

A National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan Provides an Opportunity to Better Address the Complex Support Needs of Young People

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Young people with complex support needs face a range of challenges and realities that a standalone National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan has the opportunity to address. Importantly, a national plan must not interpret homelessness as a 'standalone issue' or one that ends when young people are securely housed. Central to any national plan should be recognition of — and solutions to address — the broad range of co-occurring issues that drive and commonly arise as a result of homelessness.

Ellem et al. define complex support needs as a combination of co-occurring needs experienced by a young person which can include but are not limited to: cognitive and learning disabilities; mental illness and other impairments; physical disabilities; substance misuse; behavioural difficulties; social disadvantage and social isolation.¹

Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) provides ongoing planned support to over 1,500 young people and young families each year and brief intervention to more than 3,000. The number of occasions of support

has grown 29 per cent over the past three years (2019–2022).

Support needs are increasingly complex and often include a combination of domestic and family violence, mental and physical health challenges, substance use, homelessness, and financial stress.

The disability and mental health data collected by SYS from young people seeking support provides insight into the level of complex needs being managed and supported by Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS). In the last financial year, 63 per cent of young people accessing SYS already had a diagnosed mental health issue at initial intake and assessment. The proportion of young people presenting with a diagnosed mental health issue has increased by 34 per cent in the last five years (from 47 per cent in 2017–18). Almost one in two young people presenting for support last year rated their mental health as poor or very poor (N=1571).

In addition, 22 per cent of young people SYS supported in 2021–22 had a disability. This number has steadily increased from 14 per cent in 2017–18 — a significant increase of 57 per cent over five years.

Taylor was an inpatient at a mental health facility preparing for discharge when she first contacted SYS. Taylor had experienced family relationship breakdown as a child and had lived in out-of-home care from a young age until she was 18. Although she was able to secure an apartment through the Department of Communities, Housing and the Digital Economy after exiting residential care, with limited formal and informal support in the community, Taylor's mental health had declined. She was admitted to a mental health facility for treatment and was diagnosed with complex, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. SYS workers helped Taylor source new furniture and get her unit ready for her on discharge. Taylor had never lived alone, and recovery was not a straightforward process. She was readmitted to hospital under the care of a psychiatrist not long after moving back into her unit. Taylor's SYS worker advocated for her and worked with the hospital social worker and psychiatrist to develop a comprehensive discharge plan to ensure Taylor was able to thrive while living independently in the community.

needs is notoriously difficult, as is service collaboration once support is granted.² Looking to Toby's case as an example, professional assessments required to access NDIS supports cost thousands of dollars. Young people who are or have been homeless or who are on very low incomes such as Youth Allowance cannot access these assessments without financial assistance. Access becomes more difficult when young people with disability and complex mental health challenges struggle to attend appointments and engage with assessments without support. While there are some low-cost assessment options available, these are not well advertised and have waitlists. Without financial assistance from family or services like SYS, these assessments are not accessible to young people, leaving them without early intervention, accommodation, and long-term support available through the NDIS.

Young people with complex support needs accessing youth services like SYS increases. The challenge for government (and the community sector) is to develop a national Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan that will engage and enable the collaboration and integration of other essential support services at the SHS touchpoint.

Endnotes

1. Ellem K, Smith L, Baidawi S, McChee A and Doves L 2020. 'Transcending the Professional-Client Divide: Supporting Young People with Complex Support Needs Through Transitions', *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, vol.37, pp. 109–122.
2. McKenzie K and Smith-Merry J 2023, 'Responding to Complexity in the Context of the National Disability Insurance Scheme', *Social Policy and Society*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 139–154.



Youth services like SYS have developed their own integrated approach to ensure young people can access a range of essential services such as medical support, mental health and psychosocial programs, counselling, and specialised domestic violence support. Yet the broader service system remains disjointed and a considerable challenge to navigate — particularly where young people experience complex and co-occurring support needs.

As Toby's and Taylor's stories illustrate, young people with complex needs struggle to maintain their tenancies without the ongoing wraparound support provided by youth services and the ability to transition to long-term assistance like the NDIS as they grow older. A national plan presents the opportunity to fully integrate the NDIS, Services Australia, DSP and SHS, enabling better outcomes for young people.

A National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan that aims to improve the lives of young people like Toby and Taylor needs to ensure buy-in and engagement with all of the essential services that provide wraparound support for young people with complex lives. This becomes increasingly important as the number of