

Anglicare Tasmania

Policy Position for the 2018
Tasmanian State Election

Supporting our children and young people

The wellbeing of Tasmania's children and young people is everybody's business. Every child deserves a safe home and a good education, but they also deserve more: they deserve nurturing care that supports their aspirations.

However, there is a gap in leadership on the wellbeing of children in Tasmania. Current State Government policies isolate responses to different departments and services, resulting in a fragmented approach that lacks a strategic and cohesive framework to plan, monitor and hold accountable the wide range of departments and agencies that play a part in the wellbeing of Tasmania's children. This leaves vulnerable children and young people at risk of missing out on the care they need to survive, let alone flourish.

In Tasmania in 2015-16, there were 342 unaccompanied children aged 10 to 17 who presented to Specialist Homelessness Services (Robinson 2017). Over the same period, 284 children were admitted to Care and Protection Orders in Tasmania (AIHW 2017). Tasmanian children on orders are up to five times as likely to be below the national minimum standards on NAPLAN testing for literacy and numeracy, five times as likely to be exempted from schooling and four times as likely to be excluded (DoE 2011).

Anglicare's research and service experience has identified gaps in strategy, education, care and specialist services for Tasmania's children and young people. Improving leadership and service provision would provide proper support for all our children and young people.

Every child deserves a safe home and a good education, but they also deserve more: they deserve nurturing care that supports their aspirations.

We believe

- Unaccompanied children under 16 are highly vulnerable.
- Current services are inadequate for vulnerable teens.
- Child and youth wellbeing goes beyond the realm of the Child Safety Service.
- The wellbeing of children and young people should be a daily priority in Tasmania.

Anglicare policy recommendations:

1. The wellbeing of children and young people should be a priority, non-partisan issue coordinated by the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPAC).
2. Existing specialist adolescent services should be expanded to provide a complete suite of drug and alcohol, mental health, education, trauma and medium and long-term supported accommodation services for teenagers.
3. In consultation with the sector, the State Government should develop good practice guidelines relevant to all service providers working with unaccompanied children under 16 years of age.

Rationale for change

1. Unaccompanied children under 16 are highly vulnerable and have specific development needs.
2. The current siloing of policy and service responses is not in the best interests of children and young people.
3. Current services are inadequate, resulting in significant gaps in specialist services, education and care provided to children and young people. Due to these service provision gaps as well as the ambiguity in responsibilities required by services, vulnerable teens are missing out on the State's obligations to provide statutory care and protection.
4. Political cycles and partisan approaches preclude or disrupt the progress and efficacy of medium and long-term policy approaches and program initiatives.

Current services are inadequate, resulting in significant gaps in specialist services, education and care provided to children and young people.

Anglicare's experience

Childhood exposure to family violence, physical and sexual abuse and violence is common amongst young people seeking assistance from Anglicare. Our services for women, men and children experiencing family violence are complemented by early intervention therapeutic services that support positive family functioning and child development. For the best outcomes, we have found that family support needs to be intensive, collaborative, long-term, flexible and whole-of-community.

Anglicare's services and research have found that many young people, feeling abandoned by care-givers, stigmatised and bullied in school environments and often experiencing severe impacts of cumulative trauma, reach breaking points which result in them leaving home. Their struggle to survive independently precipitates deepening compound disadvantage, including homelessness, poverty, school exclusion, violent victimisation, drug use, suicidality and mental illness and involvement in perpetrating violence and crime.

Anglicare's research also identified that supporting foster carers to support education can have a significant impact on educational aspiration, progress and achievement. However, as one foster carer explains, "The [Education] department doesn't offer any help with education. There are massive highs and low and you can feel overwhelmed. The department needs to understand that if the carer isn't getting the support it adds extra pressure at home. Then they run the risk of the placement breaking down if they don't feel supported. There's a problem in that if you ask for help from child protection you are seen as not coping. So we don't say anything" (Hinton 2016).

