

## Submissions

**NAME:** Michelle Scott

**ORGANISATION:** Commissioner for Children and Young People

**REASON FOR INTEREST:** The Commissioner is an independent advocate for Western Australia's children and young people reporting directly to Parliament.

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### **Taskforce Recommendations – Are there aspects of the Social Housing Taskforce Report you feel are problematic or particularly important, and if so why?**

I was appointed as Western Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People in December 2007 pursuant to the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*. Under this Act, I have responsibility for advocating for the half a million Western Australian citizens under the age of 18 and for promoting strategies and outcomes that enhance the wellbeing of children and young people.

Under section 19(g) of the Act, I have responsibility to monitor and review written laws, draft laws, policies, practices and services affecting children and young people. It is with these responsibilities in mind that I submit comment on the development of the State's Affordable Housing Strategy to ensure the needs and views of children and young people are considered.

I welcome the findings of the Social Housing Taskforce and support the recommendations put forward in their final report. The report provides a detailed examination of the current housing issues faced by Western Australians. It also provides opportunities for the development and delivery of affordable housing across the State in the long-term. I look forward to seeing these proposals fully addressed in the new Strategy.

I particularly support the recommendation that the responsibility for homeless services be located within the State Housing Department. I have previously advocated for this position, as in my submission to the current inquiry into homelessness legislation, because the Housing Department is best placed to coordinate the delivery of all housing services.

I agree with the Taskforce Chair that the Department of Housing will need to take a new leadership role within a comprehensive social and affordable housing continuum that supports individuals and families from homelessness to home ownership.

### **Proposed Future Directions Statement – Are there aspects of the Future Directions statement you feel are problematic or particularly important, and if so why?**

I welcome the Government's intention to develop a new approach in meeting the State's housing demands. I am pleased to see strategies that reflect the findings of the Taskforce that aim to improve the support needs of the homeless and transition incentives through the housing continuum.

My main concern is for the 23,000 children and young people involved in over 22,000 current applications for public housing in Western Australia. This is almost half of all people waiting for housing. Even more concerning, an estimated 5,500 children and young people are homeless in the State – this is 41% of the total homeless population.

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to an adequate standard of living that includes a clean environment and a safe place to live. I would like to see in the Strategy a particular focus on children and young people that addresses their needs and wellbeing, in particular, those of Aboriginal children and young people.

International and Australian studies show that the impact on children of poor housing or homelessness can lead to developmental delays, behavioural problems, poor educational outcomes and issues with health, including mental health and drug and alcohol abuse.

According to figures in the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators 2009*, Aboriginal people experience homelessness far in excess of that of non-Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people are also up to five times more likely as non-Aboriginal people to face overcrowding and struggle to maintain basic environmental standards contributing to the spread of environmentally caused diseases.

In December 2008, a State Government audit found that 90% of Aboriginal housing in remote communities was in need of upgrade work due to inadequate maintenance programs resulting in poor standards of living and overcrowding.

I commend the Taskforce for addressing some of these important matters in its recommendations, in particular specific Aboriginal housing issues, and urge the Government to implement these as a priority.

I am also concerned about the principle for housing provision based on an agreed duration as outlined in the future directions statement. While I support efforts to build individual capacity and aid independence, I am concerned that this is imposing further restrictions, particularly for Aboriginal families who may have difficulty in moving through the housing continuum and in achieving home ownership.

I continue to call for improved levels of accommodation for children, young people and their families. More needs to be done to stop children and their families from reaching crisis point in the first place and to ensure that those particularly vulnerable groups have immediate access to safe and secure housing appropriate to their circumstance.

Significant investment will be required to implement the State's Affordable Housing Strategy to ensure long-term housing support services are available to meet the needs of children, young people and their families.

### **Other Issues and Solutions – Do you feel there are other measures or practical proposals that should be considered to address the affordable housing challenge?**

The New South Wales (NSW) Commission for Children and Young People and I made a joint submission to the Australian Government green paper, *Which way home? A new approach to homelessness*. I also recently provided a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family Community Housing and Youth inquiry into homelessness legislation.

