

LEFT RIGHT THINK TANK QUEENSLAND

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS POLICY PAPER

Responding to the national strategy on homelessness.

Table of Contents

WHO ARE WE?	3
AUTHORS	4
CONTACTS.....	4
INTRODUCTION: <i>WHY YOUTH HOMELESSNESS?</i>	5
PURPOSE: <i>AUGMENTING THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT’S NATIONAL STRATEGY ON HOMELESSNESS</i>	5
BACKGROUND: <i>PERSPECTIVES ON HOMELESSNESS</i>	7
THE WHITE PAPER 2008: THE ROAD HOME – A NATIONAL APPROACH TO REDUCING HOMELESSNESS.....	8
<i>A CRITIQUE</i>	8
RECOMMENDATION 1	10
<i>SUPPORTING EARLY INTERVENTION STRATEGIES</i>	10
<i>WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY</i>	10
<i>RETENTION MEASURES</i>	10
<i>ENTRY INCENTIVES</i>	11
<i>OTHER WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT MEASURES</i>	11
<i>CONTRADICTIONARY POLICIES</i>	12
RECOMMENDATION 2	14
<i>HOUSING PROFILE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE</i>	14
<i>INTEGRATED HOUSING</i>	16
<i>‘CONDITIONAL’ HOUSING</i>	16
<i>HOUSING AS SUPPORT</i>	17
RECOMMENDATION 3	18
<i>ACCREDITATION SCHEME</i>	19
<i>SERVICE CHARTERS</i>	19
<i>INFORMATION SHARING AND DATA COLLECTION SYSTEM</i>	20
<i>REVIEW PROCESS</i>	21
APPENDIX 1	23
APPENDIX 2	24
APPENDIX 3.....	25



Who Are We?

Founded in early 2008, **The Left Right Think-Tank** is Australia's first independent and non-partisan think-tank of young minds.

Our mission is to involve young people in public policy.

Our vision is for a society that seeks and embraces the ideas of young people.

We are:

- Independent of influence
- Politically non-partisan
- Young people aged 15-24
- Not-for-profit
- Passionate about ideas
- Committed to inclusive debate

We work to achieve our mission through:

- Developing policy based on sound research across the public policy spectrum.
- Fostering discussion on the greatest challenges of our generation throughout the community.
- Advocating policy ideals with various stakeholders and across government; promoting a new genre of thinking in the public policy cycle.
- Educating young Australians through various events and programs, motivating individuals to harness their potential in contributing to public policy debates.
- Empowering the next generation of leaders by providing them with unique opportunities for development.

The Left Right Think Tank's **Queensland** office was established in August 2009.

Authors

Policy Team

Joanne Brennan
Daniel Carr
Elizabeth Cullen
Elizabeth Mathews
Samuel Volling
Kurt Winter

Research Assistance

Melinda Booker
Ganesh Jegatheesan
Colette Lebansaft
Eleanor Proust
Joanna Schuurman
Eliza Shaw

Contacts

General Enquiries

Ashleigh Norris
a.norris@leftright.org.au

Policy

Elizabeth Cullen
e.cullen@leftright.org.au

Media

Joanna Schuurman
j.schuurman@leftright.org.au

Thank you to all supporters of Left Right Think Thanks for advice and assistance on this policy project. Thank you to all organizations, representatives and individuals who participated in consultations on this project.

Special thanks to Terry Hogan, Angela Barnes, Jim DeCouto, and Michael Tansky.

Introduction: *Why Youth Homelessness?*

Young people in Australia are disproportionately and severely affected by the experience of homelessness. Youth homelessness is primarily a product of structural disadvantage and failed social relations beyond the power of its victims to address, and deprives young people of opportunities that all Australians should enjoy. Because youth homelessness is an enduring and multi-faceted social problem, the government must play a constructive role in its elimination. Solving youth homelessness is crucial to the goal of eliminating homelessness in general and addressing a significant cause of life long social and economic inequity.

Purpose: *Augmenting the Commonwealth Government's national strategy on homelessness*

The Commonwealth Government has articulated a national strategy on homelessness in the White Paper - *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*. Left Right Think Tank has formulated an independent response, specifically addressing the issue of youth homelessness.

The focus is on young people, aged 12-24 years, who experience or are at risk of experiencing homelessness as an individual distinct from a family unit, at either a tertiary, secondary or primary level¹. However, the recommendations advanced by this paper carry relevance for the broader issue of homelessness across other age groups.

