

Pre-Budget Submission 2023/24

The Youth Affairs Council of WA

A New Agenda for Young People in Western Australia



Acknowledgement of Country

YACWA acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Custodians of this land and its waters. We wish to pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend this to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples seeing this message.

About YACWA

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) is the peak body for young people and the youth sector that supports them in Western Australia. YACWA operates primarily as a human rights organisation that seeks to address the exclusion of young people in a rapidly changing society.

YACWA represents around 48 youth sector organisations and 281 individual members, including both young people and compassionate community members.

About this Document

YACWA's Pre-Budget Submission has been developed in anticipation of the 2023/24 State Budget. We wish for this document to provide guidance encouraging the State Government to use its enviable economic position to truly improve the lives of young Western Australians and create a sustainable system of care.

This document was developed between August and October. To assist in this process, YACWA has spoken with young people, youth sector workers, and other relevant stakeholders to listen to their views, experiences, and ideas for change.

Thank you

We wish to thank the young people, youth workers and other individuals who generously gave us their time and voices to inform the messages contained within this submission. It is your expertise and passion for a better Western Australia for young people that drives our communities forward to a kinder future.

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Our Vision for Young People in Western Australia

We believe in vision of a future Western Australia where all young people have safe and stable homes, access to basic necessities, a strong safety net for them and their families as well as individualised supports to nurture them to flourish.

However for so many young people in Western Australia this vision is far from reality, and in a state with a record \$6 billion operating surplus¹ this is a goal that is entirely within our power to achieve. Key tenets of this pre-budget submission are focused on pathways to better outcomes for young people and their families, including:

- Providing housing, food and other basic essentials required for young people to live safely and stably;
- Intervening early to address the pathways of social disadvantage for young people, such as poverty and family and domestic violence;
- Delivering coordinated services that address a range of indicators of youth wellbeing such as physical and mental health, education and employment and familial stability, and;
- Enabling supports that are tailored to the unique needs of diverse cohorts of young people and responsive to the local conditions of the area in which they live.

Our Pre-Budget Submission sets out a series of recommendations for the State Government which will enable them to deliver this strategic approach to investment and address gaps in support for young people in the community. We have designed these recommendations to be tangible, practical, and staged – to ensure a sustainable and vibrant youth sector. These are spread across four key **Pillars of Change**:

1. **Breaking down barriers** to access by addressing critical gaps in the youth service landscape.
2. **Improving local service provision** by fostering sustainable, specialised and person-centred service delivery.
3. **Preventing vulnerability** by prioritising long-term investment in early intervention approaches that prevent disadvantage before it emerges.
4. **Building regional capacity** by empowering and harnessing local expertise and connections to community to deliver effective place-based support for young people in regional and remote areas.

The time is ripe for the State Government to deliver a fundamental shift in the way the care economy is operated and delivered. We have all the building blocks required to make this happen; a healthy surplus of resources, a network of passionate youth workers with diverse knowledge and expertise, and a community that recognises that our state's money is best spent on helping those doing it tough.

Together we can realise the vision of a prosperous community for all young Western Australians a reality.

¹ Government of Western Australia (2022). *2021-22 Annual Report on State Finances*. Retrieved from https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2022-09/2021-22-arsf_1.pdf

Summary of Recommendations

Breaking Down Barriers

Enabling young people with complex issues to access the right supports where they need them

Problem: Young people with complex needs are often unable to access critical services due to strict eligibility criteria set by funding, contracting, or organisational barriers.

Solution: Strengthen the delivery and accessibility of the low-threshold model-of-service to address gaps in support for young people with complex issues through:

- Reviewing funding and contracting eligibility criteria as part of the Department of Communities' agency commissioning plan in partnership with at-risk youth service providers.
- Building capability and capacity of services to maintain and expand low-threshold model service standards by supporting required training and providing contracting flexibility.
- Providing sustainable funding for unfunded services that are currently filling this critical gap.

Impact: If we invest in low threshold services to enable young people with complex issues to access services, we can significantly reduce the likelihood of long-term entrenched disadvantage and poor life outcomes.

Provide a critical circuit breaker to the rising issue of youth homelessness

Problem: Cost-of-living pressures and an unfair rental market are causing increasing numbers of young people to be at-risk of homelessness.

Young people experiencing homelessness are unable to access immediate housing options due to limited service capacity among supported accommodation services and a lack of accessible rentals.

Solution: Support rapid and long-term housing and homelessness support options to become available through:

- Co-designing a Housing First for Youth pilot program in partnership with the youth sector and young people who have experienced homelessness.
- Creating a Centralised Diversion Fund, enabling youth homelessness services to rapidly house young people through private housing stock.
- Adopting inclusionary zoning in all new social housing development with a portion of the housing to be allocated specifically for young people under 25.
- Addressing rental stressors faced by young people by implementing the *Make Renting Fair* Campaign's [Tenancy Ten](#) as part of the ongoing review of the *Residential Tenancies Act 1987*.
- Expand private rental assistance programs to match rising rental costs faced by young people.

Impact: Facilitating more diverse housing options and a fairer rental market will better enable young people to be rapidly housed and successfully maintain stable independent living.

Improving Local Service Provision

Addressing the Funding Sustainability of Youth Services

Problem: Continued financial austerity and rising costs of delivering community services are placing critical youth services at risk of closure or require a reduction in service quality, capacity, or scope to continue operating with insufficient funding.

Solution: Utilise the Department of Communities' Agency Commissioning Plans to:

- Invest in an immediate funding boost for WA Government funded youth services to compensate for the gap between funding indexation and actual increased cost in delivering services.
- Undertake a targeted recommissioning process for youth homelessness services with a specific focus on developing a more coordinated youth services system, including transparent data collation of State and Federal Government funded services as well as non-funded services
- Develop a dedicated cross-agency funding stream outside of core service procurement that prioritises and supports locally based organisations with evidence-based service models to develop, pilot and evaluate new and innovative programs, including collective impact approaches.

Impact: If we ensure funding models are flexible enough to adapt to the real costs of service delivery, we can guarantee sustainable, high quality and evidence-based support for young people in Western Australia

Transforming Detention to a Therapeutic Environment with a Focus on Rehabilitation

Problem: Ongoing issues in youth detention driven by staffing shortages, a lack of a child-focused model-of-care, and policy failures have created an unstable environment that is causing active harm to children and young people and failing to achieve rehabilitative outcomes.

