

Submission to the
Tasmanian State Government
Discussion Paper for the
Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy



**Neighbourhood Houses
Tasmania**



March 2021

Introduction

Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania (NHT) is the peak body for 35 Neighbourhood Houses across Tasmania. The Houses and NHT are all part of one united network that works together as a whole to improve the wellbeing of Tasmanian communities.

Neighbourhood Houses engage and connect with young people in many ways - directly through programs and support services focused on children and youth; and indirectly by engaging and supporting their families through targeted programs and crisis support.

NHT recently conducted a survey of Neighbourhood House staff and volunteers across the state to obtain feedback on the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (CYWS). The results obtained have been used to inform this submission from NHT. The survey resulted in approximately 30% of the Houses in the network completing the survey.

The survey sought feedback on the 6 domains of the CYWS, focusing on how children and young people are engaging with the Houses. The survey also obtained feedback on where more assistance is needed in order for Houses to have better outcomes in supporting children, what the barriers and challenges are in getting that assistance, and what the Houses are doing right now to support children and young people in their communities. The survey comprised 16 questions and resulted in 80% of respondents answering all 16 questions.

NHT supports the CYWS and believes that young people need to be put to the forefront of government policy. However, addressing the needs of children and young people cannot sit separately to other issues impacting families, such as persistent low levels of income support and the current escalating housing crisis.

Unless adequate income support can be secured for all families, any targets set by the CYWS will struggle to be fulfilled. If the root cause of poverty – inadequate income – is not being addressed, then the main barriers to achieving universal health and wellbeing for Tasmanian young people, in the 6 domains, will continue to remain and any CYWS will never reach its full potential.

Recommendations

NHT calls for the State Government to:

- ✓ Acknowledge that children's and young people's needs cannot be met in the 6 domains as outlined in the Discussion Paper for the CYWS until the root causes of poverty in Tasmania are addressed.
- ✓ Lobby the Federal Government to have JobSeeker payments indexed at a level that will ensure that ALL Tasmanian, and Australian, young people and their parents live a life that remains above the poverty line.
- ✓ Act on the increasingly unaffordable rental housing market in Tasmania so that no young person or their parent in Tasmania is homeless.
- ✓ Address the increasing need for mental health support for young people and their parents through increased funding for support to families, as proposed in the NHT budget submission 2021.



"We all have a critical moral responsibility to work together on behalf of Australia's young children and their families to help eradicate poverty and protect against its harmful effects throughout the life course." (Monks 2017)

Our Response

“(The) wellbeing of children and young people is pretty much dependent on the wellbeing of their parents/carers. The Government needs to be aware of this and to work to improve the wellbeing of the whole of Tasmania.”
(NHT Survey, March 2021)

NHT fully endorses the Premier's vision of “... no matter where you live, no matter your background, no matter your circumstances – opportunities will be here for a better life.”

(Premier Peter Gutwein, CEDA state of the State Address 2020)

However, this statement places an onus on the individual, suggesting that if your life is not better, then it is your fault as you failed to grasp the opportunities that are available to everyone. This places an unreasonable burden on families already in crisis, while failing to address the systems and structures needed to ensure health and wellbeing needs are met.

We need to ensure that Tasmanian young people are loved and safe; have their material basics met; are healthy; are learning; are participating; and have a positive sense of culture and identity. But young people are directly impacted by family circumstance, especially if the adults in the young people's lives do not have their own economic and health and wellbeing needs met.

NHT applauds the State Government for placing the needs of young people as a priority – but the Government is missing a vital step that needs to come before this.

The recent events that Covid 19 brought to our State and the subsequent increase to the JobSeeker payments, (which now return to near pre-covid levels of payment), provide a timely and significant insight to the plight of families.

The experiences of covid have highlighted the struggle of unemployed and underemployed people in the Tasmanian community.

