



The Future of Accommodation and Support for Young People Aged 12-18 Years

Queensland Youth Housing Coalition Inc

And

PeakCare Queensland

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Future of accommodation and support services for young people aged 12-18 years.

Background

PeakCare and QYHC began initial discussion in the second half of 2000 focussing on the issues relating to young people in the care and protection of the Department of Families accessing services funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). Through further discussion and a number of joint activities the two organisations decided to convene a policy workshop to create an interface between child protection service providers and youth accommodation service providers.

The aims of the policy workshop were to:

- bring together member services from across the areas of youth work, child protection and supported accommodation;
- establish agreement with participants about current issues and trends in relation to the accommodation and support needs of young people ages 12-18 years.
- use a framework based on a continuum of services to explore a range of flexible accommodation and support responses to young people's needs (see attachment one);
- establish a set of positions that reflect the practice experience of community based service providers.

This paper is the outcome of the policy workshop and further consultation with workshop participants and member services.

Definitions

The definitions that follow formed the basis of broader discussion during the policy workshop and consultation.

Age

The age range referred to in this report is 12 - 18 years of age. This focus on age was adopted based on the following understandings:

- young people aged 12-18 have needs that are observably different to those under 12.
- young people aged 12-18 who are unable to live with their family and have protective needs are clearly the responsibility of the Queensland Department of Families, the statutory child protection authority;
- young people aged 12-18 who are unable to live with their family, whether in care and protection or not, access SAAP services;

In a range of forums leading up to the policy workshop, community based service providers expressed growing concern for this age group as a result of observable evidence that:

- statutory residential care service provision has been and remains in decline;
- for many young people family based care is not an appropriate option;
- young people are 'drifting' into non-statutory SAAP accommodation services.

For young people aged 12 - 18 the provision of accommodation options outside a statutory framework (i.e. residential care, foster care) should not preclude linkages with existing intervention services and the funding of new intervention services under the Child Protection and Family Support Funding Program. For this age group the discussion about service delivery needs to move beyond a question of 'in care' or 'not in care' to a discussion about how statutory and non-statutory responses to young people's protective needs can compliment one another.

Target group

The information that follows summarises participant views of what might constitute a young person who is 'at risk' of experiencing harm or who is experiencing harm. It should be noted that these descriptions are broad generalisations and do not reflect the unique protective needs of individual young people.

Young people may be 'at risk' of or experiencing:

- physical, sexual and emotional abuse and/or neglect;
- absence of an adult figure who can exercise care and responsibility;
- engagement in risk taking behaviours, coupled with families who are unable and/or unwilling to protect them from the harm this exposes them to;
- family conflict/violence and breakdown;
- an absence of or limited support networks;
- a range of emotional, social, and physical affects as a result of harm or potential harm.

The protective needs of young people may be further exacerbated as a result of cultural and social factors. These young people include:

- young people with an intellectual disability or learning difficulty;
- young people with a physical disability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people;
- young people from diverse cultural backgrounds;
- young people with psychiatric illness;
- Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual and Transgender young people;
- young people with substance abuse issues.

Approaches to Intervention

Child Protection

Legislative framework

Child protection was defined in accordance with the definitions and principles of the Child Protection Act 1999. Harm is defined as:

- *Any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child's physical, psychological or emotional well-being. It is immaterial how the harm was caused.*
(Queensland Child Protection Act 1999)

A young person with protective needs is a young person who:

- *Has suffered harm, is suffering harm or is at unacceptable risk of suffering harm and who does not have a parent able and willing to protect him/her.*
(Queensland Child Protection Act 1999)

Child protection services are defined as those services funded under the Queensland Department of Families, Child Protection and Family Support Funding Program and include community based service providers in the following areas:

- Residential Care;
- Foster care;
- Counselling/intervention services;
- Family support;
- Youth work.

