Anglicare Tasmania submission to Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy: Discussion Paper 2021

March 2021

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SOCIAL ACTION & RESEARCH CENTRE

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Table of Contents

About Anglicare Tasmania

Anglicare Tasmania is a large community service organisation in Tasmania with offices in Hobart, Glenorchy, Launceston, St Helens, Devonport, Burnie, Sorell and Zeehan and a range of programs in rural areas. Anglicare Tasmania's services include: crisis, short-term and long-term accommodation support; NDIS disability and mental health support services; support services following a motor vehicle accident; aged and home care services; alcohol and other drug services; financial and gambling counselling; and family support. In addition, Anglicare Tasmania's Social Action and Research Centre conducts research, policy and advocacy work with a focus on issues affecting Tasmanians on low incomes.

Anglicare Tasmania is committed to achieving social justice for all Tasmanians. It is our mission to speak out against poverty and injustice and offer decision-makers alternative solutions to help build a more just society. We provide opportunities for people in need to reach their full potential through our services, research and advocacy.

Anglicare Tasmania's work is guided by a set of values which includes these beliefs:

- that each person is valuable and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity;

- that each person has the capacity to make and to bear the responsibility for choices and decisions about their life;

- that support should be available to all who need it; and

- that every person can live life abundantly.

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Wellbeing for all children and young people in Tasmania

Anglicare Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion about the future wellbeing of children and young people in Tasmania.

Compared to other states and territories, Tasmania has the highest proportion of children and young people living in disadvantage (ABS, 2016a). Poverty and trauma are deeply entrenched social justice issues in Tasmania with multi-dimensional and long lasting individual, relational, community and societal impacts. Understanding the challenges these children, young people and their families face has been a focus of research undertaken by Anglicare's Social Action and Research Centre (SARC) and forms the basis of this submission.

We are particularly concerned about the wellbeing of vulnerable children. These include children who are homeless and unaccompanied, children living in out of home care and those receiving child protection services (also considered priority population groups nationally (AIHW, 2020a)). Vulnerable children are often exposed to risk factors which heighten the likelihood of poor wellbeing outcomes. They can be personal, such as experiencing family dysfunction, abuse, mental illness or disability; systemic, such as experiencing poor access to supports and education; or structural, such as being located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage or regional and remote communities.

The wellbeing of all Tasmanian children and young people must be protected and promoted to enhance their quality of life now and as they grow older. For this to occur, a balanced continuum of universal to intensive wellbeing support is required for children and their families.

Summary of key actions

Putting child and youth wellbeing at the heart of policy

- Establish a Department for Child, Youth and Family Wellbeing

Loved and safe

- Develop and trial an explicit model of medium-term (6 months plus) residential care within a state-wide program of Youth at Risk Response Centres which target unaccompanied homeless children 12-15 years.

- Increase funding to Legal Aid to support families involved in the child safety system.

- Provide funding to establish a supportive non-legal service for families involved in the child safety system.

- Provide holistic case management support for parents

- Fund a support service for families immediately post-child removal

Material basics

- Provide programs, services and income to support family reunification

- Provide a suite of stable accommodation options to support family reunification

- Increase funding and support to services supporting youth to access long-term, affordable housing

- Invest in youth employment specialists within existing Employment Hubs to better connect young people to local employment opportunities

Learning

- Resource the systematic implementation of trauma-informed and poverty informed service provision in schools

- Respond to the specific school engagement and learning needs of unaccompanied homeless children

- Increase the number of social workers in schools

- Recognise and better support the role of foster carers in supporting education

- Increase investment in supporting the educational needs of students in OOHC

Participating

- Improve access to legal representation, advice and information for families involved with the Children's Court

- Fully explore the potential for introducing specialist Magistrates and a therapeutic, solution-focused court in the Child Safety jurisdiction.

- Invest in developing a comprehensive strategic approach to delivering the intent of the Children Young Persons and their Families Act 1997, empowering parents to participate in decision-making and providing a supportive infrastructure for vulnerable families who are struggling.

- Provide opportunities for a diverse group of vulnerable children to participate in the design and delivery of Government policy and programs

Healthy

- Invest in additional mental health services and practitioners to provide a continuum of mental health support to vulnerable children and young people in schools and community settings.