The overwhelming feedback from families accessing Houses is that while the JobSeeker payment was increased, life was not such a constant financial struggle, and they have experienced the dignity of being able to sustain a basic living. Without financial security individuals and families cannot take up opportunities that become available. While struggling to pay the rent, cover the basics of food and power, many lack sufficient income to cover additional transport costs to attend interviews, attend doctors and/or pay for additional childcare costs.

“I think people, including myself, will really struggle after having the extra (money from coronavirus supplement) and being able to do things with their lives again. Then it has gone back to struggle street and having to make ends meet. It has been nice to live as a normal person for a year and now we have become the second class no hopers again. It's like kicking a dog when it is down.” (TasCOSS 2021)

“Until (Federal) Government decides that unemployed people are worthy of appropriate financial support without punitive measures and provide an adequate financial safety net including basic needs such as housing and budgeting skills for families there is little hope of the situation changing for their children.”
(NHT Survey, March 2021)



Without financial security, without enough money to live above the poverty line, parents struggle to provide adequately for their children and ensure their basic needs can be met.

Without the government recognising the impact of financial issues as part of the whole picture then setting targets of wellbeing for children and young people will just remain an aspiration.

“We all have a critical moral responsibility to work together on behalf of Australia’s young children and their families to help eradicate poverty and protect against its harmful effects throughout the life course.” (Monks 2017)

Living below the poverty line in Tasmania

Having adequate income is not a privilege – it is a right.

Article 25 of the UN Convention on Human Rights states “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services....” (TasCOSS 2019)

There has been no meaningful increase in over 20 years to income support payments in Tasmania – they have not kept up with the basic costs of living and have even fallen behind in areas such as health care, education, and housing. (TasCOSS 2021) There is a significant number of Tasmanian families not receiving a standard of living that provides adequately for their or their children’s needs.

“Poverty prevents people from fully participating in the social, economic and cultural lives of their communities. In Tasmania, with one third of the population on some form of government pension or allowance, the scale of this loss is confronting.” (TasCoSS 2019)

In 2019 TasCOSS released their Submission to the Inquiry into Newstart. It records the lived experiences of people living on Newstart – now JobSeeker. Social isolation, loneliness, a low sense of worth and stigma were a dominant narrative in people’s lives. (TasCOSS 2019) All these issues impact negatively on a parent's ability to ensure that their children's needs are being met, across all 6 domains.

The increased rate of income support during Covid had important flow on effects. TasCOSS found that it had a triple benefit of “improving wellbeing, providing the ability for individuals to engage with study or work and stimulating the economy. The increased rate helped (people) to catch up on bills, visit the doctor or dentist, get a haircut and fill up on petrol...” (TasCOSS 2021)

“State Government has the responsibility to improve material basics for kids who are living in poverty. Federal Government should increase unemployment benefits so that kids can have the material basics.” (NHT Survey)

NHT acknowledges the limitations that the Tasmanian State Government faces, with the Federal Government responsible for Centrelink and JobSeeker and other welfare payments, while the State is responsible for delivering good health and education outcomes. If basic income support is insufficient, the State Governments’ ability to achieve positive health and education outcomes for Tasmanian families is consequently hindered.

(For more information on the Poverty Line in Australia and how Australia compares to the other OECD countries, please refer to Appendix 1)

As it relates to the CYWS:

When families live below the poverty line, their young people:

- ✗ are not safe if they are homeless
- ✗ do not have their material basic needs met – like stable housing, educational resources , food, decent clothing
- ✗ struggle to stay healthy as medical needs are not met and access to nutritious food can be limited
- ✗ are not learning as well as they could if families are unable to purchase learning resources
- ✗ are not participating if there is no money left over after necessities for sporting, social or community activities and engagement
- ✗ do not have a positive sense of culture and identity if their self-esteem is low



How does poverty affect Tasmanian parents?

