



**JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES
RESEARCH POLICY AND ADVOCACY UNIT**

SUBMISSION

**Reforming support to vulnerable young people: scoping a
new approach
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Introduction

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to scoping the new approach to supporting vulnerable young people.

In doing so Jesuit Social Services draws on over 35 years of involvement in supporting young people involved in the justice system and/ or demonstrating multiple and complex needs. Lack of educational attainment and disengagement from education are dominant themes in our work with young people. Efforts to coordinate and streamline services are therefore welcome.

Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services works to build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged people, families and communities. Our service has its origins in work with disadvantaged young people involved with the youth and adult justice systems in Victoria.

We do this by intervening directly to address disadvantage and by influencing hearts and minds for social change. We strengthen and build respectful, constructive relationships for:

- Effective services - by partnering with people most in need and those who support them to address disadvantage
- Education – by providing access to life-long learning and development
- Capacity building – by refining and evaluating our practice and sharing and partnering for greater impact
- Advocacy – by building awareness of injustice and advocating for social change based on grounded experience and research.
- Leadership development – by partnering across sectors to build expertise and commitment for justice

Jesuit Social Services values every person and seeks to engage with them in a respectful way, that acknowledges their experiences and skills and gives them the opportunity to harness their full potential. Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where it has the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference.

We have developed expertise and provide services in the following focus areas working with people, families and communities to remove barriers to participation and inclusion:

- **Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – people with multiple and complex needs and those affected by suicide, trauma and complex bereavement
- **Settlement and community building** – recently arrived immigrants and refugees and disadvantaged communities.

Across all this activity we promote **education, lifelong learning and capacity building** with a focus on those people with barriers to sustainable education and employment.

Currently our direct services and volunteer programs are located in: Victoria, New South Wales and Northern Territory. Services include:

- **Jesuit Community College:** increasing opportunities for people constrained by social and economic disadvantage to participate in education, work and community life and reach their full potential.
- **Brosnan Youth Services:** supporting young people and adults in the justice system, and assisting them to make a successful transition from custody back into the community. Brosnan Youth Services includes: the *Konnect* program which provides pre-release assessment and planning, and post release support to Aboriginal men and women; and the African mentoring program providing support to men from African backgrounds who have been imprisoned in Victoria.
- **Just Leadership:** Working in partnership with community and corporate enterprises to foster leadership for a just society.
- **Community Programs:** Working with people, including the African Australian and Vietnamese communities, on public housing estates across metropolitan Melbourne.
- **Community Detention Services:** delivering case management support to unaccompanied asylum seeking minors in community detention.
- **Community development:** delivering social enterprise and other activities in the area of Mount Druitt, Western Sydney.
- **Capacity building** activities in Alice Springs.
- **Connexions:** delivering intensive support and counselling for young people with co-occurring mental health, substance and alcohol misuse problems.
- **Artful Dodgers Studios:** providing pathways to education, training and employment for young people with multiple and complex needs associated with mental health, substance abuse and homelessness.
- **Support After Suicide:** supporting people bereaved by suicide, including children and young people.
- **The Outdoor Experience:** offering an alternative treatment service through a range of outdoor intervention programs for young people aged 15 – 25 years, who have or have had issues with alcohol and/or other drugs.
- **Jesuit Social Services volunteers:** provides the opportunity for individuals to make a difference in the community through a range of opportunities.

Research, advocacy and policy are advanced through our Policy Unit, coordinating across all program and major interest areas of Jesuit Social Services.

Response to submission questions

Scoping a New Approach

Are there any other issues that should be considered when describing the problem/current context for vulnerable children and young people?

Jesuit Social Services endorses the YACVIC response. That is, while fragmentation is of real concern, equal if not greater problems relate to the capacity of the underpinning services system to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people. Further, Jesuit Social Services would be interested to see further elaboration of the consultation outcome, that the new approach be "data and evidence based." We found the previous DEECD publication, *Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners* (Merryn Davies, Stephen Lamb & Esther Doecke, 2011) instructional in this regard. The focus therein on 'outreach, wellbeing, pedagogy, and pathways' is endorsed, consistent with Jesuit Social Services' practice experiences with vulnerable children and young people disengaged from learning. As found by both the previous Jesuit Social Services Gateway program and with Jesuit Community College, such support is extremely difficult to provide within current funding models. We see addressing such funding needs as a major necessity.