The key funding outcome areas for these services include:

- *Families have the skills and knowledge to care safely for children and young people and provide a quality standard of care.*
- *Children and young people subject to statutory intervention have their physical, social, emotional, cultural and educational needs met in a quality care system.*
(The Community Services Funding Book, page 14)

Emergent Issues

The impact of legislative and funding reforms has highlighted a number of issues in relation to young people 12 - 18 years of age, including:

- The definition of harm to a child or young person has expanded greatly, reflected in the act in the statement that it is “immaterial how the harm is caused”.
- In combination with the proviso in the Act that a parent(s) must be “able and willing”, the result of these definitional shifts is a greatly expanded view of a young person who has protective needs.
- Although this expanded view of the protective needs of young people may logically lead to ‘net widening’ through increased statutory intervention, anecdotal evidence would suggest that this is not the case, at this point in time.
- Despite significant definitional shifts the protective needs of young people continue to remain unmet. This is no more evident than in the case of young people as young as twelve accessing emergency shelters for homeless young people.
- The Child Protection Act 1999 provides a broad vision for protective responses to the needs of young people. It is a vision that encapsulates both statutory and non-statutory interventions or responses based on the principles that family, culture and community are central to the lives of young people.
- In practice this vision is limited by a chronic lack of resources, because of under funding, coupled with inconsistent developmental work necessary to create the shifts in practice and service delivery required to implement the vision.

Youth Accommodation Services

Legislative Framework

The *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994* describes SAAP's overall aim as:

"...to provide transitional supported accommodation and related support services, in order to help people who are homeless to achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence."

The Act further states, within this aim the goals are:

- a. *to resolve crisis*
- b. *to re-establish family links where appropriate; and*
- c. *to re-establish a capacity to live independently of SAAP.*

The SAAP Act 1994 defines the target group of young people as follows:

SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION ASSISTANCE ACT 1994 - SECT 13
Services may be general or specific

SECTION 13 ***Services***

- 13. (1) A form of agreement specified in an instrument under section 6 may deal with:*
- (a) Services provided generally to people who are homeless; or*
 - (b) Services provided to meet the special needs of people who are homeless and who belong to any of the following groups:*
 - (i) Women;*
 - (ii) Women and accompanying children;*
 - (iii) Independent young people above the school-leaving age for the State concerned;*
 - (iv) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;*
 - (v) People from non-English speaking backgrounds;*
 - (vi) Families;*
 - (vii) Single men;*
 - (vi) Single women;*
 - (ix) Any other group specified in writing by the Minister and the State Minister of each participating State.*

In Queensland current interpretation of the SAAP Act 1994 means that no youth SAAP service can exclusively house young people under 16 (14 years and 9 months) years of age.

There are no other pieces of legislation that govern the funding and provision of SAAP services. However, there are a number of best practice guidelines that services are expected to abide by and do so through the signing of Service Agreements.

Emergent Issues

Throughout the life of the SAAP funding and service provision young people under 16 have been accessing SAAP services. The impact of the changing nature of the age of young people in SAAP services has created a number of issues for the program, some of which are outlined below:

- There is increasing anecdotal evidence that young people under the age of sixteen are referred by the Department of Families, Family Services Officers to SAAP services as a form of alternative care.
- There is also evidence that there are young people in SAAP service under the age of sixteen who do not receive adequate responses to their protective needs from the Department of Families.
- Formalising service delivery that occurred due to a drift of young people into SAAP services because the child protection system could not respond to young people's needs does not equate to providing innovative planned responses to the protective needs of young people.
- Viability, a key issue across SAAP services, may be exacerbated by accommodating young people under sixteen as they tend to require more support and therefore more resources of the service.
- The drift of young people under the age of sixteen into SAAP services masks the real cost of providing alternative care to young people with protective needs.
- Single young people aged 16 – 25 years find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to access accommodation in youth shelters as a direct result of young people under sixteen accessing these services.
- There are limited appropriate exit options for young people under 16 within the SAAP service system.

With the exception of the 'Under 16's Guidelines for Good Practice for SAAP Services' there has been no other response by the Department of Families to these critical issues.