- Develop a cohort-specific COVID response plan for unaccompanied homeless children to address access to testing and supported isolation.

Putting child and youth wellbeing at the heart of policy

Child and youth wellbeing is not the responsibility of a single agency. A whole of government response is required and we support the key actions and recommendations provided in the submission to this strategy by TasCOSS. We also see value in the use of frameworks developed in consultation with Tasmanian's such as The Good Life.

To support a whole of government long term Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy we recommend the following key elements:

- It is led by a Department of Children, Youth and Family Wellbeing. The inclusion of families is fundamental as it is within the family setting that the most powerful and cost-effective prevention and early intervention work can occur (Hollonds, 2016, Sanders et al., 2018).

- That the vision, policy and program delivery is guided by a public health approach. This approach is evidence informed, takes a holistic view of health and social issues, seeks to promote wellbeing outcomes by targeting social determinants of health and supports a continuum of service provision from universal to long-term intensive responses. This is appropriate for whole of population strategies, as well as targeted population groups- e.g. unaccompanied homeless children.

- That it is child centred. This would see the interests, wellbeing and views of children and their families elevated in all of government planning and policy.

- That all policy, programs and practice be considered through the perspective of trauma and poverty.

Key action 1: Establish a Department for Child, Youth and Family Wellbeing

Leadership is required to coordinate policy, programs, accountability and the vision of this strategy. A dedicated department could do this with the appropriate:

- Governing infrastructure, resources and authority to develop policy, commission programs and hold government departments accountable for the achievement of wellbeing outcomes.

- Ability to commission services based on the need of Tasmanian children, young people and their families.

- Responsibility for a full suite of prevention, early intervention, and targeted and intensive support programs needed to achieve wellbeing outcomes.

Wellbeing domains

Over the past two decades research from the Social Action and Research Centre (SARC) has repeatedly demonstrated the intertwined nature of poverty and trauma with child, youth and family wellbeing outcomes. This research has identified gaps under the following domains of wellbeing and proposed clear actions for high impact outcomes.

Loved and safe

Unaccompanied homeless children

In Tasmania, as in other Australian states and territories, children can experience homelessness alone and without a parent or guardian. This usually occurs in the context of a breakdown in family relationships and effective guardianship, including situations of abuse and neglect. These children may not become known to authorities during early childhood and, exiting home as older children (aged 10-17), often do not meet the current practice threshold for child protection involvement. Children who experience homelessness alone without a parent or guardian can experience ongoing cumulative trauma. They are more likely to couch surf than sleep rough or access Specialist Homeless Services (SHS), to have a range of physical and mental health support needs, to have inadequate nutrition, to be living with little or no income, and to face challenges in both accessing and remaining engaged in school (Robinson 2017; 2018).

There are clear interventions, however, which could be implemented to prevent unaccompanied child homelessness or ensure that is it a brief, supported and one-off experience. SARC's paper 'A public health approach to ending unaccompanied child homeless' clearly lays out a framework to tackle this issue head on (Robinson 2020a). This work further develops Anglicare's contribution to the Under 16s Homelessness Taskforce Ministerial Advice and informs current participation in the Department of Communities Under 16s Homelessness Working Group.

Anglicare views the development and review of legislative and policy and service responses to children who experience homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian as a key and urgent priority. In the context of the current work of the U16s Homelessness Working Group, a short-term priority action is to also broaden the suite of service offerings that are developmentally appropriate for this cohort and the unique care needs they present.

Key action 1: Develop and trial an explicit model of medium-term (6 months plus) residential care within a state-wide program of Youth at Risk Response Centres which target unaccompanied homeless children 12-15 years.

This should be designed, staffed and resourced to enable re-unification with family and other natural supports or, where this is not possible, enable adequate time for Child Safety assessment and long-term placement decision-making. Current Youth at Risk Centre offerings should be expanded to include North West Tasmania.

For example the Ruby's Reunification Program, in South Australia, combines family counselling and a safe place to stay, to keep families together and divert children from the homelessness system, which is not designed the meet the practical and developmental needs of this young cohort. The Ruby's program has demonstrated excellent outcomes; 85% of children in the reunification program went home (including extended family) and did not enter the homelessness sector. Thanks to this success it has recently been funded in the ACT.