Solution: Rectify issues with the care and management of young people held in youth detention in Western Australia through:

- Leveraging and expanding existing community-based services to provide more training and development opportunities, community-based detention alternatives, trauma-informed counselling and AOD rehabilitation, as well as housing support upon release from detention.
- Providing immediate funding to remove all young people from Casuarina Prison and enable youth services to provide therapeutic support in a secure care placement which is appropriate to their level of urgent and complex need.

Impact: By investing in therapeutic approaches to youth justice we can ensure that we strike the right balance between placing the needs of children and young people at the centre of our actions and a responsibility to maintain community safety.

Preventing Vulnerability

Preventing homelessness before it begins – addressing the gap in support for children under 15

Problem: Young people under 15 are an increasingly visible cohort experiencing homelessness that require support however there are very little services funded to meet their needs.

Solution: Address the gap in services for children under 15 who are at-risk of, or experiencing homelessness by:

- Invest in a metropolitan-based pilot program which would aim to prevent youth homelessness by supporting children under 15 to have positive familial relationships and remain in their home as well as supporting them to exit unsafe situations.

Impact: If we intervene early and support children to remain safely in their home, we can enable them to live in a safe and stable environment with their families, and keep them out of the child protection, homelessness and youth justice service systems.

Reducing youth suicide – access to early intervention mental health support

Problem: Despite positive investments in mental health over the last few years, there is still an overwhelming demand from young people needing to access mental health support that services are struggling to meet.

Solution: Improve access to early intervention mental health support for young people by:

- Increasing investment in existing State Government funded youth mental health services to increase access to support for young people.
- Rebalancing the mental health system by further investment in prevention and early intervention as both a gross figure and proportion of overall spend, in line with the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015-2025.
- Provide support for specialist youth services to both recruit and train staff with specialist trauma informed mental health and/or alcohol and other drug expertise as well as facilitating collaborative partnerships with mental health services.

Impact: With robust investment in early intervention and prevention, we can ensure that young people receive the support they need before their mental health issues deepen into crisis, preventing the need for emergency services.

Preventing the criminalisation of young people by reimagining our youth justice system

Problem: There is currently no overarching strategy to direct investment and coordinate agencies to enhance youth justice outcomes. This has resulted in disconnected policies, services and reforms across the system, entrenching poor outcomes for vulnerable young people.

Solution: Implement the reforms outlined in Social Reinvestment WA's [*Blueprint for a Better Future: Paving the Way for Youth Justice Reform in WA*](#), including:

- Allocating funding to develop a whole-of-government strategy for youth justice which coordinates efforts across government agencies responsible for youth justice outcomes and is developed in partnership with youth services, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, those with lived experience and other key stakeholders.
- Piloting an Embedded Youth Outreach Program; formalising a partnership between the State Government, youth services and ACCOs across the state to facilitate coordinated engagement and diversion of street present and at-risk young people.
- Immediately committing to raise the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility from 10 to 14 years old as an absolute minimum and provide resourcing to enhance the capacity of community-based youth justice services to provide alternative supports.

Impact: By enabling a unified approach to youth justice that responds to the underlying socio-economic drivers of offending, we can effectively prevent the criminalisation of young people, and in doing so improve social, cultural and emotional wellbeing outcomes across the community.

Building Regional Capacity

Providing better services for young people in the Great Southern Region

Problem: Young People in regions such as the Great Southern, particularly those outside of regional hubs, are facing a lack of access to housing, mental health support, and alternative education opportunities.

Solution: Strengthen the range of services and supports available to young people in the Great Southern Region by:

- Invest in a place-based hub that facilitates access to person centred supports for young people including mental health, education and financial, including regular outreach to satellite communities as well transport assistance for young people.
- Provide investment for Great Southern-based ACCOs to employ Aboriginal outreach staff who can provide place-based mental health support and facilitated access to community support services.
- Support the design and delivery of a Foyer Education First Model to provide housing and education and training support for young people.
- Provide incentives for private landowners to utilise available granny flats to increase housing availability in the Great Southern.

Impact: By enabling young people in rural and remote areas to access timely and effective services, we can ensure young people remain living healthy, stable and secure lives in their homes and families.

Providing improved supports and better access to services for young people in the Mid West Region

Problem: Young people in the Mid West Region often experience difficulty in accessing many crucial resources and supports such as long-term stable housing, healthy and affordable food, and sexual health services – all of which impacts their ability to live safe and stable lives.

Solution: Strengthen the range of services and supports available to young people in the Mid West Region by:

- Improving access to programs that provide free, accessible and healthy foods to children and young people in the region.
- Reviewing and enhancing partnerships between the Department of Communities and key youth services to identify and provide intensive support for children and young people at risk of abuse and neglect and their families.
- Prioritise the refurbishment of untenanted social housing in the Mid West region to enable them to be accessible to children, young people and their families.
- Work with schools and youth services to enable widespread access to STI prevention tools such as condoms, sexual health testing as well as comprehensive sexual health and respectful relationship education.

Impact: By providing young people with proper nutrition, stable housing and the right supports we can disrupt the pathways that lead to entrenched disadvantage and poor life outcomes.

Pillar One - Breaking Down Barriers

Enabling young people with complex issues to access the right supports where they need them

Problem: Young people with complex needs are often unable to access critical services due to strict eligibility criteria set by funding, contracting, or organisational barriers.

Solution: Strengthen the delivery and accessibility of the low-threshold model-of-service model to address gaps in support for young people with complex issues through:

- Reviewing funding and contracting eligibility criteria as part of the Department of Communities' agency commissioning plan in partnership with at-risk youth service providers.
- Building capability and capacity of services to maintain and expand low-threshold model service standards by supporting required training and providing contracting flexibility.
- Providing sustainable funding for unfunded services that are currently filling this critical gap.

Impact: If we invest in low threshold services to enable young people with complex issues to access services, we can significantly reduce the likelihood of long-term entrenched disadvantage and poor life outcomes.

