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### **Re: South Australia's Housing and Homelessness Strategy**

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016 (SA)* is to advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also my role to ensure that the State, at all levels of government, satisfies its international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). I also must engage with children and young people whose ability to make their view known is limited for some reason.

Since commencing this role I have spoken to more than 3,500 South Australian children and young people face to face and heard from many more on a wide range of issues that are important to them. A reoccurring theme in many of these conversations has been concern for those "doing it tough", both as experienced by young themselves and witnessed in their communities. As this was so important to them I have made it a focus area in my 5 year strategic plan: "To prioritise the development and wellbeing of those doing it tough."

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*Article 3 of the CRC: All organisations concerned with children should work towards what is best for each child.*

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One in six South Australian children and young people experience homelessness<sup>2</sup>. Many of these are couch-surfing or live in otherwise precarious situations rather than sleeping rough in contravention with Article 20 of the CRC. However, service providers have been

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<sup>1</sup> The Commission for Children and Young People, "Front and Centre: an agenda for south Australian children and young people, 6 August 2018, accessed at <https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Front-and-Centre-Agenda-06-08-2018-Lower-Res.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Mission Australia, *Young People's Experiences of Homelessness*, 2019, accessed at [file:///C:/Users/BianchiM/Downloads/Young%20people's%20experiences%20of%20homelessness%20Survey%202017\\_FINAL%20REPORT.pdf](file:///C:/Users/BianchiM/Downloads/Young%20people's%20experiences%20of%20homelessness%20Survey%202017_FINAL%20REPORT.pdf)

experiencing an increase in demand by these children and young people. Service to Youth Council (SYC), a homeless service provider has seen a 60% increase in the number of young people requesting homeless support services, but this has not coincided with an increase in resources to be able to support these children.

Further, many of these young people come from increasingly complex backgrounds, such as ill-health, unemployed, experiencing mental health issues, those from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, experiencing domestic or family violence or have a disability.

Children and young people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless are a group whose voices are not often heard. Especially for those aged between 12 and 15 who are 'falling through the gaps'. These children are often not picked up by child protection and too young for homelessness services to provide them with support services. I have also heard of many cases where children under the care of Child Protection, Youth Justice or in hospital who are simply "moved out" of these systems into the homelessness sector. On any given day there are not enough vacancies for all the young people seeking accommodation. Further there is minimal, or no transitional plan to support these children and young people out of homelessness and into independent supported accommodation, where they are able to reconnect with education, employment and community.

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*Article 6 of the CRC - Children have the right to live a full life and governments should ensure children survive and develop healthily.*

*Article 20 of the CRC – The government must give special protections and assistance to children who cannot be looked after by their immediate family. This includes making sure children are provided with alternative care that is continuous and respects the child's culture, language and religion.*

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This is simply "not good enough" and is a systemic issue that requires a whole of government response that ensures education, health, youth justice, mental health, child protection services (with cooperation with the non-government sector) all work together to best respond to the needs of individuals, families and their children, prior to factors that lead to young people becoming homeless.

This submission outlines what children and young people have told me how government and agencies should respond to children and young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This includes feedback from over 1,100 children and young people through a Poverty survey asking about their views and solutions on poverty.

## Listening to the views of children and young people experiencing homelessness

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*Article 12 of the CRC – Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account.*

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Children and young people have told me that they want their views heard and listened to. From my conversations with them, most have very good solutions as to how to address issues that affect them. This includes children and young people experiencing poverty and how their experiences can help others. As one young person said:

*“Because children and teens who are experiencing poverty did not choose their situation, you do not choose to be in poverty, and so they should have a say in how they and others can be helped.”* Young person aged 15-17, Poverty Survey (2019).

Children and young people at risk of being homeless want more support earlier, not when they are at crisis point.<sup>3</sup> A quick review of the current SA homelessness services reveals that the general minimum age for a young person to access these services is 15 years. There is a service that provides therapeutic services for 12 and over as well as one for pregnant children and young people<sup>4</sup>. There are also some additional mainstream support services to maintain connection with schools, provide mental health services and other services, but often these can only be accessed by their parents or guardians.<sup>5</sup> Children are also able to access homeless services if they are in a family that requesting services for being homeless, through DHS.

Despite these services, many children who have experienced homelessness have said there is not enough support for them, particularly in rural areas.

