



**Mental
Health
Council**
OF TASMANIA

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Reforming Tasmania's Youth Justice System

Discussion Paper Response

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About Us

The Mental Health Council of Tasmania (MHCT) is the peak body for community managed mental health services in Tasmania. We represent and promote the interests of our members and work closely with government and agencies to ensure sectoral input into public policies and programs. We advocate for reform and improvement within the Tasmanian mental health system. Our purpose is to strengthen and advocate for our communities and service providers to support the mental health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians, and our vision is that every Tasmanian has access to the resources and support needed for good mental health and wellbeing.

Introduction

MHCT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Reforming Tasmania's Youth Justice System Discussion Paper (the Discussion Paper).

MHCT acknowledges that consideration of mental health and wellbeing is a critical aspect of youth justice reform in Tasmania. Young people entering the justice system are a vulnerable cohort with complex needs, many of whom may be experiencing mental health issues.¹ They are much more likely than other young people to have experienced some form of abuse or neglect² and also at an increased risk for developing serious mental illness.³ Research also suggests that this cohort is much more likely to have ever attempted suicide.⁴ Engagement with the youth justice system, particularly detention, may negatively affect mental health and exacerbate existing mental illness.^{5,6} Furthermore, despite high levels of need for mental health support, engagement with services is low in this population, particularly upon release back into the community.⁷

Facilitating access to and utilisation of trauma-informed, holistic social, health and mental health supports and services for young people both at risk of and already in contact with the justice system is critical.⁸

Overall, MHCT supports the systemic, multi-disciplinary public health approach that is proposed in the Discussion Paper. This should take into account community, specialist, and government services, take other jurisdictional successes into account and will require multi-sectoral coordination. MHCT would like to highlight three key priorities in reforming the youth justice system in Tasmania:

- Trauma-informed practice implemented throughout the youth justice system
- Provision of adequate wrap around supports in early intervention and post release
- A coordinated and integrated response at all levels and between relevant providers and stakeholders.

Trauma-informed practice

The majority of young people who are involved with the youth justice system have experienced trauma and serious adversity.⁹ In a survey of young people in detention in NSW, 81% of female and 57% of male young people reported they had experienced abuse or neglect, most of which was severe.¹⁰ Other research has found that approximately 80% of young people in juvenile justice settings in Australia have experienced multiple traumatic stressors.¹¹

A trauma-informed approach should be a priority for youth justice system reform in Tasmania. A trauma-informed approach prioritises the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of survivors, and emphasises empowerment and rebuilding a person's sense of control.¹² Such an approach builds on young people's strengths, with evidence demonstrating that this can reduce the likelihood that they will continue to engage in anti-social or high-risk behaviours.

A trauma-informed approach needs to be systemic. It should not involve simply implementing specific trauma-informed interventions, but rather focus on embedding trauma-informed principles throughout the system.¹³ A cultural shift is required in the way the Tasmanian youth justice system, and in particular detention centres, operate. This will require training in trauma-informed practice for the entire youth justice workforce, along with a review of systems, policies and processes within the justice system to ensure trauma informed principles are fully integrated. To ensure this systemic approach, the Youth Justice Act should be amended to explicitly reflect a trauma-informed approach.¹⁴

While MHCT is encouraged to hear that the two new centres replacing the Ashley Youth Detention Centre will have a new 'trauma-informed therapeutic service model underpinned by effective coordination across government', this model is yet to be released. We agree that achieving this service model will require that the new centres are considered one part of a program of supports, and that ensuring effective throughcare and access to a range of wrap around supports in the community post-release is critical (see section on 'wrap around supports' below).