With a team of twelve young people, Left Right Think Tank developed this policy paper through extensive research and consultations. Perspectives were sought from young people experiencing homelessness², a broad range of service providers³, and interested young people⁴ in the Brisbane metropolitan area.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, Left Right adopts the definitions regarding homelessness and the sector as set out in the Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, unless otherwise stated.

² Excerpts and case studies are used throughout this paper. See appendix 1 for list of interviews conducted.

³ Consultations were undertaken with a range of specialist, not-for-profit, community service providers. See appendix 2 for list of consultations.

⁴ Left Right Think Tank conducted a youth consultation event on the 26 October 2009, attended by 3 expert panelists and 40 young people. Responses and feedback to Left Right's policy proposals were sought and integrated into this policy paper.

This policy paper will present the following policy recommendations designed to augment the Commonwealth Government's national strategy and reflect on its implementation by all levels of government:

- Support for early intervention strategies by developing a workforce development strategy and removing contradictory policies;
- Provision of youth specific housing, which encompasses integrated housing models and supports the progression of young people through services;
- Improvements to accountability of service delivery through the expansion of the proposed accreditation scheme, encompassing -
 - the use of service charters to clarify and inform clients of their entitlements,
 - development of a system of data sharing, and
 - a review process administered by respective State Departments of Communities.

Left Right acknowledges that these recommendations are limited in scope; they do not address the breadth of causative, contributing or related factors encompassed by youth homelessness. In addition, the distinct issues facing Australia's indigenous youth are not addressed in this paper. Instead, these recommendations examine discrete issues within this policy area, while recognising the need for further research and continued policy development.

Left Right looks forward to continuing dialogue with policy makers and all stakeholders in this policy area.

Background: *Perspectives on Homelessness*

The Commonwealth Government deserves commendation for seeking to shift the political and social discourse about homelessness. The White Paper sets the goal of halving homelessness by 2020, with a strategic refocusing on prevention⁵. The White Paper is part of the social inclusion agenda, which recognises the significant role of social and structural forces in the persistence of inequality and disempowerment⁶. The White Paper demonstrates the ambition to eliminate, rather than simply manage, the problem of homelessness.

Congruent with the recognition of homelessness as a social problem, Left Right supports the inclusion of rights in any proposed statutory protection for human rights, which address categories relevant to homelessness⁷. This shift in discourse could be cemented by the adoption of a rights based framework.⁸

The Commonwealth Government's shift in approach is fully supported by Left Right Think Thank. However, in order to achieve its vision, the strategies and policies set out in the White Paper need further development, particularly in relation to youth homelessness. Unless this age group is targeted, homelessness cannot be halved by 2020. More than a third of Australia's homeless population is aged 12 – 24⁹. Experiencing homelessness as a young person remains the strongest indicator in the incidence of homelessness in later life. Approximately 40% of people who are homeless as adults were first homeless as young people.¹⁰

⁵ The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p 15, 17.

⁶ Ibid, p 19.

⁷ National Human Rights Consultation Committee Report (30 September 2009), p 96. Available at: http://www.humanrightsconsultation.gov.au/www/nhrcc/nhrcc.nsf/Page/Report_NationalHumanRightsConsultationReportDownloads#pdf

⁸ Public Interest Law Clearing House (PILCH) Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness Legislation (30 August 2009).

⁹ The Federal Government Green Paper 2008 *Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness*, p 21. See appendix 3 for further demographic profile information about those young people experiencing homelessness in Australia.

¹⁰ Homelessness Australia (1/04/2009) *Ending Youth Homelessness First Step to White Paper Vision*. Available at:

<http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/File/Ending%20Youth%20Homelessness%20first%20step%20to%20White%20Paper%20vision.pdf>

The White Paper 2008: The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness

A Critique

The White Paper, *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, released on the 21 December 2008, sets out the Commonwealth Government's national strategy to halve overall homelessness by 2020, with an interim reduction target of 20%.¹¹ It adopts a three-pronged approach:

- (i) "turning off the tap" by preventing Australians from becoming homeless,
- (ii) improving and expanding existing services, and
- (iii) "breaking the cycle" of homelessness for those already in the system.¹²