It is evident from the brief overview outlined here that the Child Protection Act 1999 and the SAAP Act 1994 provide a clear legislative framework. Policy and practice should reflect this framework and is essential to implement the reforms and changes necessary to adequately address the protective needs of young people.

It is critical, in light of Inquires such as Forde that action is taken to address these issues for young people underpinned by a commitment to provide quality outcomes for young people.

WORKSHOP THEMES

Legislative framework

Workshop participants identified the following themes in relation to current legislative frameworks:

- Although there was broad agreement with the intent of the Child Protection Act 1999 and the SAAP Act 1994, participants felt that resource issues limited the potential of both of these pieces of legislation.
- Participants also agreed that there needed to be clearer statements made at policy level about the respective roles and responsibilities of government and funded community service providers i.e. in relation to young people in SAAP who are in the care and protection of the Department of Families.

Continuum of service delivery

Workshop participants identified the following themes in relation to a continuum of service delivery:

- A desire to move away from 'welfare' models of service delivery with a greater focus on prevention and early intervention, but not at the cost of existing statutory and crisis interventions.
- Investment into the service delivery system to build a continuum of services responsive to the protective needs of young people.

Models – flexible responses

Workshop participants identified the following themes in relation to models of service:

- The active development and implementation of models of service which, when implemented, will provide a range of options for young people in relation to their protective needs.
- The development of models of service that incorporate the needs and interests of parents and families.
- An increase in resources to meet the accommodation needs of young people aged 12-18, in particular those under the age of sixteen.

Systems development

Workshop participants identified the following themes in relation to systems development:

- The development, resourcing and implementation of mechanisms for the sustained and purposeful development of relationships between service providers in relation to service planning around the protective needs of young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Legislative framework

Recommendation 1: *That the Office of Community Development and the Office of Child Protection work collaboratively to develop a memorandum of agreement outlining the roles and responsibilities of the Department of Families and those organisations funded under SAAP and the Child Protection and Family Support Funding Program in relation to the protective needs of young people.*

Recommendation 2: *That the Queensland State Government appropriately resources the Department of Families to ensure the effective implementation of the Child Protection Act 1999 and the SAAP ACT 1994, according to the intention of the legislation.*

Continuum of service delivery

Recommendation 3: *That the Office of Community Development and the Office of Child Protection work collaboratively with community based service providers to establish a clear policy framework and funding strategy for the provision of flexible services to young people based on a continuum of service delivery that includes prevention, early intervention and statutory/crisis interventions.*