If the underpinning services are not meeting the needs of children/young people disengaged or at risk of disengagement from education, then no amount of systemic improvements to coordination and governance will achieve the stated benefits.

In scoping a new approach to support vulnerable children and young people are there additional Benefits/Key Performance Indicators that could be included?

The benefits and KPIs in the Discussion Paper are high order and general. Further questions they raised for us were: What will success look like? How will this be measured? To this end, Jesuit Social Services supports the KPIs proposed by YACVIC.

The intention of the new approach is stated as to build on strengths of existing DEECD programs, yet realising the desired benefits would require a whole-of-government cross sector approach. This is reflected in the objective of "seamless connections between external services and the education workforce to improve young people's engagement with education and training and promote positive mental health and wellbeing". We would be interested to see greater elaboration about the processes that will be employed to leverage the participation of external services. This issue will be returned to when the governance questions are considered below.

Are there additional strategic responses that should be considered in developing a new approach and achieving the benefits?

As per the first question, the defined problem is fragmentation and the defined strategic response is to "Improve the bridge between universal and tailored individual responses". Again, we believe further analysis is required about the adequacy of the underpinning services and exemplars of evidence based models to meet the needs of the target vulnerable children/young people. Using the language of Davies et al, and consistent with our practice experience, we believe that the strategic response must relate to the range and effectiveness of required services across each domain of outreach, wellbeing, pedagogy and

pathways. For bridges to be effective, the underpinning foundations must be strong and comprehensive.

Functions of a New Approach

Along the continuum of prevention, early intervention and intervention, are there any gaps/ opportunities to consider in the proposed functions of a new approach and the key responsibilities at each level?

Consistent with the comments above, the functions described for the new approach focus on capacity building and expanding partnerships based on existing services. Further analysis is required about the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in existing services, and evidence about best practice for meeting the needs of the identified target group and the desired objectives of re-engagement in education. Furthermore, we believe that more detail is required about the nature, composition and resourcing of the pivotal "Locally determined point of contact/platform for support" to comment further.

Further, Jesuit Social Services endorses the YACVIC response, in particular, "Much early intervention activity should be undertaken within and by schools, in particular support for common youth issues – such as responses to bullying, and learning difficulties. More complex issues will rely on the partnerships described."

A new approach will support young people during key transition points, enabling smooth and seamless delivery of services across early childhood, schooling and higher education. Please indicate your level of support for a new approach targeting vulnerable children and young people aged 8 – 18 years. Please provide a rationale for consideration of a different age cohort.

Like YACVIC, Jesuit Social Services welcomes the proposition that the new approach support young people during key transition points to enable services to be delivered across early childhood, schooling and higher education. Like YACVIC, Jesuit Social Services believes the upper age limit (18) is too low as young people who have disengaged from school at younger ages will potentially require extended time to complete their secondary or equivalent education. This is consistent with the experience of Jesuit Social Services programs, where young people have failed to complete education due to disruptions as a result of alcohol and /or drug abuse, involvement in the criminal justice system, homelessness, child protection involvement or the young person's experience as a new arrival, including refugees and asylum seekers.

We endorse the YACVIC position that young people up to 25 years need to be included to address transitions to further education and/or employment and continued vulnerability during important and often difficult life transitions – to independent living, from adolescent to adult relationships, and into parenting roles.

The new approach intends to create a single point that young people and agencies can use to access the range of pathways required to support vulnerable groups of young people. This will require formal partnerships that connect universal settings

and a range of targeted providers. For example the partnerships should be able to connect to employment pathways or pathways to improved health and wellbeing that will enable engagement in learning. Do you have a view on this partnership approach?