Ensuring that the youth justice system is trauma informed, culturally safe, and effective requires meaningful engagement with young people, their families, and the justice workforce throughout the reform process. Taking a participatory co-design approach to engagement with consumers and carers upholds human rights and allows for genuine partnerships that will help to ensure the best outcomes at individual, service and system level¹⁵. Engaging with and empowering the people who are most directly affected by the youth justice system and related services, policies and programs is essential to understanding what is working, what isn't working and articulating what is needed.¹⁶

As outlined in the current Victorian Youth Justice Strategic Plan:

“Respecting the agency of young people, supporting their families, and ensuring they have a voice in Youth Justice is fundamental to delivering a child-centred response. This means engaging regularly, providing information that is understood and relevant, and being genuinely open to their participation. It is not only a key ingredient for promoting the rehabilitation of each child and young person, but also the ongoing improvement of the youth justice system.”¹⁷

It is important that consumer, carer and workforce representative bodies are engaged to support and help facilitate a process of genuine co-design in the Youth Justice reform work.

It is worth noting that engaging families and carers of young people in the justice system can be complex. Children who are involved in the child safety system are over-represented in the youth justice system and referred to as ‘crossover children’.¹⁸ Crossover children are a particularly vulnerable cohort. While children in supportive families may have increased resilience to trauma, the outcome for those experiencing abuse, neglect and/or domestic violence who are not living in a supportive family environment can be very different.¹⁹ Experiencing trauma during childhood can contribute to mental health difficulties, substance abuse and involvement with the youth justice system.²⁰ It will be important to work closely with carer representative groups and child advocate groups to navigate these complexities.

Child and Youth Forensic Outreach Service

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Review presented Queensland’s Child and Youth Forensic Outreach Service (CYFOS) as an example of an effective outreach model that provides high quality care to this complex consumer group within a multidisciplinary framework, involving psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, mental health nurses and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers.²¹

The CYFOS model incorporates mental health screening and referral to facilitate early intervention and prevention of mental illness, specialised assessments, therapeutic interventions, interagency intervention planning, and evidence-informed strategies to enhance service provision, crisis and risk-management plan development.²² It also offers staff training on forensic mental health issues among young people and, importantly, incorporates treatment goals that go beyond mental health symptom reduction to include improved consumer quality of life and improved engagement with education and employment, which in turn is likely to contribute to reduced recidivism.²³

MHCT recommends that the youth justice reform work is informed by models such as CYFOS and prioritises multidisciplinary approaches that are able to meet the diverse and complex mental health needs of youth involved in the Tasmanian justice system.

As noted in the Discussion Paper, there needs to be a particular focus on engaging with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community given the over-representation of Indigenous young people in the justice system. Aboriginal involvement should be on their terms and led by them, as co-design is a central component of developing culturally appropriate services.

In Victoria, the recently released [Aboriginal Youth Justice strategy](#) was written by and for Aboriginal children and young people and led by the Aboriginal Justice Caucus.²⁴ This approach ensures the aspirations of Aboriginal young people inform the creation of a culturally safe and responsive youth justice system. MHCT suggests that the Tasmanian Youth Justice reform considers taking a similar approach.

MHCT also advises that a co-design approach should be undertaken to engage with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and LGBTQIA+ communities to ensure their meaningful input into the reform process.

Young people from CALD backgrounds are over-represented in youth justice and there is a need to understand their specific risk factors, cultural beliefs, and histories to develop and deliver effective interventions.²⁵

LGBTQI+ young people experience higher rates of self-harm, substance abuse and family disruption which may impact on their involvement with the justice system. Creating an inclusive youth justice system that is able to support and respond to the needs of LGBTQI+ people is important in improving outcomes for young LGBTQI+ people, as well as LGBTQI+ staff.²⁶

► **Recommendation 1**

A genuine co-design approach is undertaken in the development of a trauma-informed therapeutic service model for the Tasmanian Youth Justice System. This model must not only incorporate trauma-informed practice within youth detention centres, but across the whole youth justice system. The co-design approach must include engagement with young consumers, their families and the workforce and take specific measures to engage Tasmanian Aboriginal, CALD and LGBTQI+ cohorts.