Children and families receiving child protection services

The rise in the number of children entering the out-of-home care (OOHC) system in Tasmania (AIHW, 2020b) is putting increasing pressure on families, on the child safety system, on the justice system and specifically the Children's Court. Also affected are the community organisations that support families where children experience, or are at risk of experiencing, abuse and neglect. Research from Anglicare's Social Action and Research Centre (SARC) shows that the Child Safety system is unable to adequately pursue the intent of the C*hildren Young Persons and their Families Act 1997* to actively support and promote family preservation and reunification, which is driving both entry into OOHC and longer stays once children and young people enter the OOHC system. Anglicare proposes investment in a comprehensive strategic approach to deliver on the intent of the legislation, empower parents to participate in decision-making and put in place a supportive infrastructure for vulnerable families.

Key action 1: Increase funding to Legal Aid to support families involved in the child safety system.

Although the exact number of families attending the Children's Court unrepresented is unknown, the impacts are significant in terms of increasing court workloads, lengthening care proceedings and leaving highly vulnerable people navigating their way through a complex legal system unsupported. A right to legal representation is a basic prerequisite of a fair and just system and must be ensured for such significant decisions as the removal of children from their birth families.

Anglicare supports state investment in the expansion of the Legal Aid funding pool in order to ensure a right to high quality legal advice for parents in the child safety system.

Key action 2: Provide funding to establish a supportive non-legal service for families involved in the child safety system.

Anglicare recommends establishing a Family Inclusion Network (FIN) for Tasmania based on the core elements of the FIN Western Australia model (Anglicare Tasmania 2018). This would facilitate:

- more effective partnering between parents and the Child Safety Service (CSS) at an individual level to enable parents to better engage with CSS, safety concerns and decision-making;

- support with the 'collateral consequences' of child removal and the transition into the justice system; and

- placing lived experience at the heart of effective policy and service design.

Anglicare believes that a properly funded and authorised body delivered by a professional incorporated organisation and supported by recurrent funding is essential. Such a body would encompass a state-wide approach to provide information, advice, advocacy and casework to all families who want or need it. It would also include a mechanism for consumer participation in the co-design of services.

Key action 3: Provide holistic case management support for parents

Parents need access to a continuous working relationship with a case manager who can provide support at any stage - from notifications and assessments, through to child removal, and family reunification. Case management should support parents to interact in an informed and constructive way with Child Safety Services and address the practical and emotional consequences of Child Safety's processes and safety concerns. Post child removal, case management should work with parents, Child Safety Services and other relevant agencies and support services to develop a post-removal plan covering what needs to happens for the family to become reunification ready. The following supports should form part of this holistic case management:

- Assistance to maintain the parent/child relationship and improve parenting capacity (whether or not children are returned).

- Intensive support during pregnancy to proactively engage vulnerable women and assist them (to prevent removal).

- Intensive therapeutic support which can address the underlying causes of the challenges parents face in parenting their children.

Key action 4: Fund a support service for families immediately post-child removal

There is currently no child removal support service in Tasmania to work with families of origin **immediately after a child is removed** by providing support for the collateral consequences of the removal and to address the safety concerns raised by Child Safety (Hinton 2018; Fidler 2018). Within the current review of the continuum of family support services, Anglicare recommends adding a service for families immediately post-child removal to complement current investments in IFSS, IFES and Pathway Home. It would ensure that vulnerable families have access to therapeutic and practical supports, not only to reduce Tasmanian children's involvement in OOHC but also to maximise the chances for their safe return to their birth families.

Housing and basics of living

Children and families receiving child protection services

Removing children from their birth family has implications for that family's income and housing, creating a cycle of challenges that further reduce the possibility of family reunification. The existing policy framework withdraws parenting income from parents when children are removed, triggering an almost inevitable trajectory into poverty and homelessness (Fidler, 2018).

Furthermore, Tasmania's maze of discretionary emergency relief and NGO family support brokerage funds cannot meet parenting and reunification costs and are time-consuming for parents to access. In addition, the current suite of transitional and longer term housing options are at capacity, leaving few options available for families to access affordable and suitable accommodation to expedite family reunification. Even when parents are able to address Child Safety Services' concerns–, parents may be unable to provide the material basics required for reunification: stable housing to accommodate their children, and adequate food, clothing, furniture, toys and learning materials. Without addressing these material basics, progress on family reunification may be stalled.

