

9 August 2024

Senate Standing Committees on Economics
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: NATIONAL HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS PLAN BILL 2024 (No.2)

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is the national voice and advocate for young people. We represent more than 4.5 million young people across the country. We are the national peak body, and our members include young people, youth-led organisations, and youth sector organisations that support and work with young people.

We welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on the *National Housing and Homelessness Plan Bill 2024 (No.2)* (hereafter referred to as The Bill) to the Senate Economics Legislation Committee Inquiry.

AYAC appreciates the Australian Government's intention to formulate a National Housing and Homelessness Plan that is "rights-based, comprehensive, strategic and legislated" (Hutchens, 2024), which sits within a strong authorising environment (OECD, 2020). AYAC further appreciates that The Bill explicitly includes references to the obligation to maintain a National Housing and Homelessness Plan, as a protection against changing political priorities that often (but not always) accompany a change in government (OECD, 2020).

We encourage support of The Bill by members of the Parliament of Australia. However, we wish to recommend some amendments, and address our feedback below to the first three parts of The Bill.

Part 1 – Preliminary

s.3 Objects of this Act

AYAC commends the rights-based approach embedded in the objectives of the Act as proposed in The Bill. We further commend the explicit acknowledgement of Australia's obligations under both the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. We note, however, that Australia also has human rights obligations relating to housing under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and recommend inclusion of this instrument in this section of The Bill.

Part 2 – National Housing and Homelessness Plan

AYAC supports the objectives specified in the proposed content of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. In particular, AYAC commends the inclusion of the following stipulations:

s.8.1.b Preventing and ending homelessness

AYAC, along with other homelessness and youth-focused organisations (including Homelessness Australia, Mission Australia, and YACVic), supports a shift towards an increased focus on prevention. The commitment to preventing and ending homelessness needs to be accompanied by genuine action to achieve this, and with a focus on the specific drivers of, and pathways to, youth homelessness (Productivity Commission, 2022), which can differ in type and severity from the drivers of adult homelessness. For example, while factors such as insufficient affordable housing and experiences of family violence are common to both adults and young people experiencing homelessness (Homelessness Australia, 2024; NT Shelter & The Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023; Yfoundations, 2023), the impacts on young people are compounded because of their age (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2023; Yfoundations, 2023). In particular, the issue of lack of access to affordable housing is aggravated for young people as they tend to work in jobs that are lower paid, are more likely to be working part-time (often in combination with study commitments), and rates of youth income support payments remain woefully low (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2023). If the Australian Government is serious about its commitment to prevent youth homelessness, it **must** raise the rate of Youth Allowance and JobSeeker to above the poverty line – as repeatedly called for by key homelessness organisations, including Yfoundations, Homelessness Australia, and Mission Australia (Brennan et al., 2024; Homelessness Australia, 2024; Yfoundations, 2023), as well as by AYAC and all state and territory youth peak organisations in our 2024 Pre-Budget submission.

In addition to factors that commonly precipitate homelessness amongst adults and young people alike, there are also unique drivers of homelessness that are specific to young people. These include lack of appropriate support when exiting youth justice and out-of-home-care settings (Hutchens, 2024; Yfoundations, 2023); neglect, abuse, and family dysfunction/breakdown (Homelessness Australia, 2024; NT Shelter & The Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023; Yfoundations, 2023); family rejection due to homophobia and transphobia (Homelessness Australia, 2024; Yfoundations, 2023); and age discrimination in the private rental market (NT Shelter & The Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023). These factors must also receive sufficient focus in prevention efforts.

s.8.1.d Improving choice in the housing system, including between owning and renting

AYAC supports the inclusion of this objective, and notes that home ownership is a particular issue for young people. While many young Australians (almost 60%) hope to own their own home one day, the majority believe that this will not be within their reach (Walsh et al., 2024, p. 23). Indeed, it has been noted that “being able to access intergenerational wealth...is becoming the key pathway of entry into home ownership” (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2023, p. 1). If this remains the case, this will only serve to exacerbate

existing inter- and intra-generational inequalities. AYAC notes that implementation of this section of The Bill will therefore need to be accompanied by considered policy action to ensure that these equity concerns are addressed.