Aligned Government Priority -

- **“Develop and support low-barrier / low threshold accommodation options for young people which are inclusive of the needs of vulnerable groups, including culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) and LGBTQI+ young people” – Priority Action 3.1.1 of the State Homelessness Strategy Action Plan | 2020-2025.**

Evidence to Support Investment

Western Australia currently has a dire lack of services and supported housing for young people experiencing homelessness alongside multiple complex issues affecting their health and wellbeing. This clear and critical gap in services has a significant flow on effect to other services and leaves very little services available to those who are the most in need of intensive support, leaving some of Western Australia's most vulnerable young people on the streets. Without the right supports, these young people will face severe entrenched disadvantage, facing a lifelong increased risk of detention, hospitalisation, poverty and low life expectancy².

Many local accommodation or drop-in services in Western Australia cannot in most cases house or provide the support required for young people if they have ongoing complex mental health and AOD issues. This is due to range of factors including current funding models reinforcing restrictive eligibility, service overcapacity and/or a lack of specialist knowledge to provide the right support. Perth Inner City Youth Services is an example of one of the few services that are directly targeted at providing medium to long-term support and housing for young people with multiple, complex issues, including long-term homelessness and histories

² Flatau, P. Lester, L. Lai, C. Li, M (2022). *Ending Homelessness in Western Australia 2022*. Retrieved from https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/waaeh_2022_ending_homelessness_in_wa_report.pdf

of rejection from other services. Filling this crucial gap leaves them in high-demand and suffering from ongoing limited capacity³.

It is crucial that the State Government provides additional investment in a range of low threshold drop-in and transitional accommodation services that provide both intensive support and referral to access long-term housing. This is paramount to prevent young people with complex issues arising from traumatic experiences from becoming entrenched rough sleepers. Feedback from our consultations indicated that both Perth's northern⁴ and central suburbs⁵ are two areas where these kinds of services are required, complementing and strengthening the previous investment in crisis accommodation. The State Government must prioritise this when commissioning services to reduce demand on crisis accommodation and services with more rigid eligibility criteria, and provide the investment required to enable a trauma-informed, person-centred approach to service delivery.

Case Study – Passages Youth Engagement Hub

Passages Youth Engagement Hub is a service operating as a joint venture between Vinnies WA and the Rotary Club of Perth and Mandurah that provides an accessible drop-in space for marginalised and at-risk young people aged 12 to 25. Passages are guided by a Low Threshold and Change Approach⁶ to service delivery, meaning that they are one of the few youth homelessness services in Western Australia that doesn't exclude individuals based on past challenging behaviour or criminal activity, and do not require referrals, abstinence from substances, disruptive behaviours or service compliance⁷.

Whilst they do not provide accommodation, Passages acts as a crucial interface to assist young people to access services both internally and/or through referrals. In the 2020-22 financial year Passages provided over 700 referrals to young people for additional support services, which clients accessed at Passages on more than 33,000 occasions. These services included legal, medical, alcohol and drug support and Centrelink⁸

Despite being an evidence-based service that fills a unique and crucial role in Western Australia's youth homelessness system, Passages receives no core funding from the State

³ St Vincent de Paul Society (2022). *Submission to the Inquiry into the Financial Administration of Homelessness Services in Western Australia*. Retrieved from [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/lulnquiryPublicSubmissions/9045480D7BDAED3F4825880E00201CA3/\\$file/00011NoCover.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/lulnquiryPublicSubmissions/9045480D7BDAED3F4825880E00201CA3/$file/00011NoCover.pdf)

⁴ Lynch, J (2022). 'Calls for PCYC in Perth's North-West Amid Concerns about Youth Crime'. *The ABC*. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-31/pcyc-calls-perth-north-west-youth-crime-concerns/101373022>

⁵ St Vincent de Paul Society (2022). *Submission to the Inquiry into the Financial Administration of Homelessness Services in Western Australia*. Retrieved from [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/lulnquiryPublicSubmissions/9045480D7BDAED3F4825880E00201CA3/\\$file/00011NoCover.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/lulnquiryPublicSubmissions/9045480D7BDAED3F4825880E00201CA3/$file/00011NoCover.pdf)

⁶ Depaul Ireland (2013). *Where You're At: Low Threshold and Change*. Retrieved from https://issuu.com/depaulireland/docs/depaul_threshold_a5_update_2013_web

⁷ The Youth Affairs Council of Australia, Passages Youth Engagement Hub (2019). *Passages Youth Engagement Hub Service Framework*. Retrieved from https://www.vinnieswa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Passages-Service-Framework_web.pdf

⁸ Bruce-Truglio, S. Smith, C (2021). 'Ending Youth Homelessness in Western Australia: A Targeted Approach to Systemic Reform'. *Parity Magazine: Ending Homelessness in Western Australia*, Vol.34, no.10. Retrieved from <https://chp.org.au/sector-learning-and-development/parity-magazine/>

Government bar limited grant funding for its Mandurah hub and subsequently is not included in official data reporting and evaluation. The Passages model is resource intensive and without long-term support from the Department of Communities faces difficulties in continued operation in the Perth Metropolitan Area moving forward, which would have significant destabilising flow-on effects across the youth homelessness system.

Provide a critical circuit breaker to the rising issue of youth homelessness

Problem: Cost-of-living pressures and an unfair rental market are causing increasing numbers of young people to be at-risk of homelessness.

Young people experiencing homelessness are unable to access immediate housing options due to limited service capacity among supported accommodation services and a lack of accessible rentals.

Solution: Support rapid and long-term housing options to become available through:

- Co-designing a Housing First for Youth pilot program in partnership with the youth sector and young people who have experienced homelessness.
- Creating a Centralised Diversion Fund, enabling youth homelessness services to rapidly house young people through private housing stock.
- Adopting inclusionary zoning in all new social housing development with a portion of the housing to be allocated specifically for young people under 25.
- Addressing rental stressors faced by young people by implementing the *Make Renting Fair* Campaign's [Tenancy Ten](#) as part of the ongoing review of the *Residential Tenancies Act 1987*.
- Expand private rental assistance programs to match rising rental costs faced by young people.

Impact: Facilitating more diverse housing options and a fairer rental market will better enable young people to be rapidly housed and successfully maintain stable independent living.

Aligned Government Priority –

- **“Support the Development of a Housing First for Youth Model”** - Priority Action 2.1.3 of the *State Homelessness Strategy Action Plan | 2020-2025*⁹.

Evidence to Support Investment

The need for a separate approach

The best way to prevent and disrupt homelessness for young people is to provide them with the housing and support networks required to transition into independent living. A Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) model is an internationally evidenced approach that achieves this by understanding that the causes and experiences of youth homelessness are different to adult homelessness and therefore a separate and targeted approach is required.