“Disadvantaged families experience a multitude of challenges, including difficulty accessing stable and affordable housing, high quality healthcare, childcare and schooling. They are also more likely to experience food insecurity, mental health problems, unemployment and prejudice... The chronic stress of poverty and the associated hardships can strain parents’ bandwidth, limiting their capacity to ensure low-stress environments and engage in the interactions and activities that support children’s development.” (Monks 2017)

The shared stories to the TasCOSS submission indicate the negative outcomes, that living on an inadequate basic income can lead to, include:

Increasing parents’ feelings of low self-esteem, guilt and inability to be a good parent.

“I’m feeling like a failure as a parent more than anything.... The only time my daughter gets clothes is Christmas and her birthday. I feel guilty for buying anything for myself... But I always make sure my daughter is warm.” (TasCOSS 2019)

Hindering parents’ ability to have their child participate in normal childhood social and sporting activities.

“My son sometimes won’t go to friends’ birthdays because we can’t afford a present. Often he doesn’t go to do school swimming or outside-of-school sport activities because we don’t always have the money.” (TasCOSS Raise the Rate)

Decreasing parents’ ability to be involved in their child’s life.

“I can’t even afford to go and watch my son play football.” (TasCOSS 2019)

Increasing parents’ social isolation.

“I’m lonely because I can’t afford to go out. It makes me feel down and out.... Mental health is an issue, you feel down and out but you just have to keep going.” (TasCOSS 2019)

Increasing parents’ health problems.

“I can’t afford to go to the doctors, I will take my daughter but not myself.... I don’t go to the dentist....I want to eat healthily and buy quality food but cannot afford it. Often we will just have toast for tea.” (TasCOSS 2019)

Decreasing parents’ own self-care with many making sacrifices so that their child does not miss out.

“I go without a lot of things a normal mother would have just so my children can have the appearance they are like other children and so they feel they are no different.” (TasCOSS Raise the Rate)

Increasing parental stress and mental health problems with the constant worry over money and inability to provide adequately for their family

How does poverty affect Tasmanian young people?

“Research has shown that a lack of money directly harms the physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing of children.”
(TasCOSS 2019)



According to the CoLab Evidence report Poverty:

- can shape lifelong physical and mental health outcomes for young people
- when experienced in the first 5 years of life is particularly detrimental to a child's development
- reduces a family's capacity to provide a safe and enriching home learning environment
- affects a child's future academic success and life chances as an adult
- can become a cycle within families that is then repeated by the young person, as an adult

Poverty contributes to a flow on effect of negative outcomes for young people, resulting in further hardship and vulnerability, including reduced educational outcomes, increased social and emotional difficulties, criminal activity, and unemployment. (Monks 2017)

“It is not (only) economic hardship per se but the accompanying poverty of relationships and experiences that dramatically shapes young children's health and developmental outcomes.”
(Monks 2017)

Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states “the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development”.

Insights from the NHT Survey

“Do you agree that the majority of children and young people, who are engaging with your Neighbourhood House, are having their needs met in all 6 domains of health and wellbeing?”

This question was answered on a sliding scale of not at all, somewhat and totally agree, with totally agree being 10, for all 6 domains. The resulting average for all domains was 5 - meaning that from their engagement with young people through the NHs, NH experience is that young people are only ‘somewhat’ having their needs met in the 6 domains.

1) Do you agree that the majority of children and young people, who are engaging with your NH, are loved and safe?



2) Do you agree that the majority of children and young people, who are engaging with your NH, have their material basic needs met?



3) Do you agree that the majority of children and young people, who are engaging with your NH, are healthy?



4) Do you agree that the majority of children and young people, who are engaging with your NH, are learning?



5) Do you agree that the majority of children and young people, who are engaging with your NH, are participating?



6) Do you agree that the majority of children and young people, who are engaging with your NH, have a positive sense of culture and identity?



Insights from the NHT Survey

"What are the challenges and barriers to young people, in your community, having their needs met in all 6 domains?"