*“More housing options for young teenagers. I’ve found that there are not many housing options for young teenagers who are having trouble at home.”* Mission Flo, Listening Tour (2017)

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<sup>3</sup> SYC, *Adelaide’s Increasingly Complex Youth Homeless Population*, 15 July 2019 accessed at <https://www.syc.net.au/adelaides-increasingly-complex-youth-homeless-population/>

<sup>4</sup> SA Government, Homelessness service provider directory, accessed at <https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/housing/emergency-shelter-and-homelessness/homelessness-service-providers>

<sup>5</sup> Department for Child Protection, Additional Support services, accessed at <https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/child-protection-initiatives/support-services-children-young-people-and-families/additional-support>

*"I was recently homeless and there was no support at all rurally so had to move to capital city."*  
18-21 year old, Poverty Survey (2019)

Further, once these children become homeless they require specialised housing with wrap around supports that help them transition into adulthood safely and confidently so they remain connected to community, education and employment.

A different response is needed for the young aged cohort, who often have experienced additional adverse circumstances in their lives. Services need to be trauma informed work with families, so a stable, nurturing home environment can be provided through effective and targeted interventions from a number of government services, including education, health and child protection.

Children and young people experiencing insecure housing have told me that they often feel let down by schools and social services which don't recognise that their needs are different to those of an adult. As one young person said; *"high schools aren't equipped to help homelessness or home stability before 'homework.'"* Listening Tour (2017)

Generally, children and young people want to be taught more about the "important things" that will help them if their situation becomes "tough" in some way, not just science, English and maths in schools.

*"Introduce a class (subject) in all schools for important things, i.e. how to detect abuse in family or relationships. Where to go if homeless. How to make a resume, taxes etc. We don't learn about real life things, therefore when situations occur we are unaware and more vulnerable."*  
Listening Tour (2017)

These "things" should be taught every year, building on what is learnt from the previous year.

**Governments – at all levels - should be doing more to address poverty, the main driver of homelessness**

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*Article 26: The Government should provide extra money for the children of families in need.*

*Article 27: Children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs. The government should help families who cannot afford this.*

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The majority of children and young people said they want all children to have the same opportunities as themselves, and they recognise that becoming homeless is often connected to poverty and the stress that comes from living in household that has trouble surviving day-to-day. Children and young people are asking that these children and families are given more support for themselves and their family and that they are able to access the right

services at the right time. Many also want to remain with their families and do not want to be taken away from their parents into the child protection system because of “neglect”, simply because the family is at risk of becoming homeless or is homeless. At this time, many parents do not seek extra supports because of this risk.

Children are growing disillusioned at what government says about those who are doing it tough. They want the government to stop blaming people for *“being poor”* and instead concentrate on *“fixing the system that puts them in this position.”* Young person aged 22-25 in Poverty Survey

Children and young people see that an increasing number of families are struggling when it appears that *“the rich are only getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.”* They recognise that this has to do with the current policies at all levels of government. This has been supported by research from the Grattan Institute that has found that young Australians face an uncertain employment future, including unstable work, earning less due to wage stagnation and rising underemployment.<sup>6</sup>

They want to see governments reprioritise their agenda to serve the many, not the few. This includes assisting children and young people and their families so that they have access to a home and are given access to services to assist them to remain together in supported, safe environments without the risk of becoming homeless.

As one young person said:

*“We are a developed country, yet the level of people living in poverty mirrors that of the third world. Our government spends money on useless crap, like the \$48.7 million in 2018 that was spent on commemorating Captain Cook. Our Government has very wrong priorities.”* Young person aged 15-17, Poverty Survey (2019)

### **Increasing welfare payments and rethinking how they are administered**

Currently the range of government welfare payments to parents, carers and families are inadequate to alleviate many families’ financial stresses leaving them at risk of homelessness. Government systems can treat those receiving payments as a burden on society and overlook the children and young people that are impacted as a consequence of their parents’ situation. Although the state government does not determine these payments they should be encouraging the federal government to do this.

*“Centrelink’s stance is that young people whose parents are middle class or better off do not need financial assistance, when the reality is that many young people rely solely on their own earnings. Many young people have experienced abuse or family breakdown and cannot rely*

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<sup>6</sup> Wood D and Griffiths K., “Generation gap: ensuring a fair go for younger Australians”, Grattan Institute, accessed at <https://grattan.edu.au/report/generation-gap/>

*on their parents or carers for financial support, they are not adequately supported by Centrelink.” Young person aged 18-22, Poverty Survey (2019)*

Young people have told me that they want governments to do more. They do not distinguish between local, state and federal governments; simply they want action and expect their leaders to listen them.

I trust that you will consider their input in detail so we are able to ensure the best possible outcomes for our community and our children and young people. If you have any questions or would like to discuss this in more detail, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Helen Connolly', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Helen Connolly**

Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Adelaide, South Australia