Key action 1: Provide programs, services and income to support family reunification

A suite of programs and income supports are required to address continued parenting costs for birth families post child removal, as well as the significant costs involved in preparing for and undertaking family reunification. These should include the following elements:

- automatic access to financial counselling pre- and post-child removal to prepare parents for any change in income and explore ways to address it;

- a form of transitional parenting-related income for the first six months while an active case plan is developed;

- providing parenting-related income once family reunification begins in a way that appropriately responds to day and overnight visits;

- expanding access to finance for significant one-off costs for parents that enable family reunification, such as children's car seats, car registration, maintenance and repair, white goods and furniture;

- routinely reimbursing any expenses parents incur in arranging access visits and meeting reunification requirements, such as travel and medical fees; and

- reviewing guidelines and mechanisms that direct carers to materially support reunification activities when the carer is still in receipt of parenting payments for the child.

Key action 2: Provide a suite of stable accommodation options to support family reunification

In order to expedite family reunification, families whose children are removed by Child Safety Services require a suite of options to support them to maintain stable accommodation. These should be tailored to the needs of families and include elements such as:

- Developing specific guidance and mechanisms for Child Safety Services, Housing Tasmania and social housing providers to support family reunification goals. This would include guidance to allocate public and social housing property with sufficient bedrooms for family reunification (where this is flagged as a need by CSS);

- Exploring and providing ways for parents (post child removal) to access the social housing sector, and subsidise access to private rental accommodation to ensure they have stable accommodation close to their support networks and children's schooling;

- Exploring and providing supported accommodation options for families working towards or who are reunification-ready. These could include supported clustered tenancies in the community and residential support models that work intensively with families.

- Any tenancy support should routinely be part of the family's case co-ordination team, linked to the parent's NGO case manager, Child Safety case worker and the Reunification Case and Care Plan requirements.

Young people aged 18-25

80% of Tasmanians aged 15-24 live on less than minimum wage, and 31% of young Tasmanians aged 20-24 live on less than $300 per week (ABS, 2016b). Young Tasmanians are disproportionately represented in homelessness statistics (ABS, 2016c), and make up one third of the waiting list for social housing.

A property is considered affordable for low income households if the rent is less than 30% of income (Yates 2007). The Rental Affordability Snapshot 2020 revealed that only 11% of properties listed for rent across Tasmania would meet the affordability threshold for households relying on income support payments. Even more concerning, the analysis of available rental properties in 2020 found there were **no properties** anywhere in Tasmania that were affordable for someone in their late teens receiving Youth Allowance (and this has been the case for the past 8 years). Despite work by government to improve housing availability (e.g. the Affordable Housing Strategy) it is of concern that actions underway and planned will not fully address the spectrum of accommodation needs of young, low-income Tasmanians, including those in crisis situations and those with intensive support needs.

Key action 1: Increase funding and support to services supporting youth to access long-term, affordable housing

Given the private rental market is unable to provide affordable homes for independent children and youth, who are over-represented in Tasmania's specialist homelessness services, there is urgent need for the State Government to specifically provide sufficient affordable homes for this cohort.

In addition, we recommend the State Government also increase funding to Housing Connect front door and support services as they respond to demand across an increasingly diverse range of client groups who need crisis, medium and long-term housing and tenancy support.

Key action 2: Invest in youth employment specialists within existing Employment Hubs to better connect young people to local employment opportunities

Unemployment continues to be one of the most persistent issues facing young Tasmanians. Despite a range of initiatives in place to prepare and support young people to access employment, the youth unemployment rate is currently at 14.8%, and has not been below 12% since 2012 (ABS, 2021).

Tasmania's Employment Hubs provide a space for business and industry to partner with the Tasmanian Government in supporting people into meaningful employment. These hubs should be further explored as a space for employing youth specialists (Youth Connectors as proposed by YNOT

[YNOT, 2020]) to provide a youth-targeted, individualised, holistic approach to finding meaningful, local employment for our young people.