Responses to this question fell into four key areas of concern:

1) Family and social issues:

- lack of hope, bullying, drugs
- very small social circles and poor social skills
- social media
- lack of positive role models
- role models with ingrained behaviors that are not supportive of a positive experience in their world
- limited access to healthy food and creative education
- limited understanding of what a healthy lifestyle is
- lack of extended family to help out
- dysfunctional families
- difficulties for some parents updating contemporary parental practices and perpetuating less than ideal approaches to parenting
- drugs and alcohol issues

2) Education:

- poor education
- lack of an educational system that meets the needs of children in all levels of learning
- low numeracy and literacy
- parental perceptions about learning
- schooling not enforced
- no encouragement to achieve and to think big!

3) Mental Health:

- mental health disorders in children and adolescents not seeking or accessing help, they don't feel they are listened to
- poor mental health
- lack of confidence and low self-esteem
- lack of self-awareness and self-control

4) Financial issues:

- generational norms and unemployment, lack of finances
- poverty, insecurity of jobs and housing
- money, lack of support
- living in poverty

"I worry for the future of young people, it's tougher than when we were kids."

Respondents frequently commented on the rising problems of mental health challenges for both adults and children and how there is a significant lack of support services in this area that are readily accessible, especially to people on low incomes. Financial insecurity and generational cycles of poverty were also highlighted as being major barriers to the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

"It is extremely important that we support children and young people in Tasmania and their wellbeing should be high on our priority."

Insights from the NHT Survey

"How is your NH assisting young people in your community meet their needs in the 6 domains?"

"We care, we listen, we feed them, we provide social activities and programs....
we are consistent and offer stability."

- Host youth activity programs targeted to engage disadvantaged children and youth in the community.
- Run a playgroup to support parents and pre-school age children providing the place for their social participation, nurturing programs for children and connection with other families.
- Provide food relief programs to meet the basics needs of children, youth and their families.
- Work with charities like Share the Dignity, Tassie Mum and Nappy Collective to support their wellbeing.
- Help youth with resume writing and job interview skill development to maximize their employment opportunity.
- We run a preschool which assists in a lot of the 6 domains – the majority attending are multicultural students.
- We run children's activities and programs.
- Support families with food support.
- We provide free counselling services for children and young people, and their parents.
- We provide a safe space for youth, and they do 'love' the House.
- Provide nutritious food and water.
- Provide access to education and training materials to support participation in activities.
- Provide food education and life-skills that encourage a healthier life.
- Provide social and skills-based learning opportunities.
- Offer youth groups that are participant led.
- All youths have a voice and are listened to.
- We are inclusive and encourage a respectful environment of all culture and identity.

"If there is turmoil at home or at school they will probably talk about it with staff and volunteers."



Insights from the NHT Survey

“How can the Tasmanian Government better support Neighbourhood Houses to assist Tasmanian children and young people meet their needs in the 6 domains?”

- ✓ Increase resources to run more family and parenting support programs.
- ✓ Provide more funding for charities that support food relief.
- ✓ Increase resources to run healthy eating programs for families.
- ✓ Provide youth mental health counsellors at NHs regularly and funding for more youth targeted activities, including volunteering programs.
- ✓ Support for the NHT network to provide job ready skills programs.
- ✓ Increase the funding for more learner driver programs.
- ✓ Increase the funding to provide weekend and after school activities and programs for youth.
- ✓ Provide funding to employ full-time youth community development specialists.
- ✓ Work towards improving the partnerships between DoC, DoE and NHT.



"Provide a family support worker at every Neighbourhood House to be available WHEN families/children need it."

In Summary

“There is strong evidence that households’ financial resources are important for children’s outcomes... Protecting households from low income.... ought to be a central part of government efforts to promote childrens’ opportunities and life chances. “
(Reference 7)

Before the health and wellbeing needs of Tasmanian children and young people in the 6 domains can be fully achieved, poverty needs to be addressed by ensuring that all Tasmanians receive income support at a level that remains above the poverty line.

Matters are significantly complicated when key departments are funded from different levels of Government. While State has the responsibility for health and education, unless the Federal Government commits to the provision of a basic income support level that lifts Australians out of poverty it is difficult to imagine how any true and meaningful advancements in the health and wellbeing of Tasmania's children and youth can be achieved.