Prevention and Early Intervention Strategies

The White Paper prioritises prevention as vital to reducing homelessness,¹³ complemented by early intervention strategies.¹⁴ While this successfully negotiates a balance between these strategies, both are limited in scope by the conception of those 'at risk'. Young people considered 'at risk' under these categories, while not homeless, would already experience social disadvantage, lost opportunity and marginalisation. The definition of risk factors should be consistent with the social inclusion agenda. Broader prevention strategies should address issues such as systemic poverty, unemployment, education and health reforms.¹⁵

The expansion of prevention and early intervention programs outlined in the White Paper will require an increased numbers of caseworkers in order to effectively manage service delivery. For example, the strength of the widely successful Reconnect Program has been its flexibility and context-sensitivity.¹⁶ It would be challenging to maintain these attributes in a national 'roll out' without adequate staffing support. Despite the detailing of funding and strategic implications for increasing supported housing proposals, no similar plan is made with respect to service program rollouts. The White Paper acknowledges raising award wages as a

¹¹ The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p 17, 18.

¹² Ibid, p 15.

¹³ Ibid, p 73. Prevention is defined as 'programs and opportunities that enable and encourage individuals to address possible risk factors before they are vulnerable to homelessness.'

¹⁴ Ibid, p 72. Early Intervention is defined as 'strategies that aim to reduce risk factors through timely identification and tailored advice and support for those at risk of homelessness.'

¹⁵ Ibid, p 11. The connection of these broader reform agendas to reducing homelessness is acknowledged in the White Paper.

¹⁶ Crane, Phil (September 2009) "Reconnect: Developing the Practice of Early Intervention into Youth Homelessness" *Parity*.

possible improvement, but is silent on a complete strategy to increase the quantity and quality of staffing in the specialist services sector.

Housing

The White Paper acknowledges the need for youth specific housing and advances the Foyer model, or similar models. In recognition of the importance of education and employment opportunities for young people, Foyer models co-locate supported public housing with education, employment and other services. Access to housing is, thus, conditional upon participation in these services. There are several disadvantages associated with this model.

Firstly, Foyer models segregate the homeless and deprive them of the opportunities for re-integration in the broader community. Secondly, conditional housing is also not preferable as a support method for young people, whose needs and experiences are complex and varied. Moreover, this model cannot be effectively implemented on a large scale; this would require a very large and highly skilled workforce, which is not presently available. Expansion without an adequate workforce would undermine the highly personalised relationships, which are so valuable to young people and which underpin this programme.

Coordination and Accountability

The issues of coordination and accountability are acknowledged in the White Paper.¹⁷ An accreditation scheme, development of service charters and data sharing system are discussed. While the government undertakes to conduct further investigation and development,¹⁸ Left Right is concerned that these proposals are presented with a lack of substance.

The problem of co-ordination between service providers is a major barrier to effectively addressing youth homelessness. Ease of access and the continuity of service provision are essential to support the progression of young people out of homelessness. Accountability is also vital for improved services and underscores commitments to a social inclusion agenda. These issues, therefore, deserve greater attention from policy-makers.

¹⁷ The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p 19, 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 62.

Recommendation 1

- **Supporting early intervention strategies by developing a workforce development strategy and removing contradictory policies**

Supporting Early Intervention Strategies

The negative effects of experiencing homelessness for prolonged periods are well documented.¹⁹ Young people are especially vulnerable to these risks. It is essential, through effective early intervention, to avoid a cycle of long-term homelessness. The White Paper advances several early intervention strategies, and expands on existing programs targeted in this area. The Council of Australian Governments' National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness also addresses the need for early intervention strategies in order to "lessen the impact of homelessness".²⁰

"Most people get swamped with the fact that there's nothing they [service providers] can really do to help you and they just give up. A lot of my friends have given up."

(Interview with X, 20 yo, Red Cross Night Café)

Workforce Development Strategy

The expansion and adequate support of early intervention strategies as outlined in the White Paper necessitates the development of a comprehensive workforce development strategy. This is acknowledged in the goals expressed in the Queensland Compact.²¹ Left Right recommends that any workforce development strategy encompass a two-pronged approach: to establish retention increasing measures, and create incentives to enter the sector as an employee. Short-term practicality dictates an emphasis on improving retention. However, long-term investment in training and recruitment will contribute to ensure sufficient numbers in a sustainable workforce.

