

'The kids are coming'¹

Just Access to Care for Unaccompanied Homeless Children in Tasmania

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In this article I reflect on my journey of undertaking a suite of research projects focused on a cohort of highly vulnerable older children in Tasmania. These are children who live trajectories of harm and adversity and who remain a constant, distressing presence in multiple services which are unable to provide the care they require. I describe how projects set up to explore the issues faced by this cohort consistently highlight the unique and often overwhelmingly difficult lives of children who experience homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian. At the same time, however, I point to encouraging developments in policy and service provision which, for the first time in Tasmania, very clearly articulate and embed unaccompanied homeless children and their need for care amongst the social care imperatives for the state.

The Starting Point: Highly Vulnerable Teens in Tasmania

Too hard? Highly vulnerable teens in Tasmania, the original project which subsequently triggered a program of research, was launched in 2017. It focused on children aged 10 to 17 years old who are known to child protection (but who have not been placed on orders), known to police and/or youth justice, and who have experienced homelessness.² *Too hard?* sought to understand the high vulnerability of this group and found that complex trauma and neglect beginning in early childhood and persevering into adolescence are central driving factors. The research also identified how current system responses contribute to high vulnerability. This includes a culture of referring older children with complex needs between services with limited capacity and resourcing, an absence of fundamental

medium to long-term therapeutic non-statutory care, an incomplete suite of specialist services, and a lack of capacity for intensive engagement within existing specialist services.

Drawing on the insights of service providers and older children themselves, the report concluded that Tasmania lacks a completed circle of care for highly vulnerable adolescents. This includes wrap-around therapeutic, relationship-based care delivered in both outreach and residential settings and a full complement of surrounding specialist services with capacity and skills to engage with and respond to adolescents with multiple and

intensive needs. In a nutshell, the research found that *simple care* — the long-term, therapeutic relationship — and *complex care* — the timely alignment of specialist responses — are needed together in order for highly vulnerable older children to be supported to stay safely with their families where possible or in some kind of supported residential setting.

A Focus on Unaccompanied Homeless Children in Tasmania

Too hard? threw light on some broadly acknowledged issues in the *adolescent* service system. These include firstly the lack of an obvious systemic place and role for family supports outside child



What highly vulnerable older children need in Tasmania: a complete circle of care³

safety services, secondly, the lack of places of care for older children outside child safety services, and thirdly, the limited response of child safety services to older children. *Too hard?* clearly identified unaccompanied child homelessness as the flashpoint in which complex systemic gaps, in particular between Specialist Homeless Services (SHS) and Child Safety, are revealed. As such, Anglicare Tasmania made the decision to focus both research and advocacy effort on unaccompanied child homelessness and the long-standing struggles of a range of services to respond to this.

The starting assumption for this work was that while ideally early intervention family work should ensure vulnerable children remain at home and that child safety services should respond to those children unable to remain at home, it is currently and historically the case that children unaccompanied by a parent or guardian are routinely presenting to and being supported within youth SHS, or being supported through outreach while couch surfing and rough sleeping.

The presentation of unaccompanied children to homelessness services in particular has at least two problematic effects which continue to make addressing their care needs a blind spot in Tasmania and nationally. Children needing developmentally appropriate and multi-dimensional care have been absorbed into youth accommodation services designed to transition young people to independence. This has reinterpreted and ultimately silenced their unique needs for care and pushed the SHS sector to the limit in cobbling together responses within youth services never designed, staffed or skilled to address the needs of unaccompanied children. Additionally, the lack of visibility of this cohort within data collection and advocacy has contributed to long-term stagnation in achieving appropriate recognition and outcomes for them both in Tasmania and nationally.

Alongside the evidence presented in *Too hard?*, the discussion paper *Who*



Ink artwork was created by a Year 7 student from Fahan School for the 2019 Hobartians Facing Homelessness project

cares? Supported accommodation for unaccompanied children provided a starting point for broader community dialogue about unaccompanied child homelessness in Tasmania.⁴ Anglicare Tasmania formed an alliance with the Youth Network of Tasmania (YNOT), the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People (ARACY) and the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People to advocate for systemic responses to this cohort. This advocacy aimed to capitalise on earlier acknowledgment of the need to respond to this group within the *Tasmanian Affordable Housing Strategy and Action Plan 2015-2019* and the *Youth at Risk Strategy*.⁵ Two public forums brought together key stakeholders statewide, and subsequent Commissioners provided ministerial advice on the

urgent need to respond to the care needs of this group of children.⁶

Meanwhile, again in response to the key findings of *Too hard?*, Anglicare Tasmania committed to a new research project examining the barriers to accessing and attending school faced by vulnerable children.⁷ *Outside in: How the youth sector supports the school re-engagement of vulnerable children in Tasmania* painted a picture of trauma, adversity and poverty which put seemingly insurmountable barriers in the way of being at school. Further, it highlighted how *schools themselves* create barriers to participation for vulnerable children which make learning an opportunity that must be fought hard for. Youth workers described children's trajectories of personal adversity — in which ideally education should intervene — as compounded by negative and very circumscribed interactions with schools. Overall they told a powerful story of vulnerable, disengaged children whose needs are misrecognised in schools and who are often denied meaningful pathways back into school, primarily due to a shortage of appropriate, targeted resources.

As well as highlighting the struggles and exclusion of vulnerable children living with their families, the project again encountered and described the very specific, crushing barriers to school faced by children experiencing unaccompanied homelessness. Aside from the fundamental challenge of how to physically get to school and engage in school activities as a dependent child without a carer or income, youth workers did not expect children to be able to maintain their schooling for very long while their housing is highly unstable and they are forced to move around different suburbs. Keeping track of the possessions or uniform they may have left home with is nearly impossible whilst couch-surfing and workers pointed out that in many cases children arrive at refuges with very few belongings at all.