Child Safety Service has a focus on keeping families together, or expediting family reunifications where possible to minimise the traumatic impacts on children of removal from their birth families. For families involved with the Child Safety Service, our workers also

Our Values

- Compassion
- Hope
- Respect
- Justice

often see parents who have had a child or children removed struggle with a reduction in income, escalation of debt and changes to their housing, placing severe restrictions on the ability of families to reunify in cases where that would be in the child's best interests. Adequate supports for parents during and after removal of children and for families who are trying to reunify are critical to reducing ongoing trauma for families, children and young people. Such supports would assist the Child Safety Service to distinguish between a family's true parenting capacity and the negative effects of child removal.

Anglicare policy recommendation 1:

The wellbeing of children and young people should be a priority, non-partisan issue coordinated by DPAC.

Rationale for change

1. The current siloing of policy and service responses is not in the best interests of children and young people.

As identified by child welfare expert Professor Maria Harries, the fragmentation of children's services results in "dedicated Child Protection Services often becom[ing] the default service for all concerns about children regardless of the level of risk to the child... and that managing the associated burden of escalating reports is unsustainable and dangerous for children, families and the workforce" (DHHS 2016, p. 3).

Central agency leadership would reduce the likelihood of gaps in strategy and support for vulnerable children and young people. Through DPAC, senior bureaucrats and politicians would be the driving force to make children and young people a priority policy issue, joining up current collaborative work undertaken as part of the child protection redesign and the Strong Families Strategy.

The wellbeing framework that is being developed by the Department of Health and Human Services should also be brought under DPAC to ensure it guides all departments with their work with children. DPAC should ensure the framework takes an ecological approach (across children, youth, families and communities) and operates within a public health model (across universal prevention and early intervention programs through to tertiary and crisis support).

The value of central agency leadership and coordination has already been demonstrated in the establishment of a whole-of-government

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response to family violence and violence against women.

There is significant complementarity between these existing initiatives and DPAC also prioritising the wellbeing of Tasmania's children and young people.

Further, like the approach on family violence, an interdepartmental steering group that is required to meet frequently to identify issues of concern and review policies, strategies and specific cases would ensure the wellbeing of children and young people is a daily priority in Tasmania.

2. Political cycles and partisan approaches preclude or disrupt the progress and efficacy of medium and long-term policy approaches and program initiatives.

While every new government wants to make its mark, we cannot afford to have policies and practices about the wellbeing of children change every four years. A tri-partisan approach similar to that for addressing family violence, with DPAC taking a lead role, should hold all departments to account for how their strategies, policies and programs will work to achieve wellbeing for children and young people, making it easier to identify gaps in policy or service delivery.

This policy recommendation addresses the leadership gap in supporting the wellbeing of children and young people in Tasmania.

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Anglicare policy recommendation 2:

Existing specialist adolescent services should be expanded to provide a complete suite of drug and alcohol, mental health, education, trauma and medium and long-term supported accommodation services for teenagers.

Rationale for change

- 1. Current services are inadequate for vulnerable teens, with significant gaps in care provided by the Child Safety Service and Specialist Homelessness Services.**

Anglicare services and research have identified significant gaps in services available for children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Despite the recently released Youth at Risk Strategy identifying the need for strong communities and families, early intervention, coordinated interventions and intensive interventions to improve outcomes for young people, the strategy lacks a cohesive approach and specific initiatives.

Anglicare has identified the following as high priorities across the State for highly vulnerable young people both with and without Care and Protection Orders:

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SPECIALIST SERVICES

- Trauma-specific mental health services with capacity for assertive outreach and engagement
- Residential mental health recovery services
- Residential drug detoxification and rehabilitation services for under 18 year olds

EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

- Increased capacity and diversity of alternative education options
- Greater support for foster carers and schools to meet the educational needs of students impacted by trauma

CARE SERVICES

- Intensive family reconnection services for older, unaccompanied children
- Medium and long-term therapeutic supported accommodation for under 16 year olds
- Innovation in out-of-home care placement options for older children
- Extension of out-of-home care support to 21 years of age
- Long-term, therapeutic, mobile case coordination and case work

Anglicare is particularly concerned that Tasmania's Child Safety Service is under financial pressure to 'deal' with children and young people they consider to be at 'lesser' risk by not invoking Care and Protection Orders and, rather, allowing these children to remain at risk either in their family homes or moving through short-term accommodation options such as couch surfing with friends or specialist homelessness services.