Retention measures

The retention of staff in specialist homelessness services would have a direct impact on service outcomes and quality. Retention is vital to allow for trusting and continuous relationships with clients and other stakeholders. The progression of

¹⁹ Johnson, G. and Chamberlain, C. (2008) From Youth to Adult Homelessness. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. Vol.43 No.4.

²⁰ Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness* 2009, section 18(a), p 6.

²¹ The Queensland Compact 2008 – *Towards a Fairer Queensland*: Goal 3.2.

young people through services and out of homelessness would benefit from consistent case management.²² In addition, retention enables knowledge sharing amongst the workforce and the capturing of invaluable experience.

Retention and the recognition of workplace success are strongly correlated. Private sector organisations can more easily provide promotion opportunities, bonuses and profit sharing to reward success. However, other forms of recognition are available. Organisations can guide employees through hierarchical structures via promotion, and the assumption of additional responsibilities. The risk of replacing the relatively flat structure of many specialist service providers with unnecessary management layers can be mitigated. Formalising progression steps and allowing for vertical movement between specialist services and mainstream services can create career pathways.

Increasing retention will require addressing the negative effects of casualisation in the sector.²³ The perceived desirability of the sector as providing a secure career path is jeopardised. The benefits of permanent staff include increased consistency, commitment to training and development, and person investment in the job.

Entry Incentives

Incentive schemes to promote the desirability of careers in the sector are necessary. Left Right recommends that incentives currently in place for medicine, nursing and education studies could be applied to social work and community service related degrees. This could entail the use of bonded scholarships and subsidised study as effective tools for attracting applicants. Developing internship programs with service providers could complement studies with practical experience and contribute to a better prepared workforce. Interns would also increase the capacity of participating organizations. Resources are required to support the development of these programs.

Other Workforce Development Measures

Left Right also suggests that improvements in the coordination of volunteering efforts across organisations may yield positive results. This is in line with the Queensland Government's commitment to develop a workforce strategy for the community sector, which would deal with volunteering issues.²⁴ Consultations with

²² Gronda, Hellene, (2009) 'What makes case management work for people experiencing homelessness? Evidence for practice', Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) Final Report No. 127.

²³ The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p. 42.

²⁴ The Queensland Compact 2008 – *Towards a Fairer Queensland*: Goal 3.1.

service providers indicated that services, which have reached saturation point in terms of volunteers, do not systematically refer excess volunteers to other services. This could be remedied by requiring specialty service providers to register and maintain updated profiles with Volunteering Queensland, or equivalent state bodies with the capacity to manage volunteers in an efficient fashion.

Similarly, the volunteering potential of young people who have experienced homelessness should be utilised. This would provide valuable mentoring roles for young people, and support the development of skills and employment experience. This strategy would also assist in establishing the credibility of services catering to young people; these services can be perceived as being several steps removed from the experiences of their clients. This can re-enforce the alienation young people may feel and, thus, compounds the problem.

"I just want to know how I can help others. I've been thinking about becoming a volunteer here. I want to be in the music industry and fashion and multimedia and do motivational speaking to the young kids."

(Interview with K, 21 yo, Red Cross Night Café)

"I want to be a youth worker. I know what it's like, I'd be the best person to help."

(Interview with B, 23 yo, BYS)

Contradictory Policies

The recognition of homelessness as an issue of social vulnerability requires complementary constructive, not punitive, policies. Removing contradictory policies, namely by reforming police move-on powers and 'homelessness' offences, is a necessary step in addressing the problem of homelessness. These policies do not serve the interests of either those experiencing homelessness or wider society.

An acute danger of enshrining minor offences that people experiencing homelessness may easily perpetrate is the disproportionate escalation of penalties that can occur.²⁵ An inability to attend trial, afford legal representation or access legal aid services, or pay initial fines, make it easy for homeless young people to fall victim to the law.²⁶ Encouraging memoranda of understanding between police and specialist service providers²⁷ can uphold community standards, whilst facilitating outreach and avoiding negative consequences. This is in line with the White Paper's

²⁵ Queensland Public Interest Law Clearing House (QPILCH) *Written Submission to the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness 2007*: Section 8.1, p 16.

²⁶ Ibid: Section 10.1, p 23.

²⁷ Already in practice between some service providers and Queensland Police.

recognition of the need for increased cooperation between mainstream and specialist services in order to reduce homelessness.²⁸

²⁸ The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p. 37 – 44.