Learning

Unaccompanied homeless children

Unaccompanied homeless children live with no or little income which can exclude them from participating in schooling. In addition, their experiences of trauma and abandonment are actively reinforced in many school settings. School settings can be inherently chaotic, and many schools do not have capacity to identify and appropriately respond to traumatised and dysregulated children. Students who have experienced trauma may appear to be deliberately misbehaving in the classroom, disengaged or disinterested in learning, and can struggle to develop skills that strengthen positive relationships with school staff and other students. Explosive behaviour may occur as a result of the potent mix of extremely frightening or overwhelming challenges children face at home, the environmental challenges of school, and a lack of capacity to self-regulate. Schools typically respond to children's unwanted or unsafe behaviour with measures that reduce access to school or otherwise keep them off-site (e.g. through school suspensions). Instead of offering sanctuary, schools expect vulnerable children to take responsibility for their own behaviour and the barriers to learning this creates (Robinson, 2018).

Key action 1: Resource the systematic implementation of trauma-informed and poverty informed service provision in schools

We recommend the Department of Education review how school environments can be shaped to be sites deeply sensitive to children's experiences of trauma and poverty. This should include professional development for all teaching and non-teaching school staff; teacher's aide resourcing to support the implementation of responses to the specific learning needs of children impacted by trauma; and trauma-informed and poverty-informed revision of approaches to student behaviour and discipline(in particular suspensions). A partnership between the Department of Education and the University of Tasmania could be pursued to make trauma awareness an integral part of teacher training programs in Tasmania.

Key action 2: Respond to the specific school engagement and learning needs of unaccompanied homeless children

As a rapid response within a broader shift to school-based homelessness prevention, the Department of Education is encouraged to expand the capacity of Learning Services to work with children identified as at risk of or experiencing unaccompanied homelessness. This would include fast-tracked resolution to enrolment and school access issues and priority access to professional services.

The provision of targeted one-to-one learning supports through a tutoring program would help children, and support over-stretched schools in their re-engagement efforts. This is particularly important in the context of COVID19 recovery. Support efforts could be modelled on recently

announced tutoring programs in NSW, Victoria and the UK:

- COVID Intensive Learning Support Program in NSW (NSW Department of Education 2020)

- Tutor Learning Program in Victoria (Victoria State Government Department of Education and Training 2020)

- National Tutoring Programme in the UK (National Tutoring Program 2020).

Key action 3: Increase the number of social workers in schools

Similar to Victoria's approach Tasmania could resource the provision of social workers in all schools r to provide relationship-based care for children; liaise and collaborate with allied government and community sector supports; and implement care and safety plans in the school environment.

Children and families receiving child protection services

Approximately 41% of children in out-of-home care in Tasmania live with foster carers (AIHW, 2016). These carers play a significant role in the educational experiences and outcomes for children in their care. Our research has found gaps in the collaborative processes designed to include foster carers in Personalised Learning Plans and Case and Care Plans (Hinton, 2016). Foster carers also experience barriers to supporting children in their care with their education. These barriers include accessing funding for educational expenses, being excluded from decision making processes, and a lack of information or knowledge. A range of models operate in other jurisdictions to support foster carers. These recognise carers as crucial and valued members of collaborative processes. Of particular interest is the role of education specialists working to support both students in OOHC and those caring for them alongside peer support from Education Champions. These approaches can provide a bridge between carers, child protection and education staff to support education as well as offering a pool of expertise about how to tackle educational challenges.

Key action 1: Recognise and better support the role of foster carers in supporting education

The educational support provided by foster carers can be better supported through the following strategies:

- Building support for education into foster care contracts and recruitment processes.

- Providing foster carers with greater access to training, information, support and decision-making in their education work.

- Ensuring that tenders for OOHC include funding for education specialists who can provide expertise and support to foster carers and others about educational issues.

- The development of a peer support/mentoring program and peer Education Champions who can provide expertise and support to foster carers and others about educational issues.

- Strengthen existing collaborative mechanisms to ensure the involvement of carers by welcoming them into collaborative processes, supporting their involvement and providing a range of options to allow their participation in decision-making.

Key action 2: Increase investment in supporting the educational needs of students in OOHC

We recommend an audit to review how much is currently spent on the education-related needs of children in OOHC. This would help to assess the nature of these needs and identify any shortfalls lie in expenditure. It is proposed making a clear sum available for each OOHC student which is dedicated to educational resourcing and scaled according to need. Educational needs would be outlined in Personalised Learning Plans and appropriate resources allocated to address them.