Models flexible responses

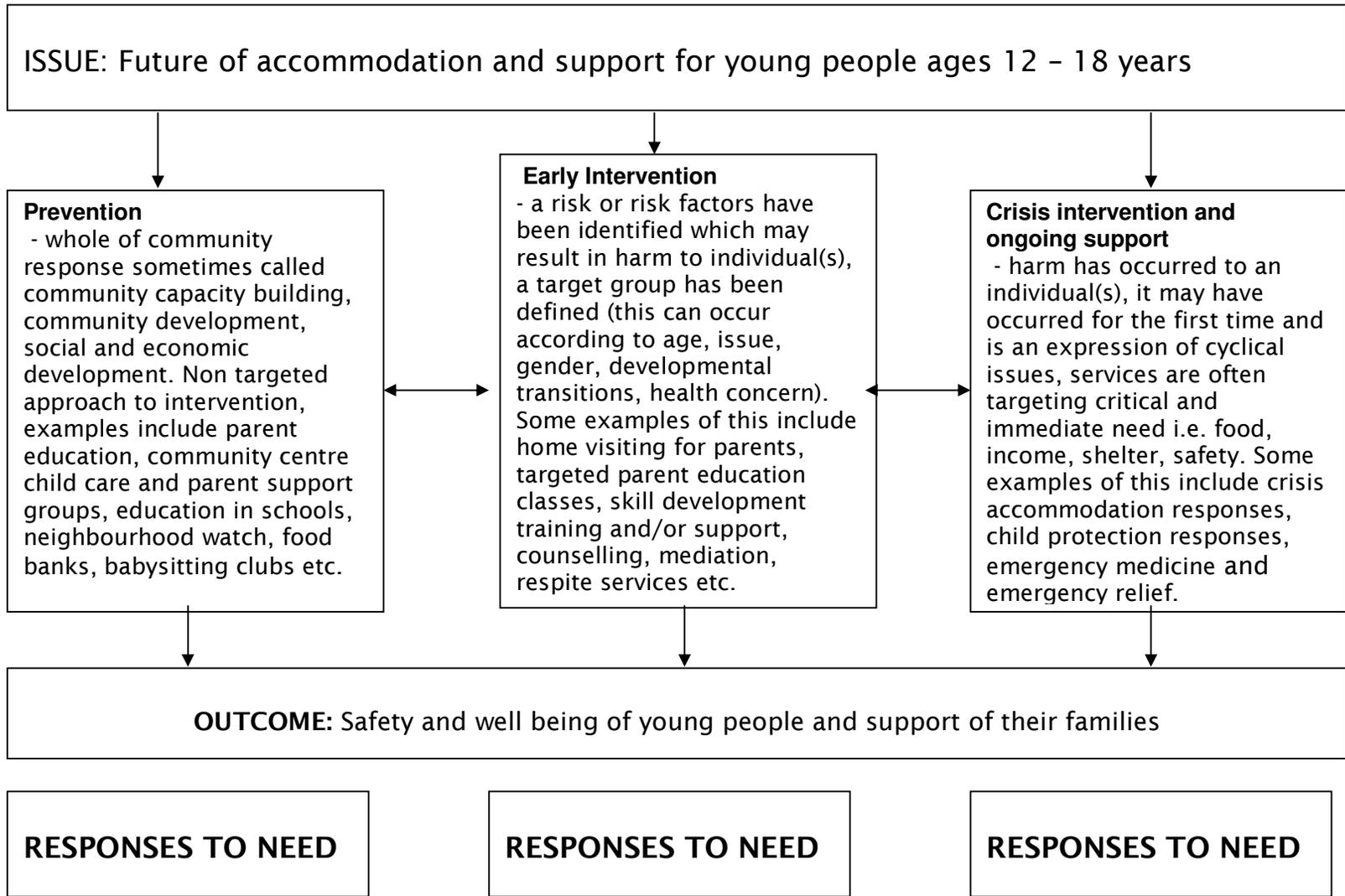
Recommendation 4: *That the Office of Community Development and the Office of Child Protection provide non-recurrent funding to enable community based organisations to carry out practice-based research to inform the development of service models across a continuum of service delivery, with particular emphasis on prevention and early intervention.*

Recommendation 5: *That once models for service provision are articulated through practice-based research they are costed and funded in a way that builds capacity within the current service delivery system and sits within the policy and funding framework suggested in recommendation 3.*

Systems development

Recommendation 6: *That the office of Child Protection and the Office of Community Development provide funding for a pilot project aimed at exploring and implementing mechanisms for service coordination and planning in a locality where it is identified that there are services currently funded across a continuum of service responses.*

ATTACHMENT ONE



Risk/Needs indicators underpin the types of policy and practice responses that are required to respond to needs.

The level of isolation from community, disadvantage and marginalisation probably increases from prevention through to crisis intervention.

Young people do not move in a linear progression from prevention through to crisis intervention, however, a lack of resources in the areas of prevention and early intervention mean that a significant point of contact in relation to community services is with those services providing crisis responses.

A good example of this is in child protection where a notification is made and after initial contact with that family an assessment is made that further child protection investigation is not necessary and that the family would benefit from support, as there are obvious risk factors for the future. However, as a result of a lack of early intervention services in a community or a lack of knowledge about the work that they do and who they are, an appropriate referral out of that system may not be made. This indicates a need to develop resources in the areas of prevention and early intervention and to establish systematic relationships between different forms of service delivery.