Recommendation 2

- **Providing youth specific housing, which encompasses integrated housing models and supports the progression of young people through services**

Public housing, supported and crisis accommodation are areas of focus in the White Paper. The shortage of this housing is well documented,²⁹ and was repeatedly highlighted during consultations and interviews conducted by Left Right. Studies have highlighted the cost effectiveness of providing long-term housing; it lowers the use and cost of judicial, health, shelter and substance abuse services.³⁰ Moves to expand funding for tenancy support are also welcome to provide a mechanism for transition from public housing dependency to independent private renting, which is vital for any meaningful reduction in homelessness numbers.

Within this framework, the White Paper recognises the need for youth-specific housing, but advances policy solutions, which do not adequately address these needs. Left Right advocates that housing solutions be reconceived and tailored to the profile characteristics of young people. While progression through housing and services towards self-sufficiency must be encouraged, this process should not be made a condition of access to housing. Similarly, adequate caseworker support, which continues after placement in housing, is necessary to facilitate this progression.

Housing Profile for Young People

Accommodation options for young people must consider the increased value young people place on the idea of 'belonging' and other characteristics of this life stage. These characteristics are likely to manifest in an extreme and destructive manner given the stress and trauma common to young people experiencing homelessness. Housing must avoid increasing social exclusion and the subsequent danger that young people will find acceptance in a homelessness subculture, precipitating a cycle of long-term homelessness.

²⁹ PILCH (Public Interest Law Clearing House) Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic *Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness Legislation* (30 August 2009).

³⁰ Culhane, D., S. Metraux, et al. (2002). "Public Service Reductions Associated with the Placement of Homeless Persons with Severe Mental Illness in Supportive Housing." *Housing Policy Debate* 13(1): 107-163; Eberle, M., D. Kraus, et al. (2001). Homelessness: causes and effects. Volume 3. *The Costs of Homelessness in British Columbia*. Vancouver, British Columbia, Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services; James, D., F. Farnham, et al. (1999). "Homelessness and Psychiatric Admission Rates through the Criminal Justice System." *Lancet* 353(9159): 1158.; Zaretzky, K., Flatau, P. and Brady, M. (2008) "What is the (Net) Cost to Government of Homelessness Programs?" *Australian Journal of Social Issues* Vol. 43 No.2

“When you’re brought up in a youth shelter you hang out with the wrong people. ... When I was in youth shelters I was introduced to drugs and spray paint and graff and all that sort of stuff.”

(Interview with F, 19 yo, BYS)

Access to employment and education opportunities is crucial for young people. However, given increased natural transience, a ‘housing first’ approach to the provision of these opportunities may not be appropriate. This does not detract from the need to provide housing support for all young people. Similarly, structural barriers for young people for progression through the system, such as lack of/availability of references³¹, need to be comprehensively addressed.

“I haven’t thought that much about it [study]. I’m just looking to find somewhere to live. That’s my priority.”

(Interview with M, 19 yo, YOS)

Left Right concludes that young people need housing which:

- provides individual support and is enabling (as opposed to ‘pushes’ or is conditional);³²
- recognises the need for a sense of ‘belonging’ and provides this within the wider community;
- is located close to employment, education and training opportunities;
- is located close to the individual’s existing support networks;
- avoids re-enforcing a young person’s self-identification within an inward-looking, often unhealthy, homelessness subculture;
- avoids re-enforcing or ignoring the existing structural barriers youth encounter due to age.

Privacy and security remain important desires for young people.

“It’s just not safe to go into share housing. You don’t know if you’ll be living with psychos. ... From anyone I’ve ever spoken to, they’re just not safe. They [the government] think there’s security but there really isn’t. ... I’d rather sleep on the street and protect my stuff. It’s probably a little vain to want to protect my stuff but it’s all I’ve really got kinda.”

(Interview with X, 20 yo, Red Cross Night Café)

³¹ Support for system currently operated by Brisbane Housing Company.

³² This can include support to enter education/training when ready, and to aid progression through the system, into the semi-private/private markets.

Integrated Housing

The Foyer model received particular emphasis in the White Paper. In addition to concerns about 'conditional' housing, Left Right notes that this model may increase the social isolation of young people experiencing homelessness. Quick re-integration into mainstream society is preferable. By segregating the homeless, Foyer models increase barriers for re-integration and may re-enforce community perceptions of the homeless as "them" as distinct from "us". Furthermore, the concentrated housing of young people with highly complex needs permits the creation of 'ghettos' and unhealthy, inward-looking communities.