Policies that support household income are integral to any strategy that aims to improve the life chances, and health and wellbeing of children. (Cooper 2020)

The rapidly increasing demands for mental health care from all age groups, including children and young adults, desperately calls for a significant increase in funding in this area.

NHT supports the CYWS and believes that young people need to be put to the forefront of government policy. However, addressing the needs of children and young people cannot sit separately to other issues impacting families, such as the persistent low level of income support, and the current escalating housing crisis and demand for mental health services.

Families need to be supported so they can provide the best possible environments for children and young people to grow up into healthy adults and enjoy lifelong wellness.



References:

- 1) TasCOSS. March 2021, Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Social Services Legislation Amendment (Strengthening Income Support) Bill 2021. Tasmanian Council of Social Services, Tasmania.
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- 3) TasCOSS. August 2020. Jobseeker and the Coronavirus Supplement Fact Sheet. Tasmanian Council of Social Services. Tasmania.
- 4) <https://blog.grattan.edu.au/2021/02/the-jobseeker-rise-is-not-enough/>
- 5) TasCOSS. Raise the Rate: “I regularly don’t eat at all”: Trying to get by on Newstart. Tasmanian Council of Social Services fact sheet. Tasmania.
- 6) Monks, H. (2017). The impact of poverty on the developing child. (COLab Evidence Report). Retrieved from <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/resources/>
- 7) <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/does-money-affect-children%E2%80%99s-outcomes>
- 8) Cooper, K., Stewart, K. (2020). Does Household Income Affect Children’s Outcomes? A Systematic Review of the Evidence. Child Indicators Research. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09782-0>

Notes:

NHT = Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania

CYWS = children and youth wellbeing strategy 2021

Read ‘young people’ to encompass all Tasmanian children and youth 0-25.

Read ‘parent’ as referring to biological and non-biological parents and caregivers that provide the main care for a young person.

Quotes from NH employees were obtained through the NHT survey, March 2021.

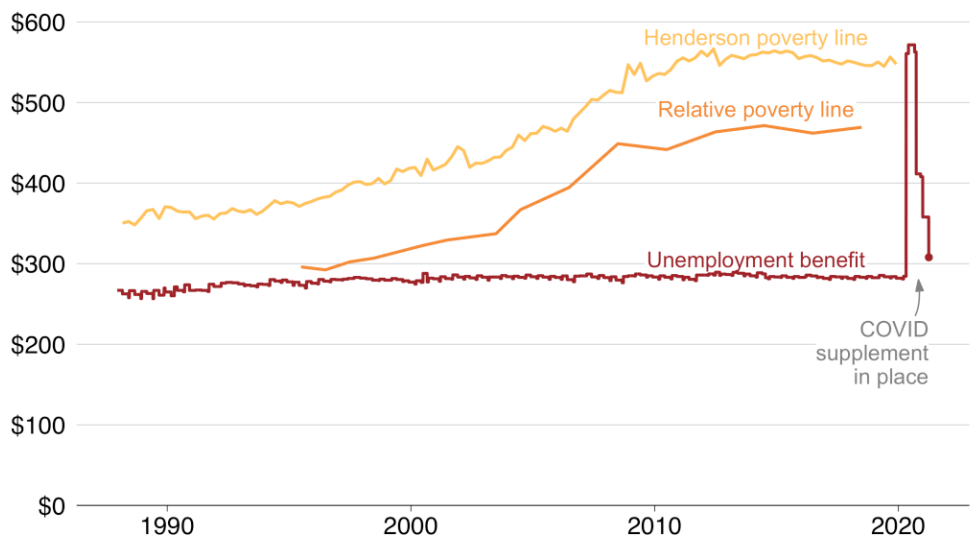
Appendix 1

Australia does not have an official poverty line, but there are at least two measures commonly used by researchers – the relative line, which is half of median household income, and the Henderson line, which was set by an inquiry in the 1970s and is updated by the Melbourne Institute. The relative line is used most often, including by international organisations like the OECD. (4)