Participating

Children and families receiving child protection services

For many parents involved with child protection, the experience of attending court further marginalises parents from supports and care systems. These families and carers face a series of barriers to accessing legal representation including a lack of understanding that legal advice is needed and how to access it, limitations in receiving adequate levels of Legal Aid funding, and the quality of the legal advice available. Administrative processes, procedures and timeframes including the late serving of Child Safety affidavits, the nature and the quality of the evidence used to support them, a lack of legal representation, differences in judicial style, the operation of alternative dispute resolution and the delays endemic to care proceedings all conspire to impose additional pressures and costs on families. Non-standardised processes across the state and processes that are not adapted to meet the needs of specific population groups (e.g. people with disability or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds) further serve to limit effective and efficient outcomes for Tasmanian families receiving child protection services (Hinton, 2020).

Key action 1: Improve access to legal representation, advice and information for families involved with the Children's Court.

We recommend the Tasmanian government ensures that a right to legal representation in the Child Safety jurisdiction is embedded in the relevant legislation and Legal Aid funding pool is expanded to meet this need. Work must also be undertaken to improve access to non-legal advocates who can provide more generalised support. Improving access to information resources would also support families' understanding of legal processes and supports.

Key action 2: Fully explore the potential for introducing specialist Magistrates and a therapeutic, solution-focused court in the Child Safety jurisdiction.

This exploration should include a comprehensive review of pre-proceedings processes, and make further investment in current court processes and workforce capacity. This would improve opportunities to divert families from the justice system and support and respond promptly to the particular needs of families in the Child Safety system (for example families where there are parents with mental illness or disability, families from CALD backgrounds).

Key action 3: Invest in developing a comprehensive strategic approach to delivering the intent of the Children Young Persons and their Families Act 1997, empowering parents to participate in decision-making and providing a supportive infrastructure for vulnerable families who are

struggling.

Key action 4: Provide opportunities for a diverse group of vulnerable children to participate in the design and delivery of Government policy and programs.

Listening to the voices of children and young people is crucial for ensuring their needs are properly heard and addressed. We know that young people can capably provide insights into the challenges and opportunities they face by articulating their unique perspectives regarding all aspects of their lives (Caldwell et al., 2019; Cook-Sather, 2006; Groves & Welsh, 2010; Levin, 2000). Innovative strategies and an investment of time is required to ensure there is diversity and representation of vulnerable groups of children and young people in consultative and decision making activities.

Healthy

A staff survey conducted at Anglicare to support this submission highlighted concern about the lack of appropriate mental health services available for young people in Tasmania. A shortage of appropriate services and supports means places in some Anglicare-delivered programs are taken by young people who require a far more intensive responses. Young people are also seeking support at Accident and Emergency units. Waiting lists for mental health supports are lengthy, and there is a shortage of support workers (including social workers, counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists) across the state.

Anglicare has consistently observed the struggle of vulnerable children and young people to access existing mental health supports and services in schools and in the community. Anglicare has also consistently raised the issue of gaps in mental health service provision including the absence of outreach and the need for a trauma-specific service for children and young people (Robinson 2017; 2018; 2020a; 2000b).

Key action 1: Invest in additional mental health services and practitioners to provide a continuum of mental health support to vulnerable children and young people in schools and community settings.

We acknowledge the development by Department of Communities of COVID Practice Guidelines for Specialist Homeless Services for supporting unaccompanied homeless children. However, gaps remain in planning COVID responses and continuity of face-to-face support during public health emergencies for the majority of children experiencing unaccompanied homelessness outside of SHS in contexts of couch surfing and rough sleeping (Robinson 2020b).

Key action 2: Develop a cohort-specific COVID response plan for unaccompanied homeless children to address access to testing and supported isolation.

In collaboration with the diverse range of frontline child and youth workers who serve this cohort, Department of Health should develop clear COVID-safe plans and resources for:

- Classifying community-based child and youth services supporting highly vulnerable clients as essential.

- Proactively increasing the availability of emergency accommodation options suitable for unaccompanied homeless children.

- Arranging transport to and from testing for unaccompanied children.

- Arranging supported isolation for unaccompanied children and their carers.

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