Acculturation is an important consideration for the avoidance of long-term homelessness. The co-location of all support services, such as mental health and substance abuse services, with housing is impractical and undesirable in any event. This is a particular challenge for regional and rural areas. Left Right proposes that housing options be integrated within the community to the greatest extent possible. Mixed tenancy arrangements, including young people from diverse backgrounds, are preferable. The manageable dispersal of high needs individuals throughout supported housing is also important.

'Conditional' Housing

The White Paper acknowledges the importance of access to education and employment opportunities for young people. However, the preference for housing models, such as Foyers, conditional upon or tied to these services is undesirable. Left Right contends that the provision of education and employment opportunities can be achieved without the disadvantages of co-location or conditional housing. An emphasis on stable and long-term housing, well integrated in the broader community, could achieve access to these opportunities. The support of individualised caseworkers in preparing for education and employment would also assist.

It is evident that an unwillingness to participate, or inability to conceive of the value of education or employment, are not the greatest barriers preventing young people experiencing homelessness from undertaking education or employment. Individuals who are homeless are often dealing with complex issues and high needs. Issues such as childhood trauma, abuse, mental illness, substance addiction and self-esteem may need to be addressed first. Housing options need to be flexible enough to acknowledge this, or risk proving counter-productive.

"They kept pushing and pushing for me to go back to school and I wasn't ready for school then so I snapped at them and I left (that shelter)...". L is now completing Grade 11 and 12 through TAFE. L would like to attend university to study accounting.

(Interview with L, 17 yo, Nathaniel House)

"I'd like to be a landscaper. I like working round plants and helping the environment. I walk around. Anytime I see rubbish and that, I pick it up and put it in the bin." Q is currently homeless and lives in the Brisbane Botanical Gardens.

(Interview with Q, 22 yo, Red Cross Night Café)

Housing as Support

Housing solutions for young people need to be coupled with individualised support through caseworkers. Young people exiting homelessness are likely to have missed opportunities for the acquisition of important life skills. They may require significant support to maintain themselves in housing, and to cope with household routines and tasks. This observation reinforces the need for a national community services workforce strategy.

"Now that I'm in accommodation it's considered that I don't need help anymore. I do. I've never had my own place. Like hygiene, how to keep the place clean. How hard is it for someone who's never had responsibility to then turn around and run their own place?"

(Interview with B, 23 yo, BYS)

Recommendation 3

- **Improving accountability of service delivery through the expansion of the proposed accreditation scheme, encompassing –**
 - **the use of Service Charters to clarify and inform clients of their entitlements,**
 - **developing a system of data sharing, and**
 - **a review process administered by the State Department of Communities.**

Accountability of service delivery is essential to an effective system capable of dealing with youth homelessness. Through accountability, the community and government can monitor the adequacy of services. Improved accountability is empowering for young people who interact with homelessness services. On an individual level, client satisfaction presupposes a clear and mutual understanding of entitlements and expectations regarding services.

Improvements in this area produce a dual effect benefit, contributing to the increased coordination of service providers and delivery. The White Paper acknowledges the need for improved co-ordination between mainstream and specialist services.³³ The Queensland Government has, similarly, identified co-ordination between state government departments and the not-for-profit community services sector as a focus area.³⁴ Left Right observes that better co-ordination is also needed between specialist service providers. This encompasses improved data collection and sharing for synthesis in case management and research analysis, more effective use and sharing of resources, and easier access to services for young people experiencing homelessness.

Accountability measures should work to improve service delivery, rather than simply establishing an elaborate mechanism for enforcement or redress. While the rights of people interacting with community services should not be any weaker than those enjoyed by 'paying' clients of any other service, limited resources in this sector require prioritisation based on utility. Measures should reinforce accountability by encouraging information sharing, facilitating better data collection for research purposes, and supporting collaborative and cooperative relationships.

³³ The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p. 37 – 44.

³⁴ *The Queensland Compact 2008 – Towards a Fairer Queensland: Goal 2.1.1.*

Accreditation Scheme

The White Paper raises the proposition of a national accreditation scheme for specialist homelessness services.³⁵ This would be modelled on other community services sectors. Left Right supports an accreditation scheme and advocates an expanded model. Left Right additionally supports government subsidisation to assist non-for-profit specialty service providers with inadequate resources to gain accreditation.