We know that, compared to out-of-home care options, homelessness services are cheaper for the State and considerable 'savings' can be found for the Child Safety Service, although with poorer outcomes for the children. As Maria Harries explains, if child protection services "are

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not provided before families reach a crisis point, the levels of demand within the statutory system will continue to increase, be more costly and there will continue to be poor outcomes for vulnerable children and families” (DHHS 2016, p. 3).

2. Vulnerable teens are missing out on the State’s obligations to provide statutory care and protection.

Many vulnerable teens in Tasmania are missing out on adequate care because of the age at which they come to the attention of the State.

If a child under 10 years of age is identified as needing State care, the Child Safety Service is more likely to respond in a manner that sees the child both protected and supported. However, children aged 10 years and above are anecdotally considered ‘too old’ for the child protection system – for example, it has been argued that age rather than level of risk determines the threshold for a Child Safety Service response (CYS 2012, p. 59) – and ‘too young’ for the Specialist Housing Services system, which has been designed for adults transitioning back to independence.

This policy recommendation will address gaps in specialist services, education and provision of care to children and young people in Tasmania.

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Anglicare policy recommendation 3:

In consultation with the sector, the State Government should develop good practice guidelines relevant to all service providers working with unaccompanied children under 16 years of age.

Rationale for change

1. Unaccompanied children under 16 are highly vulnerable and have specific development needs.

The Child Safety Service is at capacity and is unlikely to respond to the needs of 'older' children. Further, services such as education, drug and alcohol, mental health etc. assume young people receive support either through a case worker or family, which makes accessing a service and maintaining access more achievable. However, vulnerable children under 16 who are not on care orders and are forced to rely on short-term accommodation options, including specialist homelessness services, are unlikely to have a reliable support person.

Ideally, the Government would solve this gap with appropriate intensive therapeutic services for children between 10 and 16 years of age. Services should have family reunification as a priority for this cohort where appropriate, but if reunification is not possible children under 16 currently have limited options for receiving care or protection.

For example, while Tasmanian Specialist Homelessness Services accept children from age 13 they do not have the resources or practice guidelines to support the specific service delivery needs of this young age cohort. These services are often faced with the choice of turning away vulnerable unaccompanied children or trying to find a solution within their often already over-stretched service. If they are

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able to offer shelter, their one-worker model restricts the support younger children can receive.

Good practice guidelines, along with appropriate funding, would ensure that children who do need to rely on specialist services receive appropriate care.

2. There are gaps and ambiguity in responses by service providers.

Tasmania's services are failing our vulnerable children and young people, forcing them to seek intermittent and inadequate help from services either focused on young adults or providing services to children with lower, non-trauma-specific needs who are more likely to have a support person.

While stable accommodation is "an absolutely critical factor for young people in the TYSS [Targeted Youth Support Services] program", TYSS "does not have the power to remove young people from unsafe environments" (CYS 2012, pp. 59, 61). This leaves the service in the difficult position of working with children they know to be in unsafe environments and having no ability to offer them safe accommodation.

Other states have attempted to grapple directly with the issue of who has responsibility for responding to unaccompanied children. For example, in 2015 NSW created the Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP). It is the only supported accommodation program for under 16s in Australia. Its service delivery framework is to "reconnect unaccompanied children and young people 12 to 15 years of age with their families or wider support networks, or facilitate transitions to more appropriate long-term supported accommodation" (FACS 2016, p. 3). In recognising that some children are unable to return home, HYAP places into a policy and practice context the specific needs of unaccompanied under 16s.

Tasmanian government and non-government service providers need clarity about who has responsibility for children who are not on Care and Protection Orders.

This policy recommendation will ensure Tasmania meets its requirements for caring for children and young people.

Tasmanian government and non-government service providers need clarity about who has responsibility for children who are not on Care and Protection Orders.

These principles guide our policy recommendation

COST EFFECTIVE

Early intervention, prevention, better coordination and long-term tri-partisan commitment will reduce long-term costs for caring and protecting our children and young people. In addition, achieving better outcomes for children as they transition to adulthood will increase their opportunities for further education and employment.

