case study: Reconnect**

Social Futures has been at the forefront of delivering early intervention programs and support to young people in regional Australia. In 1996 we were a pilot site for the Youth Homelessness Project which led to the establishment of the well regarded Reconnect program in 1998, Australia's first programmatic response to youth homelessness, which we have continued to deliver and innovate for over twenty years.

Reconnect is an early intervention and prevention program for young people aged 12 to 18 years (or up to 21 years in the case of newly arrived youth) who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and their families.

Because issues in the family home are frequently a significant factor in a young person becoming homeless or being at risk of homelessness, it can be tempting for service models to put the emphasis on creating independence and autonomy from family.

However, if there are risk factors within the family that influence outcomes for adolescents, it makes sense that family should be seen as part of any intervention addressing adolescent problems and homelessness wherever possible.

Reconnect retains a strong focus on family reconciliation, wherever practicable and safe, between homeless young people, or those at risk of homelessness and their family. It provides counselling, group work, mediation and practical support to the whole family, to help prevent homelessness from occurring. The goal is to stabilise the young person's living situation and strengthening relationships within the family as well as establishing wider connections in the community.

### **Case study: Getting It Together and youth alcohol and other drug (AOD) services**

Many young people present to SHS with co-morbidities including substance abuse and mental health issues and complex trauma. If not appropriately addressed it often leads to young people falling out of accommodation and back into a cycle of homelessness.

Social Futures has successfully delivered Getting It Together for more than a decade to provide early intervention and prevention services to prevent family breakdown and support young people who are experiencing alcohol and substance abuse issues. The community based early intervention model has had excellent results. However greater investment is still needed to tackle AOD issues with young people.

There is a chronic shortage of youth detoxification and residential rehabilitation services, both outreach and accommodation supports in regional Australia, including Northern NSW. Many young people do not have the capacity to travel outside of their region to access these services. Localised models are needed to ensure transitional and ongoing support is available in the communities where the young person lives so that they can build genuine networks of support. Investment in expanding early intervention programs like Getting It Together, including children as young as ten in AOD early



intervention, and providing home detoxification and outreach supports alongside specialist adolescent residential detoxification and rehabilitation support service in regional communities is critical to addressing one of the key risk factors for homelessness.

### **Case study: Community of schools and services (COSS) model**

Another well regarded approach to early intervention and prevention is the ‘community of schools and services’ or COSS approach, initially established in Geelong. This model offers an integrated place-based ‘collective impact’ form of support for vulnerable youth and families. About half of the young adults, who experience homelessness, have had their first experiences of homelessness while they were much younger. The model identifies young people at risk of disengaging from school, becoming homeless and entering the justice system during secondary school and supports them on a community-wide basis through secondary school.

## **Youth housing support models**

**Recommendation 9 – Increase investment in youth-specific social housing and alternative housing models that provide support in regional areas and move away from youth refuge models.**

**Recommendation 10 – Increase resources nationally to provide support for young people exiting out of home care or institutional care including custodial settings.**

While early intervention to reach young people before they become homeless should be the primary goal, for many young people who are already experiencing homelessness, particularly young people transitioning from of home care, family reconciliation or support is not always safe or appropriate.

For this cohort, the priority should be to rapidly provide stable and secure accommodation. However, there is still a lot of work to be done to identify and provide appropriate housing models for young people. A lack of long term affordable stable accommodation options for young people remains the most significant barrier when addressing youth homelessness.

Many young people experiencing homelessness with histories of trauma are unprepared for independent living. A lack of rental history and housing affordability makes accessing the private rental market almost impossible. Mental health or substance abuse issues alongside disconnection from education or employment may make it difficult to access, afford and maintain a room in a share house – one of the most common housing arrangements for young people.

Young people leaving out of home care or exiting institutional care with the criminal justice system are incredibly vulnerable to becoming homeless and, without early intervention, are at high risk of experiencing ongoing episodic homelessness throughout their lives. As a cohort already connected to support services, there is significant opportunity to direct greater resources to delivering appropriate and meaningful transitional support towards independent living for this cohort to break the cycle of homelessness.

In Northern NSW, when housing and homeless issues for children and young people at risk cannot be addressed by the Department of Communities and Justice, our Homeless Youth Assistance Program provides support for unaccompanied young people.



However independent living options for young people are limited. Unaccompanied young people make up 16 per cent of the people accessing SHS, but only account for 2.9 per cent of the people accessing social housing.<sup>25</sup>

While there is a need to provide crisis accommodation for young people experiencing homelessness, traditional youth refuge models can be problematic for vulnerable young people and exacerbate existing histories of trauma. Refuge models also do not serve the needs of young people in regional communities as they may need to travel away from school or other community support networks in order to access refuge accommodation.

Alternative models of appropriate ongoing accommodation options that meet the needs of vulnerable young people remain a major gap in the system.

### **Case study: Northern NSW Connecting Home Youth and Northern Youth Housing Project**

Social Futures provides several youth specific SHS in Northern NSW. Our Northern Youth Housing Project service model has an emphasis on a 'continuum of care' and stable accommodation as the foundation for working with young people with complex trauma experiencing homelessness. The model avoids the churn that can happen when young people move from crisis to transitional and longer term accommodation by attaching the service to the client rather than the property. As the young person's situation stabilises the types and level of support provided shifts, but their accommodation remains the same throughout. This has enabled many young people who have been supported through this model to seamlessly progress into the highly effective Rent Choice Youth Program where they have secured longer term subsidised accommodation.

Our Connecting Home Youth Program offers integrated support with independent living by co-locating an office space with multi-site transitional housing units. This allows young people to stay connected and more easily access resources and support within their own environment.

In order to effectively support the large numbers of young people seeking to access these services, additional funding is needed for a variety of specialised accommodation options that include intensive support right through to independent living.

Youth housing models must include a regional response with a shared practice framework that enables consistent integrated and collaborative case management and community capacity building. Housing services should incorporate a continuum of care where young people can enter in and out of this support system on a needs basis with a primary focus on long term stable accommodation.

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<sup>25</sup> MacKenzie, D., Hand, T., Zufferey, C., McNelis, S., Spinney, A. and Tedmanson, D. (2020), p. 73.



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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where we live and work and their continuing connection to land, water, sea and community. We pay respects to Australia's First Peoples, to their unique and diverse cultures, and to Elders past, present and future.