⁹ The Department of Communities (2020). *All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030 – Action Plan 2020-25*. Retrieved from <https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2021-06/homelessness-action-plan-2020-2025.pdf>

What sets HF4Y apart as a specialist model is that its goal are the long-term supports required for young people to build the skills and resilience required to maintain independent living, engage with employment and/or education, and facilitate a healthy transition into adulthood.¹⁰ Data from the Housing First program 50 Lives 50 Homes showed that less efficacy of the program for young people as it was for adults. Despite having similar sustained tenancy rates to adults within the first six months of being housed, after 12 months only 71% of young people had sustained their tenancies compared to 83% of those aged 26 or older¹¹. With more intensive support delivered by specialist youth workers, we can support young people to achieve a successful transition to a healthy adulthood, gaining the skills and resilience required to live independently.

The question of housing

There is no question that Western Australia is experiencing a profound shortage of both affordable private rentals¹² and social and affordable housing¹³. Last year's budget included a welcome \$875 million social housing investment, however comments by the Minister for Housing John Carey have indicated that 'massive cost escalations' due to inflation and a statewide shortage of builders and global issues with supply of materials have meant that the State Government have struggled to utilise this money to develop social housing as intended.

These difficult conditions must prompt innovative ways of thinking when resourcing efforts to deliver access to housing for young people experiencing homelessness. There is a significant opportunity for the State Government to enable youth services to work with young people to find creative solutions at a more individual level, rather than simply waiting on social housing conditions to stabilise. This can be done through investing in a Centralised Diversion Fund (CDF) which enables youth services to flexibly and rapidly source housing outside public housing waitlists, alongside financial assistance to facilitate this process. Aligned with an allocation of future social housing development for young people, this would create a streamlined and targeted process for State Government and youth services to collaboratively source housing for young people.

Alongside the existing barriers developing new social housing, conditions in the rental market have made it increasingly inaccessible for a growing range of young people to find timely, affordable and quality rentals. Rents in WA have been going up much faster than average wages¹⁴, and the number of affordable rentals available for people on low income are declining¹⁵. The ongoing review of the *Residential Tenancies Act 1987* is a great opportunity for the State

¹⁰ Gaetz S, Walter H and Story C 2021. *THIS is Housing First for Youth. Part 1 – Program Model Guide*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, Toronto. Retrieved from <https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/HF4Y-Program-Guide-Jul-15.pdf>

¹¹ Vallesi, S. Quinn, D. Wood, L (2021). *An Evaluation Snapshot: Youth Experiences of Housing First – Zero Project Snapshot*. Retrieved from https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/147494508/Youth_Snapshot_Report_FA_web.pdf

¹² The current vacancy rate in the Perth Metropolitan Area is sitting at 0.9%, down from 1.4% in July 2021.

¹³ As of August 2022 the social housing waitlist has grown to almost 19,000 households, with an average wait time of 113.5 weeks (over 2 years).

¹⁴ <https://thenewdaily.com.au/finance/property/2019/06/03/minimum-wage-rent-cost-property/>

¹⁵ Anglicare's yearly Rental Affordability Snapshots have consistently shown that there are no affordable houses available in Western Australia for young people on Youth Allowance or JobSeeker.

Government to invest in new initiatives that improve rental access for young people in Western Australia.

Case Study (break out box) – A Way Home Washington

Learnings from A Way Home Washington's Anchor Community Initiative (USA) provide a blueprint for successfully utilising a CDF to deliver innovative approaches to finding housing for young people. **96% of young people** supported by the Anchor Community Initiative to access both the CDF and individualised case management, **remained in a home 3 months after being housed** and **92% of households successfully diverted from homelessness into housing outside the homelessness service system**¹⁶.

¹⁶ Harding Chao, L. Barnes-Cocke, A. Jain, V (2021). *The A Way Home Washington Centralized Diversion Fund: Using Flexible Funds to Prevent and End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in Washington State*. Retrieved from <https://d15k2d11r6t6rl.cloudfront.net/public/users/Integrators/ad2d408a-0934-48f4-a774-cb0a2301bca5/2254production/AWHWA-CDF%20Report-Final.pdf>

Pillar Two - Improving Local Service Provision

Addressing the Funding Sustainability of Youth Services

Problem: Continued financial austerity and rising costs of delivering community services are placing critical youth services at risk of closure or require a reduction in service quality, capacity, or scope to continue operating with insufficient funding.

Solution: Utilise the Department of Communities' Agency Commissioning Plans to:

- Invest in an immediate funding boost for WA Government funded homelessness services to compensate for the gap between funding indexation and actual increased cost in delivering services.
- Undertake a targeted recommissioning process for youth homelessness services with a specific focus on developing a more coordinated youth services system, including transparent data collation of State and Federal Government funded services as well as non-funded services
- Develop a dedicated cross-agency funding stream outside of core service procurement that prioritises and supports locally based organisations with evidence-based service models to develop, pilot and evaluate new and innovative programs, including collective impact approaches.

Impact: If we ensure funding models are flexible enough to adapt to the real costs of service delivery, we can guarantee sustainable, high quality and evidence-based support for young people in Western Australia

Aligned Government Priorities –

- **“The Department of Treasury is to (identify) options to address sustainable funding, including consideration of a funding models and cost drivers” – Action 6.1 of the State Commissioning Strategy for Community Services: Implementation Plan 2022-2024**
- **“Providing leadership and guidance to support line agencies to implement integrated service delivery trials and pilots of place-based services, including joint budget submissions” - Priority 5, Action 3 of the State Commissioning Strategy Implementation Plan**

Evidence to Support Investment

With the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation and impacts of the State Minimum Wage Case and the Equal Remuneration Order, now more than ever youth services are facing severe threats to their sustainability, with some of our members who provide crucial supports for young people with little or no core funding from the State Government informing us that they are at risk of closure as a result. This is alongside existing funded service providers finding it increasingly difficult as repeated contract roll-overs or 12-month extensions have left many with little opportunity to renegotiate funding agreements in new contexts and with changing community needs.