BROAD REACHING

Central agency leadership will reduce the likelihood of gaps in both strategy and support for vulnerable children and young people.

MEASURABLE

Fewer children should attend Specialist Homelessness Services once the State establishes a suite of appropriate services for under 16s. Central agency coordination would also make it easier to set measurable outcomes, monitor and report on progress and gauge changing or emerging needs over time.

ACHIEVABLE AND LIKELY TO SUCCEED

Elevating child and youth wellbeing to DPAC joins up current collaborative work undertaken as part of the child protection redesign and the Strong Families Strategy. Senior level bureaucrats and politicians would be the driving force to make children and young people a priority policy issue in Tasmania. With other States showing leadership on good practice frameworks, Tasmania can learn and modify our approach based on approaches taken in other jurisdictions.

CONSISTENT WITH GOOD PUBLIC POLICY

The State of Tasmania has an obligation under the Convention on the Rights of the Child to provide protection and assistance to children deprived of a family environment. The value of central agency leadership and coordination has already been demonstrated in the establishment of a whole-of-government and non-partisan response to family violence and violence against women. There is significant complementarity between these existing priorities and adopting the wellbeing of Tasmania's children and young people as a further area of priority for DPAC.

SARC research on supporting children and young people

Robinson, C 2017, *Who Cares? Supported accommodation for children* Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.

This review examines how the non-statutory supported accommodation needs of highly vulnerable teens have been articulated and addressed in a number of jurisdictions outside Tasmania.

Robinson, C 2017, *Too Hard? Highly vulnerable teens in Tasmania*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.

This research explores young people's high vulnerability as a key social justice facing Tasmania.

Hinton, T 2016, *Fostering Education: Supporting foster carers to help children and young people learn*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.

The experiences of Tasmanian foster carers in providing placements that support education are outlined in this report.

Pryor, A 2014, *Reducing Youth Homelessness: advice from young people on how to reduce homelessness in Tasmania*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.

This report captures the 'lived experience' of young Tasmanians who have cycled in and out of the homelessness system. The research found that most of the young people who had experienced homelessness have had involvement with the child protection or youth justice systems.

Ivec, M 2013, *A Necessary Engagement: An international review of parent and family engagement in child protection*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.

This overview documents international and Australian examples of good practice in engagement, support and advocacy for parents who have contact with child protection systems.

Hinton, T 2013, *Parents in the child protection system*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.

This research documents the experiences of parents who have been involved with Tasmania's child protection system. It identifies the challenges of negotiating a successful way through the child protection system for parents and for the workers who support them.

SARC research projects in progress:

In Limbo

Looks at the complexities for the Child Safety Service and Family Support services in assessing and supporting the parenting capacity of families who are reunifying with their children in the context of poverty. In particular it will explore how we can ensure that material basics like adequate income and housing are addressed to enable families to focus on providing a safe and emotionally secure family environment to expedite family reunification.

Breaking the Cycle

Looks at the complexities of assessing parenting capacity in the context of parental trauma. It will focus on how to support parents during and post removal and the cumulative impacts of repeat child removals, where the impacts of parents' trauma after prior child removals may not have been addressed.

References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2017, *Child Protection Australia 2015-16*, Child Welfare Series no. 66, cat. no. CWS 60, AIHW, Canberra.

Children and Youth Services (CYS) 2012, *Targeted Youth Support Services (TYSS) Mid-Term Review*, CYS, Hobart.

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) 2016, *Strong Families – Safe Kids: Redesign of Child Protection Services Tasmania*, DHHS, Hobart.

Family and Community Services (FACS) 2016, *Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) Service Delivery Framework*, revised version: 23 February 2016, FACS, Sydney.

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Authorised and printed by Chris Jones, 159 Collins St Hobart
Social Action and Research Centre (SARC)

Anglicare Tasmania
159 Collins St, Hobart
GPO Box 1620, Hobart, 7001

Freecall 1800 243 232

SARC@anglicare-tas.org.au

www.socialactionresearchcentre.org.au

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