Wrap around supports in early intervention and post release

MHCT supports the focus in the Discussion Paper on prevention and early intervention and endorses the inclusion of these Principles in the Youth Justice Act.

As recognised in the Discussion Paper, supporting the wellbeing of children and youth through prevention and early intervention initiatives reduces the likelihood that they will offend. An integral element of this is access to formal and informal health and mental health supports and services. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Review, released in 2021, identified a lack of mental health support for juvenile justice consumers, in particular noting the need for an adolescent forensic mental health service that has the capacity to provide ongoing care and community-based follow up.²⁷

Unfortunately, access to holistic and coordinated care is a key pressure point for all young people in Tasmania. MHCT's recent report on the mental health of young Tasmanians identified a lack of access to GPs (less time, less appointments), eligibility and referral issues, and a lack of continuity of care and step-up/step-down care.²⁸ MHCT has also heard from mental health service providers that many young clients are presenting with more complex social and economic factors that are contributing to mental ill-health.²⁹ These factors commonly include family relationships, family violence, substance use and financial distress.³⁰

There is a need to ensure that young people and their families are able to access wrap around supports and services that respond to their unique physical, social and emotional wellbeing needs in a coordinated way. Wrap around supports often accompany 1-1 therapeutic interventions and may include psychosocial interventions such as peer social/support groups, employment services or housing assistance. This is essential to support the wellbeing of young people, both in prevention and early intervention, as well as post-release from the justice system to reduce the likelihood of re-offence. This should also be extended to providing education that will reinforce support and prevention for young people.

As outlined in the Discussion Paper, the provision of services and supports that address parental need are equally important in ensuring the wellbeing, social connectedness and security of young people and reducing the likelihood of their involvement in the justice system. The CAMHS review similarly highlighted the importance of family involvement and engagement, including the need to increase their capacity to understand young person's mental health issues and to be supported through advocacy and being linked in with other supports and services.³¹

MHCT has heard that in the past Youth Workers were positioned in local councils, providing a point of contact for young people and their families to assist in the coordination of wrap around support services. Funding for these programs has ceased however, leaving already stretched community based mental health services to provide this type of support.³²

Young people are often managing multiple service providers, receiving conflicting information and suffer a lack of coordinated service and client goals. This is compounded by the fact that

services are usually funded to only address one social service issue, not collectively manage wrap around services and supports.

There is a clear need to develop a model of support for provision of wrap around services to young people and their families that ensures their needs are being met and that empowers them to self-advocate.

The Lead Support Coordination Services Model

In 2017-2019 Department of Communities Tasmania trialled the 'Lead Support Coordination Services (LSCS)' model to support Tasmanians with complex needs to navigate government and community services.³³ The LSCS model took a holistic and client centred approach to case management. Lead Coordinators acted as advocates for their clients, working with them to assess their needs and goals, develop a common case plan, share this plan with all service providers, and measure outcomes within a standard framework.

The trial resulted in positive outcomes in relation to mental health along with wrap around services including parenting, food security, engagement with services, housing, safety, personal relationships, alcohol and drug dependence and school engagement.³⁴

There may also be potential for a model similar to LSCS to also involve youth peer workers. Lived experience could enhance the Lead Coordinator role and see it become both a support and mentorship role. While there are recognised issues involving challenges in sharing client information, the LSCS model demonstrates the benefit of a coordinated, innovative approach to providing wrap around services that reduces inefficiencies, frees up workforce capacity and results in positive client outcomes.

MHCT endorses the recommendation in the Discussion Paper for the establishment of multi-purpose youth community centres where youth can drop in and engage with a variety of services and wrap around supports as required. These should be located throughout the state, with a focus on communities experiencing higher youth crime rates.

MHCT notes that youth and community drop-in centres (or similar) do already exist in Tasmania, for example, Youth ARC and the Link in Hobart, and suggest that a mapping exercise is undertaken to identify existing community centres that could be expanded, equipped and resourced to enable them to respond to the wrap around support needs of young people and their families. Utilising existing community centres promotes integration, inclusion and a sense of belonging in local communities.