Whilst the Department of Communities has commenced an evaluation of the funding shortfall comparative to service delivery costs across the entire youth sector, existing research has already detailed just how apparent this dire this funding shortfall is. A recent study on the

funding of Western Australian homelessness services estimated that from 2014-15 to 2022-23 the aggregate disparity was around 12% based on Wage Price Index and Consumer Price Index (CPI) estimates¹⁷. Funding models that provide a degree of flexibility to adapt to the changing needs and labour costs are a critical component of agile and needs-based service delivery, alongside the provisioning of appropriate long-term contracting arrangements that foster a more sustainable service system.

In addition to contributing to the unsustainable funding of services, the ongoing rollover and delay in recommissioning of contracts has meant that innovative and evidence-based proposals for new services ideas have been largely locked out from being considered for departmental contracts. Unfunded services are also not included in agency data collection processes, meaning they are unable to effectively evaluate and present their successful service outcomes to enable them to secure funding. Rigid and siloed funding models also make it difficult for collective impact approaches to be considered as they work across outcomes that require cross-agency oversight and funding.

If we allow for flexible funding streams we can better enable the piloting and testing of new ideas and encourage services to work together on evidence-based service models. This will in turn facilitate greater innovation and a more collaborative approach to service delivery.

Transforming Detention to a Therapeutic Environment with a Focus on Rehabilitation

Problem: Ongoing issues in youth detention driven by staffing shortages, a lack of a child-focused model-of-care, and policy failures have created an unstable environment that is causing active harm to children and young people and failing to achieve rehabilitative outcomes.

Solution: Rectify issues with the care and management of young people held in youth detention in Western Australia through:

- Leveraging and expanding existing community-based services to provide more training and development opportunities, community-based detention alternatives, trauma-informed counselling and AOD rehabilitation, as well as housing support upon release from detention.
- Providing immediate funding to remove all young people from Casuarina Prison and enable youth services to provide therapeutic support in a secure care placement which is appropriate to their level of urgent and complex need.

Impact: By investing in therapeutic approaches to youth justice we can ensure that we strike the right balance between placing the needs of children and young people at the centre of our actions and a responsibility to maintain community safety.

¹⁷ Flatau P. Lester L. Callis Z. Kyron M (2022). *The Funding of Western Australian Homelessness Services*. The University of Western Australia. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.25916/xvt3-5c91>

Aligned Government Priority –

- **“The Department contributes to the Government’s strategic goal of strong communities: safe communities and supported families through the administration of adult and youth correctional sentences in a manner that is safe, secure and decent.” – Outcome 7 of the Department of Justice’s Key Performance Indicators.**

Evidence to Support Investment

In July this year the State Government made the decision to move 17 children and young people housed in Banksia Hill Detention Centre to Casuarina Maximum Security Adult Prison, a clear and unequivocal sign that Western Australia’s only youth detention centre is not fit for purpose and in dire need of reform. The evidence of the efficacy of youth justice system reflects this:

- Of the young people who entered detention in 2020-21, 44.31% returned within two years¹⁸.
- A 2022 review found some young people in detention were kept in cells for 22 hours a day – actions which the Supreme Court of Western Australia has ruled to be unlawful¹⁹.
- The Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services have found an enduring pattern of instability in Banksia Hill Detention Centre, with high rates of mental distress and self-harm among young people²⁰.
- Keeping young people in detention is less effective²¹ and is almost 10 times more costly than supporting them with community-based supervision²².

The data paints a clear picture; decades of instability, staffing shortages, under-resourcing and prioritisation of a punitive, rather than a therapeutic response rather has created a system that fails to achieve its desired outcome of maintaining community safety, and instead serves to entrench young people in a cycle of trauma, recidivism and lifelong harm. Given that secure detention will continue to be used, for the foreseeable future, if it is to have any place as a functioning part of a transformed youth justice system its operating model must transform away this outdated and ineffective approach and towards a secure school-like environment used as a last resort to maintain community safety whilst providing comprehensive therapeutic support.

In order to achieve this the State Government must adopt a multi-agency approach which focuses investment in areas which prioritises supporting young people’s wellbeing rather than

¹⁸ Department of Justice (2021). *Annual Report 2020/21*. Retrieved from

<https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2021-09/Department-of-Justice-Annual-Report-2020-2021.pdf>.

¹⁹ Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (2022). *ALSWA Media Statement: Supreme Court of WA Declares That Lockdowns at Banksia Hill Detention Centre are Unlawful*. Retrieved from

<https://www.als.org.au/supreme-court-declares-lockdowns-at-banksia-hill-unlawful/>

²⁰ Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (2018). *2017 Inspection of Banksia Hill Detention Centre*, <https://www.oics.wa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Banksia-Hill-Report-116-FINAL.pdf>. Retrieved from <https://www.oics.wa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Banksia-Hill-Report-116-FINAL.pdf>

²¹ Productivity Commission (2021). *Report on Government Services 2021, Part F, Section 17*. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2021/community-services/youth-justice/rogs-2021-partf-section17-youth-justice-services.pdf>

²² Government of Western Australia (2021). *2021-22 Budget Statements. Budget Paper No. 2 - Volume 2*. Retrieved from: www.ourstatebudget.wa.gov.au.

simply punishing them. This should include training and development opportunities for young people leaving detention, community-based alternatives to detention as a first choice and additional through-care programs such as housing support. Local organisations such as Beyond Youth Justice Services already exist and can do this work, and with an expanded partnership with, and investment in community services the State Government can effectively rehabilitate and reintegrate young people, creating pathways to a better future for these children, and the broader community.

Pillar Three - Preventing Vulnerability

Preventing homelessness before it begins – addressing the gap in support for children under 15

Problem: Young people under 15 are an increasingly visible cohort experiencing homelessness that require support however there are very little services funded to meet their needs.

Solution: Address the gap in services for children under 15 who are at-risk of, or experiencing homelessness by:

- Invest in a metropolitan-based pilot program which would aim to prevent youth homelessness by supporting young people to have positive familial relationships and remain in their home.

Impact: If we intervene early and support children to remain safely in their home, we can enable them to live in a safe and stable environment with their families, and keep them out of the child protection, homelessness and youth justice systems.

