



**3 May 2021**

**Submission to the National Strategy to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse Final Consultation Paper**

By email: [nationalofficeforchildsafety@pmc.gov.au](mailto:nationalofficeforchildsafety@pmc.gov.au)

**About Shelter Tas**

Shelter Tas is Tasmania's peak body for housing and homelessness services. We are an independent not-for-profit peak organisation representing the interests of low to moderate income housing consumers, community housing providers and Specialist Homelessness Services across Tasmania. We provide an independent voice on housing rights and a link between governments and the community through consultation, research and policy advice. We work towards a fairer and more just housing system. Our vision is affordable, appropriate, safe and secure housing for all Tasmanians and an end to homelessness.

**Our submission**

Shelter Tas members include women's shelters, family and men with children shelters, youth shelters and services who provide supported accommodation for young people across Tasmania. People and children are exposed to more risks when they are not safely and securely housed, and poverty narrows people's options and exacerbates their risks. We know that appropriate accommodation and support are essential for many children and young people who are victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

Our submission addresses Priority Themes one, two and four:

1. Education and building child safe cultures
2. Supporting and empowering victims and survivors
4. Offender prevention and intervention

**Education and building child safe cultures *needs to include specialist homelessness services as essential services that engage with victims and survivors of child sexual assault.***

It is vital to provide specialised education for the housing and homelessness sector workforce to ensure that child safe cultures are in place. Already in Tasmania, there is a focus on a 'trauma-informed' response, which embeds appropriate understanding of how

young people's development is affected by trauma, and the range of behaviours and challenges that can arise when people have experienced abuse. Housing insecurity both exposes people to more risks, and exacerbates the effects of trauma, so safe and secure affordable housing is a crucial element of a community-wide child safe culture.

Services that provide accommodation need resources and funding to enable evidence-based practice, and to ensure that all children and young people who are survivors can develop their skills and autonomy to live well.

This goes well beyond educating the workforce, as prevention includes managing risks within these services. For example, to embed a child safe culture in youth shelters, updating the 'one worker model' and reviewing the age range, currently 13-20 years old, would support a safer environment. Reconfiguring congregate living arrangements to eliminate shared bedrooms and bathrooms would help prevent issues such as adult or peer abuse of children and young people in youth shelters, women's shelters, family shelters and shelters for dads with children.

Tasmanian services also have legal obligations arising from the [Justice Legislation Amendment \(Organisational Liability for Child Abuse\) Act 2019](#) (the Act). The amendments now impose on an organisation an active duty to take reasonable measures and precautions to ensure that both their employees and individuals associated with their organisation are not perpetrating child sexual abuse. This applies to both adult to child abuse and peer abuse.

***Supporting and empowering victims and survivors requires specific attention to their needs for accommodation and support.***

Child sexual abuse can be a precursor to homelessness, and homelessness places children and young people at risk of abuse. Young people and children under 16 who seek assistance from homelessness shelters report significant levels of family and domestic violence. The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare AIHW reports that half (51%) of all younger SHS clients (aged under 18) had experienced family and domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> This is not the same as child sexual abuse, but shows the impact of trauma in early life on experiencing or being at risk of homelessness.

Sexual abuse is a risk factor for young people experiencing homelessness, including children under 16. Children are vulnerable to exploitation and criminally abusive behaviour in situations such as couch surfing or families doubling up, and even in shelters from adults or peers.

Experience and evidence have shown that is essential to provide appropriate accommodation and support for young people who are survivors of child sexual abuse. This includes both accompanied and unaccompanied children and young people under the age

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-who-have-experienced-family-and-domestic-violence>

of 18. Responses must include a range of models to suit the diverse and developing needs of accompanied or unaccompanied young people, especially where they are not supported by a family unit, and where return to family or reunification may not be safe or appropriate. Options include family and domestic violence shelters, youth supported accommodation such as the Foyer model, affordable social rental for young people who are not suited to congregate living, transitional accommodation with support for young people who need to build independence and life skills, along with other evidence-based options. When people are housed in emergency shelters and short-term accommodation, there needs to be a pathway to long term secure safe affordable homes.

***Offender prevention and intervention needs to include crisis, transitional accommodation providers, supported accommodation and specialist homelessness services***

Specialist accommodation and support services will be important pathways to engage with offenders for prevention and intervention, as well as being sites where risk management will be critical. Effective training of staff and standards that ensure safety for all workers, clients and residents including children will be key components of a successful strategy. It will also be essential to have training and support for staff around offender prevention and intervention, and effective referral pathways to relevant expert services.

Shelter Tas recommends the development of safety standards and funds to implement them in all specialist homelessness services and supported accommodation services where children and young people under sixteen may be present, or offenders may access accommodation and support. This would include, for example, a clear framework of supports that an agency should have in place to support victims and survivors; appropriate referral pathways with short timeframes to assistance being provided; and minimum staffing ratios in residential settings such as shelters, supported accommodation and specialist homelessness services, to eliminate the avoidable risks of single worker models.

The chronic shortage of affordable housing in Tasmania and nationwide needs to be recognised in the analysis and response to child sexual abuse. Too many people are turned away every day from emergency accommodation shelters. An essential element of responding to people who are victims and survivors of child sexual assault, and of preventing child sexual assault is an adequate emergency response, along with appropriate support, and secure affordable housing for all who need it.

For more information, please contact

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