Jesuit Social Services supports action to increase access and streamline referrals to coordinated and integrated services. More information is required, however, to determine whether a 'single point of contact' will assist young people to make contact with services. Based on our experience of young people with multiple needs, we believe that a single access point may work better where the initiator of the referral comes from within professional networks that are aware of it, but less well for young people who potentially favour 'back door' routes into services. We frequently see this in practice through our Artful Dodgers Studio where young people present on the basis of their interest in creative arts, but may be referred onto other services or become involved in Jesuit Community College training programs after a relationship has been established.

We believe that multiple local level entry points at venues young people naturally frequent may be more visible and accessible to young people themselves than a single entry point that commonly refers to a phone number in a setting physically removed from young people's local environments. This is particularly true for young people disengaged from schools and the obvious referral pathways connected to the educational setting. Potentially, self referrals and professional referrals involve different dynamics and the new approach should ideally cater for these different sets of needs.

Finally we believe that to fully benefit from the envisaged partnerships supporting the single entry point, that adequate resources are required to establish and maintain the relationships across sectors. This includes establishing memorandum of understandings and other functions required to connect universal settings with targeted providers.

Governance of a New Approach

This governance approach will be expected to bring together some current networks and governance groups with a view to collaborative area based planning and service delivery. Do you have any views on the geographical size of a local area?

It would seem sensible to match the local areas with the Child FIRST/Child Protection catchments, especially given that it is highly likely that the community sector representatives and current networks to be included in the envisaged governance approach will overlap. This also raises the question as to what form the relationship between the new approach governance networks and the Child and Family Service Alliances will take, including their expanded catchment planning functions as advocated through the report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry. Other governance and network groups are also likely to be operating across the functional or geographic patches relevant to the new approach. Coordination and overlap in responsibility and resources (including the costs of collaboration) will need to be considered further.

In our experience, there is a lack of geographic alignment, between the child protection areas, mental health areas, police areas, and educational areas themselves. Often regions

are too vast geographical areas to be of functional value for local level partnerships, referral pathways and collaborative area based planning. Smaller geographic areas are therefore preferred.

The local level governance group for the implementation of this new approach is proposed to operate as a working group of the Regional level governance group with a focus on vulnerable young people. Do you have a view on how the membership of the local level group should be compiled?

In Jesuit Social Services experience, there is a difference between governance groups – which have decision making authority required to make a partnership function effectively (in this case, deliver referral pathways for vulnerable children referred through the single access point) - and network groups who exchange information and strengthen relationships. From this perspective, the local level governance group should entail representatives of the organisations who are essential to making the model work. Such representatives should have sufficient authority within their agencies to ensure cooperation and the acceptance of referrals for young people referred through the single access point.

Securing the buy in of the wide range of services listed as partners (principals; community sector practitioners; youth workers; alternative education and training providers; local industry/business) will be critical to achieving the desired objectives. Often collaboration is not costed or funded. The experience of other integrated partnerships – the Primary Care Partnerships (PCP); the integrated family violence partnerships, and the child and family service alliances (Child FIRST) – is that governance processes are most effective when resourced by a dedicated project position. As noted in the Protecting Victoria Vulnerable Children Inquiry, the effectiveness of the Child and Family Service Alliances was constrained in the absence of funded Project Managers to support the partnership and undertake required functions.

What is your view on broadening the focus of the Regional Level Governance Group to consider the education and training needs of all young people?

The YACVIC response is fully endorsed- that the governance group focus on addressing 'vulnerability', and not the education and training needs of all young people, to avoid any risk of becoming distracted with education agendas that are already the focus of significant attention – such as strengthening academic results at the 'top end' of engaged learners.

Evidence demonstrates that properly addressing vulnerability with a strategy across the prevention – early intervention – tertiary span of interventions and supports will drive improvement in wellbeing for all young people, and not only 'vulnerable' young people.¹ Conversely, a generalist focus, which arguably we have already, too often fails to engage with and address disadvantage.

¹ YACVic's research *Two Way Street: young people informing improvements to schools and youth services* confirmed prior research demonstrating that inclusive learning environments best meet the needs of engaged as well as 'vulnerable' learners.