Aligned Government Priority -

- **“Young people at risk are identified early and connected to appropriate supports”** - *Strategic Outcome 3.2 of Western Australia’s 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030*²³

Evidence to Support Investment

Emerging research and reports from the youth sector have highlighted that there has been a growing population of young people aged 10-15 and sometimes younger looking to access support from youth homelessness services²⁴. Evidence has demonstrated that the earlier someone experiences homelessness the more likely they are to have chronic homelessness entrenched well into adulthood and this service gap misses a crucial opportunity for early intervention¹. Despite this, there is significant gap in data the prevalence and experiences of homelessness for children under 16; this is the result of several key factors:

- The ABS Census, which is the core method of tracking homeless populations, does not collect data about young people under 15 who are independently homeless.
- Due to a lack of formal accommodation and service options many young people under 16 experiencing homelessness are couch surfers²⁵, which is widely regarded as a hidden form of homelessness.

²³ The Department of Communities (2019). *All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia’s 10 Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030*. Retrieved from <https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2021-06/homelessness-strategy-final.pdf>

²⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People (2017). *Homelessness in young people under 16 Years: A literature review*. Retrieved from <https://www.ccp.wa.gov.au/media/2489/literature-review-homelessness-under-16-yearsfinal-web-file.pdf>.

²⁵ Cooper, T. Baker, M.R (2020). ‘Support for homeless young people under 16 years old: Towards a new paradigm’. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies, Vol.3*. Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9892&context=ecuworkspost2013>

- The lack of funded services for children under 16 means that they are not represented in data collated by the Department of Communities through service reports.

This lack of data has resulted in an inadequate policy response to address the gap in available services to meet the needs of this vulnerable population. Children of this cohort are seen to be the responsibility of child protection services, and as a result other agencies generally exclude them from service provision, restricting eligibility for those aged 16 or over. This is an inherently flawed policy response as evidence demonstrates that the earlier an individual experiences homelessness the more likely they are to experience repeated episodes of homelessness well into adulthood²⁶.

Research across different age groups indicates that the earlier someone experiences homelessness the more likely they are to have chronic homelessness entrenched well into adulthood¹. As a result, ensuring youth homelessness services are available for children under 16 is a critical element of early intervention, enabling support in this crucial period can successfully disrupt cycles of disadvantage and prevent chronic homelessness. Many other states have identified this and deployed a range of services for young people aged 12-15 which have demonstrated considerable success in both preventing and disrupting homelessness for this cohort²⁷.

Case Study – Ruby’s Reunification Program (South Australia):

Ruby’s is a program that supports children and young people aged 12-17 that are experiencing or at risk of homelessness that provides both intensive support for both the individual and their families, outreach counselling and 24-hour supported accommodation. Ruby’s is aimed at resolving family conflict after it occurs and supporting young people with accommodation and support whilst this is occurring. Data from the program between 2014 and 2018 showed that **89.8% of young people did not engage with other homelessness services** after being supported by Ruby’s, and **over 80% of young people engaged in 2018-19 were able to successfully return home and re-integrate with their families**²⁸.

Safe and Connected Youth Program (ACT):

The S&CY Program provides children and young people aged between 8- 15 years and their families with targeted support to improve family functioning and reduce the risk homelessness. It works with young people who remain at home with their families and need support to decrease family conflict to prevent homelessness. Evaluation of the program by the Youth Coalition of the ACT has been largely successful in achieving its intended outcomes in a range of areas, including; **reduced the risk of homelessness for young people, improved**

²⁶ Flatau, P. Conroy, E. Spooner, C. Eardley, T. and Forbes, C (2013). Lifetime and intergenerational experiences of homelessness in Australia’. *AHURI Final Report No. 200*. Retrieved from <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/200>.

²⁷ ACT Government – Community Services Directorate (2018). *Homelessness Amongst Unaccompanied 12-15 Year Olds: A Literature Review*. Retrieved from <https://cbrin.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Homeless-Amongst-Unaccompanied-12-15-Year-Olds.pdf>

²⁸ Uniting Communities (2021). *Ruby’s Reunification Program: Licensing Information*. Retrieved from <https://www.unitingcommunities.org/service/families-and-young-people/supporting-family-relationships/rubys-licensing>.

access to support and services, improved motivation to change, increased family communication, and improved integration and coordination of services and supports²⁹.

Reducing youth suicide – access to early intervention mental health support

Problem: Despite positive investments in mental health over the last few years, there is still an overwhelming demand from young people needing to access mental health support that services are struggling to meet.

Solution: Improve access to early intervention mental health support for young people by:

- Increasing investment in existing State Government funded youth mental health services to increase access to early intervention and crisis support for young people.
- Rebalancing the mental health system by further investment in prevention and early intervention as both a gross figure and proportion of overall spend, in line with the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015-2025.
- Provide support for specialist youth services to both recruit and train staff with specialist trauma informed mental health and/or alcohol and other drug expertise as well as facilitating collaborative partnerships with mental health services.

Impact: With robust investment in early intervention and prevention, we can ensure that young people receive the support they need before their mental health issues deepen into crisis, preventing the need for emergency services.

Aligned Government Priority -

- **“Making it easier to find and access services that are right for us: The right services are available when and where they are needed and are easier to find and access” – Strategy 3 to implement the vision of the Mental Health Commission’s Young People Priorities for Action³⁰.**

Evidence to Support Investment

Across the entire mental health system both Federal and State funded services are overburdened with high waitlists and inadequate capacity to provide timely and holistic support for young people experiencing mental health crises;

- On average, young people will currently wait between six to eight weeks for a psychologist appointment at headspace, with some centres facing waitlists as long as six months³¹.
- Between 2018-19 and 2020-21 only 46% of patients accessing the Child and Adolescent Health Service Emergency Department with a potentially life-

²⁹ ²⁹ Coe, K (2021). *Evaluation: Safe & Connected Youth Program*. Youth Coalition of the ACT. Retrieved from <https://www.youthcoalition.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Safe-Connected-Youth-Evaluation.pdf>

³⁰ The Mental Health Commission (2020). *Young People’s Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drug Use: Priorities for Action 2020-2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/3489/yppa-young-people-priorities-for-action.pdf>

³¹ The ABC (2021). ‘Six month wait times, distressed young people turned away: Demand outstrips supply at headspace. *Triple J Hack*. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/headspace-six-month-waiting-times/13532744>

- threatening or situational urgency were seen within recommended times, well below the agency target of 75%³².
- Evidence from Suicide Prevention Australia's recently report on suicide prevention methods indicated that Emergency Departments across Australia are fundamentally unsuited to meeting the needs young people who have made a suicide attempt, have self-harmed, or are at a point of suicidal distress³³.