The expanded accreditation scheme model would require compliance with the terms of service charters, and the undertaking of obligations regarding information sharing and data collection. Accreditation would also establish a system of formalised referrals between services. The use of memoranda of understanding between specialty services, and relevant mainstream services, would be encouraged to support this.

Increased data collection and information sharing will contribute to a comprehensive outcomes based performance record for the purpose of funding and review. This will also encourage best practice and enable consistent cross-organisational case management. It would better enable the collection of longitudinal data to track young people through various services and create pathways out of homelessness.³⁶

The inclusion of these measures in the accreditation of specialty services would contribute to a culture of co-ordination, promote diversity and grow capacity for collaboration. In this way, identifiable desired outcomes of co-ordination are built into the system – capturing expected results without regulating an organic, varied and nefarious process. The system is designed to reward cooperation, where the resulting improvements to outcomes are recognised in the funding of services and programs.

Service Charters

A principal requirement for accreditation would be the formulation of service charters within each service agency, stipulating the services that will be rendered. These service charters should be used as the benchmark of each agency's responsibilities, but allow for tailored, flexible service delivery. Upon accessing a service, the client should be familiarised with the content of the service charter.

³⁵ The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p 43.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p 58.

Ideally, this would occur as part of the case management process. In this way, common goals, mutual understanding and shared expectations are established.

The measurement of outcomes is a central component of this system. The Queensland Compact recognised the need to streamline measurements used by services and government to reduce duplication in administration and the funding process.³⁷ In this process, creative evaluation techniques and relative outcomes based metrics should be built into the measurements. A system to collect and record feedback from young people interacting with specialty services should be implemented through social workers.

Increased information regarding services would also contribute to broader awareness of available services, and facilitate easier access by young people. Collective knowledge is particularly important amongst transient, peer reliant young people. This is likely to be a more effective method of information dissemination than any formal information campaign given the profile of this group. However, these campaigns could play a complementary role. Simply knowing a service is available could ensure young people do not enter a cycle of long-term homelessness.

"I started living on the streets and it took a few months for me to learn where all the vans and stuff was. I was on the drugs and alcohol and all that. I got sent to jail for a year. ... I didn't know where to have a shower or go get a free feed. I was kinda like anorexic at that time. I didn't eat much 'cause I didn't know where all the stuff was so I'd go days without food."

(Interview with Q, 22 yo, Red Cross Night Café)

"It is hard to find out where to go. Then when you do find out there's so many hoops to jump and lots of red tape. I was jumping through hoops for eight months and getting nowhere. It just can't work like that especially for the younger ones."

(Interview with J, 21 yo, YOS)

Information Sharing and Data Collection System

The Commonwealth Government has recognised the importance of information sharing between specialty services and is committed to undertake a scoping study into an integrated information technology system for data sharing.³⁸ Similarly, the Queensland Government is committed to sharing information with services through

³⁷ The Queensland Compact 2008 - *Towards a Fairer Queensland*: Goal 3.2.4.

³⁸ The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p 41, 62.

a 'knowledge hub'.³⁹ Left Right proposes the development of comprehensive databases for client and service provider information managed through Centrelink to enable the improved progression of young people through services.

Information collected would include case file details (identifiable) and abstracted data (unidentifiable). This database would assist with the tracking of clients who fall out of and return to services along their non-linear journey through homelessness. This would contribute to awareness and integration between service providers' activities, goals, strategies and services. It would also enable service providers to better manage cases across services.

Shared and improved data collection would also enable increased research and analysis, and improve policy development for the sector. It could supplement the ineffective data collection through the census. In particular, longitudinal data would provide an added and welcome dimension to the analysis of policies, programs and services. This is important to track successes, to share best practice,⁴⁰ and to identify failed initiatives.

Privacy and possible misuse are very significant considerations. Left Right recommends that accreditation should be a precondition of access. Furthermore, all service providers, staff and volunteers should be required to agree to certain terms of use. Penalties for misuse could include recourse to private remedies pursued by the individual or service provider. Informed consent is vital, as is the right to withdraw consent, for access to case file data.

Review Process

Left Right advocates the development of a review process to underpin these accountability measures. Left Right supports calls for the regular auditing of services, and the establishment of appropriate complaints and investigative procedures.⁴¹ Offices within respective State Departments of Communities, with responsibility for homelessness portfolios, should be tasked with completing regular⁴² audits of service providers to monitor compliance with accreditation undertakings, including service charter commitment, information sharing, referral processes and data collection. The outcomes of audit reports should be reflected in future funding arrangements.