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Both the submissions focussed on the issue of housing affordability and the need to reduce the incidence of homelessness resulting from structural factors in the housing market. In addition to this central focus, we made two key recommendations:

1. That a public health model be adopted which would focus on primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies. This model reflects the complexity of systems and drivers across a homelessness continuum that runs from being appropriately and affordably accommodated to 'sleeping rough'. Strategies are directed along that continuum and include prevention, early intervention, minimising the period of homelessness and improving the coordination and integration of services.
2. That a 'child centred' focus in housing service delivery is necessary. The many design features of 'child centred' crisis services includes such things as prioritising service and support models to maintain families with children in their own homes, and sustaining community connectedness.

I reiterate the proposals of those earlier submissions. I also advocate for initiatives that would assist social inclusion by enabling the development of holistic models of service delivery. An example of such an approach for young people has been the 'foyer' model developed in Britain in the 1990s and I am pleased that the State Government has recently announced the first 'foyer' project to be located in WA. Typically, the UK foyers, which have focussed on the requirements of young people in housing need, have had three key characteristics:

1. They provide integrated access to housing, training and job search facilities in a holistic manner.
2. They aim to assist a transition from dependence to independence.
3. Services are provided on the basis of an individual contract between the young person and the service provider, covering the conditions of residence and the package of activities to be undertaken by the resident.

Such a model could be adapted to other groups who are vulnerable to the housing market. However, the benefit of such a model is undermined if the service users are unable to make the transition to independent housing because of a lack of available medium to long-term housing options.

The public health model also aims for greater cross-sector shared responsibility and any funding models should reflect this. Consistent with a public health approach, I support the adoption of fully integrated holistic services for those most vulnerable. This would permit the particular needs of such groups to be addressed in one setting and assist them to secure and maintain medium to long-term accommodation.

### **General Suggestions – Are there more general matters you think need attention in the proposed Affordable Housing Strategy and why?**

I would like to see the participation of children and young people in the development of the new State Affordable Housing Strategy, and identifying further the youth perspective on these issues. The views of children and young people are vital to improving the planning, development and implementation of programs and services that affect them.

The Institute of Child Protection Studies published Finding Their Way Home in 2007 featuring personal insights into the experiences of homeless children and young people:

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- Children and young people defined being ‘housed’ more by the level of connectedness to family and community and the absence of fear, instability and insecurity, than by their housing status. As one young man said ‘Living with my mum has been when I am happiest .... (home) is more about the people there than the house’.
- Parents’ capacity to protect and care for their children mitigated the effects of homelessness on their lives to some extent.
- When housed (in temporary and longer term housing), children stressed the importance of having adequate space, having adequate control over their environment and their special things around them.
- Many of the children had experienced high levels of mobility and having a ‘home’ was associated with permanency, stability, security.
- Children did not necessarily feel safer and more secure in crisis accommodation than they did in the often difficult family circumstances that precipitated their homelessness.
- The most difficult aspect of moving for many was having to leave their schools, friends and local communities.

These impacts are exacerbated by the additional burden of violence in the home. Children as young as seven years of age reported that they were tired and worried about their mother and one 14 year old girl stated: I never wanted to go anywhere. I always want to be around mum, when I go out I get scared that she is going to be killed by him. I can never do any work at school coz my head is always thinking about poor mum. Some children expressed anger at the situation and reported being in trouble at school because of their anger.

In preparing its response to the Australian Government’s homelessness green paper, the Youth Affairs Council of WA (YACWA) surveyed more than 150 Western Australian young people. In view of their feedback and consultations with youth service providers, YACWA, supports wrap-around services that recognise the range of issues affecting young people, and delivers services at different levels. I also support these findings. In addition, they identified the need for:

- an increase in housing for young people with mental illnesses, for Aboriginal young people, and for young women and mothers
- an increase in support to assist young people transition out of crisis accommodation
- an increase in funding to tenants advice services
- an increase in funding and support to organisations to assist young people in State care to transition to independence
- better-equipped mainstream services.

Inadequate housing can have a profound long-term effect on children and young people because of disruptions to daily life and the negative impact on health. The development of a State Affordable Housing Strategy provides a unique opportunity to develop a model for greater cross-sector shared responsibility to improve the housing situation for the most vulnerable.

I look forward to the ongoing opportunity to help shape housing services in the State and provide further comment on the Strategy as it develops that is inclusive of the needs of the children and young people.