Whilst some welcome investment has been recently announced for Western Australia's first short-term residential service for young people experiencing suicidal ideation, more funding is needed for mental health services that intervene earlier to prevent suicidal ideation from occurring in the first place. Despite a State Government produced plan outlining the need to rebalance investment in the mental health system towards prevention and community-based services³⁴, funding for prevention spending is projected to decline by \$13.2 million from 2022-2023 to 2025-26 in the most recent State Budget³⁵.

Prevention services are crucial to prevent the escalation of issues the point of crisis, and engagement with emergency services. Alongside prevention, community-based specialist mental health knowledge can facilitate a more comprehensive no wrong door approach to mental health support, and yet consistent feedback from the youth sector has outlined a distinct lack of resourcing and capacity to recruit and/or upskill staff with the specialist knowledge required to support for young people with complex mental health and/or alcohol and other drug issues.

Western Australia urgently requires an increase in funding for prevention and specialist community-based mental health support to meet targets established in the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Plan. Failing to provide this investment as a priority in the next State Budget risks additional burden on under-funded crisis services and increased wait times for youth psychologists and services as well as hospital emergency departments.

Preventing the criminalisation of young people by reimagining our youth justice system

Problem: There is currently no overarching strategy to direct investment and coordinate agencies to enhance youth justice outcomes. This has resulted in disconnected policies, services and reforms across the system, entrenching poor outcomes for vulnerable young people.

³² Child and Adolescent Health Service (2021). *2020-2021 Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://cahs.health.wa.gov.au/~media/HSPs/CAHS/Documents/About-us/Annual-Reports/CAHS-2020-21-Annual-Report.pdf>

³³ Suicide Prevention Australia (2022). *In Their Words: How to Support Young People in Suicidal Distress*. Retrieved from https://www.suicidepreventionaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SPA_Youth-Report_In-your-words_12-August-2022-1.pdf

³⁴ The Mental Health Commission (2018). *Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015-2025 Draft Plan Update 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/2578/draft-plan-update.pdf>

³⁵ WA State Government (2022). *Western Australia State Budget 2022-23: Budget Paper No. 2, Budget Statements Volume 1*. Retrieved from <https://www.ourstatebudget.wa.gov.au/2022-23/budget-papers/bp2/2022-23-wa-state-budget-bp2-vol1.pdf>

Solution: Implement the reforms outlined in Social Reinvestment WA's [*Blueprint for a Better Future: Paving the Way for Youth Justice Reform in WA*](#), including:

- Allocating funding to develop a whole-of-government strategy for youth justice which coordinates efforts across government agencies responsible for youth justice outcomes and is developed in partnership with youth services, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, those with lived experience and other key stakeholders.
- Piloting an Embedded Youth Outreach Program; formalising a partnership between the State Government, youth services and ACCOs across the state to facilitate coordinated engagement and diversion of street present and at-risk young people.
- Immediately commit to raise the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility from 10 to 14 years old as an absolute minimum and provide resourcing to enhance the capacity of community-based youth justice services to provide alternative supports.

Impact: By enabling a unified approach to youth justice that responds to the underlying socio-economic drivers of offending, we can effectively prevent the criminalisation of young people, and in doing so improve social, cultural and emotional wellbeing outcomes across the community.

Aligned Government Priority -

- **“A safe, secure and decent corrective services which contributes to community safety and reduces offenders’ involvement in the justice system”** – *Outcome 7 of the Department of Justice’s Key Performance Indicators.*

Evidence to Support Investment

The youth justice system in Western Australia has long been designed to deliver punishment as an immediate response, comparatively neglecting therapeutic rehabilitation, early intervention and diversion that would enable it to both keep our community safe and prevent youth offending. The provision of the core responsibilities of engaging young people in the youth justice system is largely concentrated within the Department of Justice and the WA Police, who are often ill-equipped to adequately address the underlying drivers of offending such as poverty, trauma and family instability.

If we want to move away from these failed approaches then we must leverage on the community-based, holistic services and supports that already exist and build partnerships across the State Government, local communities and non-profit sector to enhance coordination of a spectrum of interventions for at-risk young people — from prevention and early intervention to secure care and through-care transitions into independent living in the community.

Social Reinvestment WA’s recently launched Blueprint for Youth Justice Reform provides a clear path forward to achieve this goal through investment to build capacity and effective service design in a range of key areas including:

- **Thriving and Equipped Communities: Holistic care for all young people across Western Australia**
 - Investing in communities that are connected, accessible, and healthy so young people can thrive.
- **Responsive Support: Early intervention for young people at-risk**

- Community services and government collaborating to identify and care for young people early and for as long as is needed.
- **Prioritised Diversion: Support upon engagement with the justice system**
 - Using the justice system and Western Australia Police Force as a touchpoint to provide support that meets young people's needs and enabling them to engage with services in their communities.
- **Rehabilitation-Focused Justice: Diversion and supportive responses within sentencing and court systems**
 - Creating a court system that supports young people to receive effective care and support if behaviour escalates.
- **Therapeutic Care Focused on Reintegration: Therapeutic approaches within secure places of care as a last resort**
 - Transforming youth detention to culturally appropriate, therapeutic responses over punishment, and ensuring this is only used as a last resort to provide safe, intensive care.

In order to meaningfully transform Western Australia into a state that truly supports the wellbeing of children and young people, we require a collaborative and systems-based approach that shifts both the drivers of inequality and disadvantage that lead young people to our justice system, as well as the enablers that entrench this and create life-long harm.

Pillar Four - Building Regional Capacity

Providing better services for young people in the Great Southern Region

Problem: Young People in regions such as the Great Southern, particularly those outside of regional hubs, are facing a lack of access to housing, mental health support, and alternative education opportunities.

Solution: Strengthen the range of services and supports available to young people in the Great Southern Region by:

- Invest in a place-based hub that facilitates access to person centred supports for young people including mental health, education and financial, including regular outreach to satellite communities as well transport assistance for young people.
- Provide investment for Great Southern-based ACCOs to employ Aboriginal outreach staff who can provide place-based mental health support and facilitated access to community support services.
- Support the design and delivery of a Foyer Education First Model to provide housing and education and training support for young people.
- Provide incentives for private landowners to utilise available granny flats to increase housing availability in the Great Southern.

Impact: By enabling young people in rural and remote areas to access timely and effective services, we can ensure young people remain living healthy, stable and secure lives in their homes and families.