As workers argued, the distress and crisis surrounding children's homelessness also means that school

attendance may not be a priority or even physically and mentally possible, regardless of whether or not they have access to physical shelter and support. Where it is possible for children to return to school — and where schools have granted children access to return — refuge workers described varying practical challenges in equipping and enabling children to do so. In cases where children have travelled significant distances to access youth refuges, or have been referred to vacant refuge beds in a different region of the state, access to school simply stalls.

As also argued in *Too hard?*, *Outside in* made it clear that home — as a place of *stable and fully resourced care* — is critical not only to unaccompanied homeless children's basic survival but also to their capacity to flourish through the realisation of their other human rights, including the right to education. *Outside in* foregrounded the issue of *no home and no school* as a compounded complexity in the lives of unaccompanied homeless children, and again raised questions about *how* the needs of unaccompanied children are being conceptualised, with an emphasis on the crucial need for holistic, age-appropriate care.

Looking Forwards: A Taskforce and a Whole-of-community Task

In 2018 Housing Tasmania stakeholder consultations on priorities for the second *Affordable Housing Action Plan 2019–2023* immediately revealed that the issue of unaccompanied child homelessness was in the process of being more firmly written into policy existence. Effort was made in consultations to distinguish the needs of children at risk of homelessness separately to those of youth. Alongside the commitment to a new Youth at Risk Centre for those under 16 in the north of the state, the subsequently released action plan included the creation of a taskforce to consider the care needs of vulnerable children under 16 who are at risk of homelessness and not in out-of-home-care.⁸

Significantly, representation from Department of Education alongside Communities Tasmania and the community sector was sought for the taskforce. This was a vitally important development and

reflected practical recognition that unaccompanied child homelessness is not an accommodation issue but instead an issue of ensuring age-appropriate care for Tasmania's vulnerable children whether they are unaccompanied in refuges, couch surfing, living at risk of homelessness with families requiring extra support, or in out-of-home-care.

As shown in *Too hard?* and *Outside in*, experiencing an absence of care and caretakers of course has global impacts in children's lives which require integrated responses. This is about integrated policy and service delivery, but it is also about responses which integrate and educate a range of community actors in contributing to the care of unaccompanied children. The lack of inclusive community responses results, for example, in the profound bullying and stigma children report experiencing at school and the misrecognition of challenging and inappropriate behaviour as pathological and criminal rather than a logical reaction to extreme adversity and complex trauma.

Alongside my involvement on the taskforce, the next chapter of what has become a passionate *mission* to better understand and advocate for the needs of unaccompanied children will involve specific investigation of their high rates of mental ill-health. This new project will examine their experiences of mental ill-health and their access to appropriate mental health care — whether this involves non-specialist mental health supports, crisis responses or longer-term clinical care. Both *Too hard?* and *Outside in* describe this cohort's extreme psychological distress and high rates of self-reported mental illness; anecdotally youth SHS and outreach services in Tasmania are currently reporting that their children are in extreme crisis. To date, however, mental health care and the involvement of State-wide Mental Health in integrated responses to unaccompanied children remains unaddressed. Needless to say, mental health care is a critically needed component of integrated care for a group of children overwhelmingly likely to have experienced extreme adversity and childhood trauma continuing in new forms into adolescence.

Whilst the policy recognition of the existence of vulnerable children requiring care outside of child protection services is a ground-breaking step for Tasmania, the lack of consideration of unaccompanied children's need for mental health care signals there is still much work ahead in developing actual holistic responses. The level of distress reported by unaccompanied children and those who work with them is a stark reminder that while we research, consider and discuss their care needs, they must still cobble together a daily and nightly existence and service providers must still provide what they know are only fragments of care. Troublingly, it is children themselves who are asked to find the strength to shoulder the consequences of this struggle for care.

Endnotes

1. I make reference here to the lyrics of a song from *Tones and I* (2019) which refer to political potency of the voices of children and young people.
2. Robinson C 2017, *Too hard? Highly vulnerable teens in Tasmania*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart, available: <https://www.anglicare-tas.org.au/research/too-hard/>
3. This image is reproduced from Robinson, C 2017, *Who cares? Supported accommodation for unaccompanied children*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart, available: <https://www.anglicare-tas.org.au/research/who-cares/>
4. Robinson C 2017, *Who cares? Supported accommodation for unaccompanied children*.
5. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) 2015, *Tasmania's Affordable Housing Strategy 2015–2025*, available https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/30254/AHS_Strategy_Final.pdf; DHHS 2015, *Tasmania's Affordable Housing Action Plan 2015–2019*, available https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/30252/150596_TAH_Action_Plan_web_print.pdf; DHHS 2017, *Youth at Risk Strategy*, viewed 21 November 2017, http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/250984/CYS_Youth_at_Risk_Strategy_48pp_v8_LR.pdf
6. See <https://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019-03-01-Letter-to-Minister-Jaensch-Unaccompanied-Homeless-Under-16s-FINAL.pdf>
7. Robinson C 2017, *Outside in: How the youth sectors supports the school re-engagement of vulnerable children in Tasmania*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart, available: <https://www.anglicare-tas.org.au/research/outside-in-how-the-youth-sector-supports-the-school-re-engagement-of-vulnerable-children-in-tasmania/>
8. Department of Communities 2019, *Tasmania's Affordable Housing Action Plan 2019–2023*, available https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0028/31699/TAH_Action-Plan-2019-2023-WCAG.pdf.