An extra \$25 a week leaves the unemployment benefit a long way below the poverty line

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Poverty lines and unemployment benefits per week, inflation-adjusted 2020 dollars

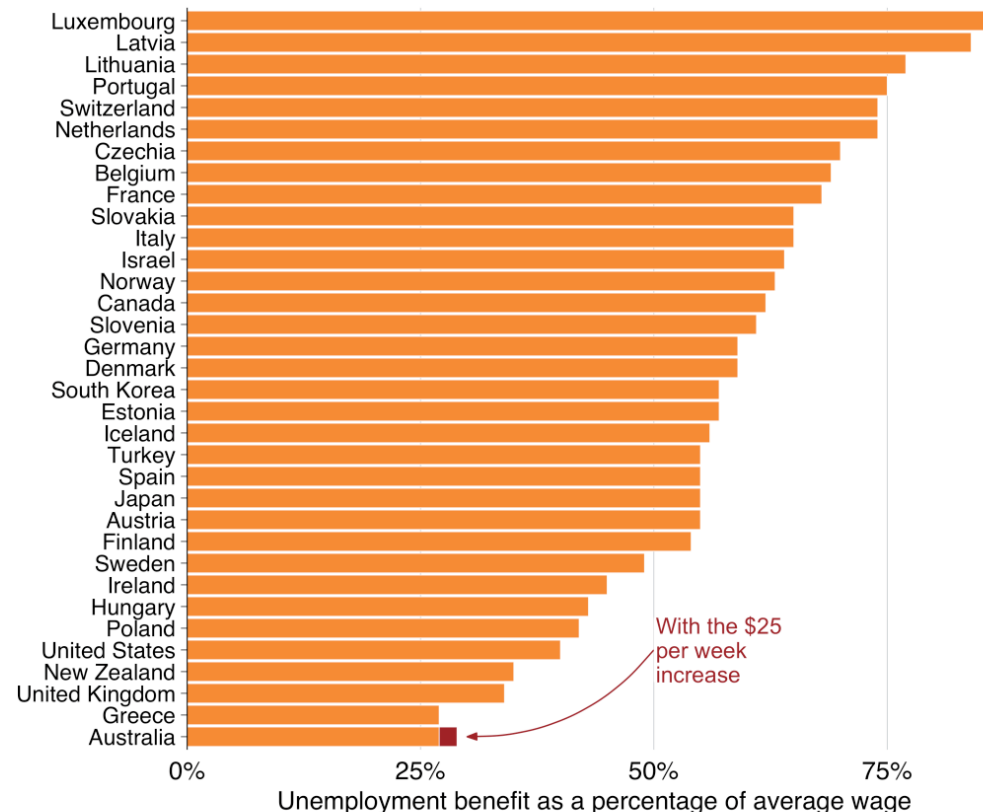


Notes: Adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index. Unemployment benefits have at various times been called unemployment benefit, Job Search Allowance, Newstart Allowance, and JobSeeker Payment. Unemployment benefit includes Energy Supplement where applicable.
Sources: Grattan analysis of Melbourne Institute 'Poverty Lines: Australia', ABS 6523.0, ABS 6401.0, ABS 5206.0, and DSS Social Security Guide.

The extra \$25 a week will take Australia's unemployment benefit from the lowest to the second lowest in the OECD

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Unemployment benefit as a percentage of average wage in first month of unemployment



The relative poverty line was \$450 per week in 2018 when the latest data were released. That means a single adult, living alone, would need at least that amount to be considered out of poverty. After the \$25 increase announced, JobSeeker (including the Energy Supplement) will be \$312 per week – \$138 below the relative poverty line. The gap between the payment and the Henderson poverty line is even bigger. (4)

Note: Including housing assistance where applicable.
Source: OECD.Stat.