Evidence to Support Investment

Mental health services

Young people living in satellite communities outside of Albany such as Denmark, Mount Barker, Gnowangerup and Katanning are facing significant difficulty in maintaining regular access to mental health services. This has led to increase in young people needing to travel significant distances to access mental health support, which due to transport, financial and other barriers is often not possible.

The Central and Upper Great Southern regions are extremely isolated from other parts of the Great Southern. This geographical isolation means that there is a reduction in services available with many towns only receiving irregular access to external outreach support. This is compounded by a lack of services in Albany outside headspace and the hospital that provide mental health support, with headspace like many others across the state experiencing high waitlists from young people seeking help.

Services for young people who aren't engaged in mainstream education

We've heard from services in the region that many young people under the age of 18 are disengaging from mainstream education due to boredom and a lack of support, leading to increased instances of antisocial behavior and engagement with police. Conversations with Elders, community members and Aboriginal Education Officers have highlighted that young Aboriginal people in particular are not getting the support they need to attend and stay in

school. There are also limited available services for students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) communities across the region which puts them at educational risk.

Young people also lack adequate support to transition from schooling to employment and independent living as well as the employment opportunities required to provide them with a sense of hope for the future and the motivation to complete their education. This leads to an entrenchment of unemployment and poverty, community disengagement and lack of access to housing. A prioritisation of investment in transitional and holistic support for graduating students is required to help them develop their networks, access employment and maintain long-term stable housing.

Investing in supported housing to facilitated education opportunities and transition into stable independent living

Young people in the Great Southern Region are facing an inadequate availability of transitional housing to be able to live and remain in their local community. Young House, the main crisis accommodation in Albany is delivered through the Albany Youth Support Association, however capacity is limited to 8 places at one given time. Service providers have indicated that many young people are living in unstable and temporary accommodation such as couch surfing due to a lack of long-term housing options available to them.

The Education First Youth Foyer Model Is one example of a service which if implemented in Albany could provide access to education, employment, social connections, participation in civic activities and access to housing. This would be facilitated by support from a multidisciplinary team of youth workers who can mentor, coach and support the development of young people to reach their potential.

Providing improved supports and better access to services for young people in the Mid West Region

Problem: Young people in the Mid West Region often experience difficulty in accessing many crucial resources and supports such as long-term stable housing, healthy and affordable food, and sexual health services – all of which impacts their ability to live safe and stable lives.

Solution: Strengthen the range of services and supports available to young people in the Mid West Region by:

- Improving access to programs that provide free, accessible and healthy foods to children and young people in the region.
- Reviewing and enhancing partnerships between the Department of Communities and key youth services to identify and provide intensive support for children and young people at risk of abuse and neglect and their families.
- Prioritise the refurbishment of untenanted social housing in the Mid West region to enable them to be accessible to children, young people and their families.
- Work with schools and youth services to enable widespread access to STI prevention tools such as condoms, sexual health testing as well as comprehensive sexual health and respectful relationship education.

Impact: By providing young people with proper nutrition, stable housing and the right supports we can disrupt the pathways that lead to entrenched disadvantage and poor life outcomes.

Evidence to Support Investment

Improving access to healthy and affordable food options

Despite living in a prosperous state, many children and young people in Western Australia do not have steady access to a regular supply of healthy and substantial food. Evidence from the Commissioner for Children and Young People's 2021 Speaking Out Survey of more than 16,500 children and young people showed that around 8% of respondents reported there was only 'sometimes' enough food to eat at home, 1% said that food was 'never' available, and two out of three female high school students reported not eating breakfast every day³⁶. Evidence from other studies shows that households from remote areas are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity and this is often intrinsically linked to poverty³⁷.

We've heard that due to COVID-19 enforced logistical difficulties, inflation and other issues cost for food in areas across the Mid West has significantly increased, with service providers noting that 1kg of mince now costs around \$50 in Meekatharra and other remote towns, and that many foods available in supermarkets are already expired. It is crucial that the State Government invests in mechanisms to provide affordable and healthy food options to alleviate poverty and provide nutrition for young people in regional and remote areas and prevent significant long-term impacts to their health and wellbeing.

Supporting the welfare of young people in unsafe housing situations

Youth services in the Mid West region have told us that there are many young people are forced to remain in overcrowded or unsafe housing options due to the understaffing and lack of support from in Child Protection and Family Services as well as a gap in long term supported housing in the area. This is particularly prominent in remote communities such as the Murchison. This has meant that young people are left with the choice of either becoming homeless or remaining in their home and putting themselves at risk of abuse or neglect.

Prioritising investment in services that intervene early to provide young people with safe and stable housing is an important way to disrupt cycles of poverty and prevent entrenched disadvantage. Improved relationships need to be established between the Department of Communities and youth services to ensure young people at-risk of abuse are identified and supported to grow up with the stable and safe housing required to develop healthily, complete their education and transition into independent living.

³⁶ Commissioner for Children Young People WA (2021). *Speaking Out Survey 2021: The Views of WA Children and Young People on their Wellbeing – a Summary Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/speaking-out-survey/>

³⁷ Landrigan, TJ. Kerr, DA. Dhaliwal, SS. Pollard, CM (2018). 'Protocol for the Development of a Food Stress Index to Identify Households Most at Risk of Food Insecurity in Western Australia'. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol.16 No.1. Retrieved from <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/1/79>

Addressing gaps in sexual health services

Outside of mainstream hospital services young people are facing a significant lack in sexual health services, education and support. Feedback from young people and youth services in the region noted that the key gaps include:

- A lack of access to contraception and STI prevention tools such as condoms and regular sexual health testing.
- An absence of funding and specialist knowledge to enable schools and services to provide education to increase young people's knowledge of sexual health.
- Very few sexual health or self-testing services outside of hospitals which are often unsuitable for young people.
- A lack of culturally appropriate and localised services to support young people who have experienced sexual violence – young Aboriginal women in particular are disproportionately impacted by this and those living in remote areas of the Mid West are forced to travel to Geraldton to seek treatment, something which is unaffordable for many.

Having widely available and youth-friendly sexual health services and resources is crucial to maintain the health of young people across a range of wellbeing indicators and should not be dismissed as less important than other areas of health service delivery. Investing in a wide range of specialised sexual health services for young people in regional areas will have widespread benefits across communities, empower young people to make positive sexual health choices and reduce the stigma and shame associated with seeking help.