A key focus within youth community centres should be that young people are empowered and equipped to adequately advocate for themselves. This requires them having adequate levels of literacy, including mental health literacy. Early mental health education focused on prevention aims to build individual and community capacity in understanding and managing mental health

and wellbeing, acknowledging risk factors, and when to advocate for and seek help if needed.³⁵ A mental health literacy approach would aim to see more young Tasmanians (and their families) know how to recognise and take care of their mental health and get help as early as possible if they need it. MHCT has proposed a whole of population mental health literacy approach in our [2021 Budget Priority Submission](#), which includes a targeted focus on young people. Such an approach should be multi-faceted and delivered in a coordinated, consistent, and localised way; utilising community capacity building initiatives such as peer to peer models to build community-led engagement and developing effective resources and strategies to directly engage young Tasmanians with their mental wellbeing.³⁶

MHCT recommends that as a part of this approach, the proposed multi-purpose drop-in centres deliver a tailored mental health literacy program that provides education for young people, their families and service providers, and builds young people's skills and confidence in recognising and articulating health needs.

► **Recommendation 2**

A multidisciplinary model of support for provision and coordination of wrap around supports and services for young people and their families, informed by the LSCS trial (and similar initiatives) and including multi-purpose community centres, is implemented to support the mental health and wellbeing of young Tasmanians in both prevention and early intervention, as well as post-release from the justice system. This should include a tailored mental health literacy program for young people, families and service providers, delivered through the multi-purpose youth centres.

A coordinated and integrated response

Achieving the proposed trauma-informed public health approach outlined in the Discussion Paper and above will require a co-ordinated, multi-sectoral response and necessitates working closely with peak body organisations such as MHCT, as well as State Mental Health Services and other key government agencies.

The Youth Justice Reform blueprint must clearly outline and respond to current initiatives that are underway and ensure integration and complementation. In relation to mental health this includes the aforementioned CAMHS reform work and initiatives. It is critically important to ensure connections between Youth Justice reform and CAMHS reform work, the establishment of a youth forensic mental health service, the replacement of the Ashley Detention Centre and the proposed new therapeutic model.

However, it also extends beyond CAMHS to include the community mental health sector and other initiatives that contribute to the health and wellbeing of young people, such as school-based initiatives. MHCT's recent consultations on a youth mental health response, as well as the CAMHS review, have highlighted the need for multi-sector, multi-disciplinary approaches to shared care for young people who require a range of wrap around supports.

This requires collaboration across schools, child safety, youth justice, family violence, alcohol & drug service providers, general youth service providers, family support services and GPs. There is a need for ongoing networking to facilitate opportunities to integrate, reduce duplication, map workforces more broadly and seek out integration and shared workforce opportunities.³⁷ A coordinated response also requires comprehensive service mapping.³⁸

MHCT also suggests that agreements and/or processes are put in place to support alternative mental health service providers when required. For example, if a CAMHS service or clinician is not available to provide a mental health assessment, an alternative community service provider is engaged to provide the assessment or support, utilising trauma-informed practice. This will help to ensure that safety nets are in place so that every young person (and their family) is assessed and provided with an adequate mental health response in a timely fashion. This is in the interests of the individual as well as the system as it will help to ensure that a genuine intervention approach is applied to every young person in the justice system requiring mental health support.

► Recommendation 3

The Child Youth and Wellbeing Strategy Cross-Agency Working Group and Community Consultative Group (or similar) are utilised as a multi-sectoral mechanism throughout the Youth Justice Reform process, to foster a partnership approach and ensure ongoing integration and collaboration across the Tasmanian youth sector.

▶ **Recommendation 4**

Agreements and/or processes are put in place to support alternative mental health service provider options to ensure all young people and their families are able to be assessed and receive mental health support in a timely way.

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