³⁹ The Queensland Compact 2008 - *Towards a Fairer Queensland*: Goal 2.1.1.

⁴⁰ Supports The Queensland Compact 2008 - *Towards a Fairer Queensland*: Goal 4.1 to share best practice through annual intersectoral forums.

⁴¹ PILCH (Public Interest Law Clearing House) Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness Legislation (30 August 2009).

⁴² Preferably annually.

Further, these offices should be adequately resourced to receive complaints and feedback both from individual clients and from peer services regarding the adequacy of service delivery. Easy and anonymous access to this office should be ensured by the provision of a phone hotline and online portal. Consultations conducted by Left Right have revealed the preference for and capability of young people to access online resources while experiencing homelessness.

The availability and preparedness of caseworkers would also provide a useful support for homeless young people wishing to avail themselves of this process. Offices should have discretionary powers to investigate, to be exercised in accordance with principles of due process and proper administration.

Appendix 1

Interviews with young people experiencing homelessness or at risk.

Case studies used in this policy paper are drawn from interviews conducted one on one with users of various specialist service centres. Interviews were recorded with permission but full transcripts and interviewees' details remain anonymous and confidential.

Identifying initials were assigned at random to interviewees.

List of interviews conducted:

- Interviews with K, Q and X
 - o Red Cross Night Café, 29 October 2009
- Interviews with B, D, F
 - o Brisbane Youth Services Drop in Centre, 16 October 2009
- Interview with J
 - o Youth Outreach Service Drop in Centre, Salvation Army, 7 October 2009
- Interviews with S and M
 - o Youth Outreach Service Drop in Centre, Salvation Army, 15 October 2009
- Interview with L
 - o Nathaniel House, Holland Park, 7 October 2009

Appendix 2

Consultations with Service Providers

The opinions and statements represented in this policy paper are those of the Left Right Think Tank, unless otherwise acknowledged to third parties.

The service providers consulted do not necessarily endorse the content of the policy paper.

List of participant service providers:

- 139 Club Inc Drop in Centre
- Micah Homelessness Services
- Brisbane Homelessness Services Centre
- Brisbane Housing Company
- Brisbane Youth Services (BYS)
- Crane, Dr Phil, Social Work and Human Services, Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology
- Nathaniel House Crisis Shelter
- Queensland Public Interest Law Clearing House (QPLICH) Homelessness Legal Clinic
- Queensland Youth Housing Coalition (QYHC)
- Red Cross Night Café
- Salvation Army, Youth Outreach Service
- Youth Accommodation Association (YAA)

Appendix 3

Demographic Profile

The 2006 census revealed a 4.8% increase in overall homelessness since 2001.⁴³ However, an increase in the Australian population of almost 6.6% in the same period signals that homelessness was kept at a relatively constant rate.⁴⁴

The 2006 census numbered the total homeless population in Australia at 104,676.⁴⁵ Of these, 19,849 were being housed by SAAP supported services and 16,375 were classed as rough sleepers, the remainder lodging with friends/relatives or temporary boarding accommodation.⁴⁶ Indigenous Australians are vastly over-represented in homelessness figures: although they make up just 2.4% of the general population, they comprise 9% of the homeless population.⁴⁷

Between 2001 and 2006 censuses, the composition of young people experiencing homelessness (those aged under 24) fell by 3% to account for 43% of the homeless population.⁴⁸ In the same period, a 20% drop in homelessness for those between 12-18 years was recorded.⁴⁹ Despite this, more than a third of Australia's homeless population is aged 12 – 24.⁵⁰ The population of young homelessness people has doubled in the past 20 years.⁵¹ Young people aged 12 - 18 are the single largest group of people experiencing homelessness and the highest users of specialist homelessness services.⁵² In 2007 – 2008, 33% of SAAP clients were aged 15 – 24.⁵³

⁴³ Census of Housing and Population, 2001 and 2006, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie, *Counting the homeless 2006*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Census Analytic Program, No. 2050.0.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Census of Housing and Population, 2001 and 2006, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Federal Government Green Paper 2008 *Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness*, p 21.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The Federal Government White Paper 2008: *The Road Home – A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, p 4.

⁵³ Mission Australia *Youth Homelessness Report 2009*.