s.8.1.i Improving the ability of people with disability to live in the community, with choices equal to others and s.8.1.i Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in developing, determining, and administering housing programs affecting them

AYAC commends the inclusion of these objectives. We would, however, note that young people within these identified cohorts are exposed to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation, whereby culture and/or disability interacts with their age to produce needs and experiences that differ from those of adults in the same priority groups (Victorian Government, n.d.). AYAC therefore recommends that an intersectional approach should be employed in implementing The Bill, including in the development of any policies associated with The Bill, to ensure that young people's needs are met.

s.9 Process of preparing National Housing and Homelessness Plan and s.10 Implementation of National Housing and Homelessness Plan

AYAC commends the requirement for each Plan to be prepared through a collaborative process involving civil society organisations, members of groups who face special disadvantage in the housing system, and people with lived experience of housing need and homelessness. We urge the Australian Government to ensure that both young people and specialist youth homelessness organisations are included in this process.

Part 3 – National Housing Consumer Council

s.17 Functions of the Consumer Council

AYAC commends the explicit reference to young people in this section [s.17.1.a.ix]. However, we note that s.20.2, which deals with the appointment of Consumer Council members, does not guarantee membership of any young people. Given the Consumer Council's function of advising the Minister on the effectiveness of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan and current issues relating to housing and homelessness, it is important to note that young people experience not only different pathways to homelessness and different barriers to accessing affordable housing and home ownership (as outlined earlier in this submission), but that the predominant types of homelessness experienced by young people – that is, couch surfing and overcrowding (NT Shelter & The Office of the Children's Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023; Yfoundations, 2023) – are also different from those of adults. AYAC therefore recommends that this section of The Bill should be amended to secure guaranteed and ongoing representation of young people on the Consumer Council, to ensure that their unique needs experiences are adequately represented, and that their voices are consistently included in discussion of housing and homelessness issues and in the formulation of recommendations to the Minister.

AYAC further notes that if youth representation on the Consumer Council is limited to only one seat, such an approach would be tokenistic (AYAC, 2024; Stephenson et al., 2024; Walsh

et al., 2024), and would not be commensurate with the proportion of young people impacted by housing concerns and homelessness (Homelessness Australia, 2024; Yfoundations, 2023). This approach also does not take account of the power imbalances inherent in both adult-youth relationships, and formal bodies such as councils (AYAC, 2024). We would, therefore, encourage the Australian Government to guarantee multiple ‘youth seats’ on the Consumer Council to address these concerns, and to support the safety and meaningful participation of young participants.

A standalone youth housing and homelessness plan

While inclusion of the amendments outlined above would be a positive step towards ensuring that young people’s needs are adequately addressed within the proposed National Housing and Homelessness Plan, we note, however, that there is only one reference to ‘youth’ in The Bill [s.17.1.a.ix], and no references to ‘children and young people’. This is a significant concern, and perpetuates the issue of young people being consistently overlooked or poorly dealt with in housing and homelessness policy frameworks (Homelessness Australia, 2024; YACVic, 2023) – and, indeed, in public policy more broadly (Oto, 2023; Stephenson et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2024). AYAC therefore reiterates that there is a need for a standalone youth housing and homelessness plan, and that this plan should be co-designed with young people with lived experience across the spectrum of housing and homelessness. AYAC has previously called for such an instrument as part of our submission to the Inquiry into the Worsening Rental Crisis (2023). Other key youth and homelessness organisations, including YACVic (2023), Yfoundations (2023), and Homelessness Australia (2024), have also made similar appeals, pointing out that a standalone youth plan is desperately needed to ensure that children and young people’s unique needs and experiences are appropriately addressed, and to ensure that they do not – yet again – get lost in an adult-centric policy.

AYAC would be pleased to provide further input to the Inquiry or respond to queries relating to the issues discussed in this submission, should this be required.

Contact

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