



## Written Submission

*~ Response to the Consultation Paper:*

### ***Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Out-of-Home Care***

Dandenong Gatehouse is part of St Kilda Gatehouse, and works with a niche group of marginalised young women aged 12-25, who have been identified as vulnerable to sexual exploitation/ affected by commercial sexual activity. Those young women vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation may have experienced numerous challenges including childhood trauma, abuse, family breakdown, poverty, and a lack of traditional supports. The engagement in sexual exploitation tends to be closely linked with drug addiction and homelessness, and can experience difficulty accessing mainstream services. Dandenong Gatehouse has been in operation of the full vision of the model since July 2015.

*St Kilda Gatehouse* is a not-for-profit organisation which works alongside those involved in street based sex work, whom are often marginalised and have life controlling addictions. It is a place where individuals feel valued and important. For many who come from a background of abuse and poverty it is a source of dignity and hope – where they can find the support and care needed as they attempt to build a life off the streets and beyond drug addiction.

Dandenong Gatehouse do not currently receive any government funding, and are fully operational based on philanthropic funds.

Dandenong Gatehouse have various components of support including Group Work, Outreach, Therapeutic Support and a Mentoring program, all of which work collaboratively and focus on early intervention.

Dandenong Gatehouse comprises of the following core components to the model.

1. Open Door aims to create an intentional focused space that is open to young women coming when they choose. It is a combination of a timetabled space as well as choice of attending without notice, rather than the traditional unstructured drop-in space.
2. Wrap Around describes the holistic service response, wherein the Centre is a partnership which hosts accommodation for a range of essential providers including but not limited to; drug and alcohol, housing, counseling, and sexual health support.
3. Outreach aims to draw young women into the Centre to ensure young women don't 'fall through the cracks' because they are unable to come to the Centre.



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4. Group Work provides to the young women key topics and areas that relate to the factors leading into and creating dependency on commercial sexual exploitation. Group Work sessions will address psychological, emotional and spiritual healing through a range of creative and innovative mediums.

5. Mentoring provides matching of young women with volunteer mentors from the community. This is an existing program that St Kilda Gatehouse has operated successfully for two years in partnership with Whitelion and will be extended into the Dandenong area.

Mentoring offers positive social relationship, alternatives to the sense of isolation they often experience, and strengthened connection with the young person's local community.

#### **Child Sexual abuse by carers and staff**

It is common for the Dandenong Gatehouse team to hear stories from the young women about experiences of sexual abuse perpetuated by carers, residential care staff, volunteers and others.

Whilst Dandenong Gatehouse primarily seeks to support young women aged 12-25 years old at risk or, or affected by commercial sexual exploitation, experiences of sexual abuse is a predominant topic of conversation with our young women. Sexual abuse is divulged in varying scenarios, but child sexual abuse perpetuated by carers, residential care staff, volunteers and others does get shared with the team. This is very commonly after a long period of support and engagement; once a young woman feels safe to share.

Dandenong Gatehouse is a Young Women's Centre, where the young women are able to access the Centre Monday –Friday. There is a small team of paid and unpaid staff to wrap around the supports to the young women.

The issue of screening carers and staff is essential at the beginning of the employment/engagement with volunteering, however it must also be an ongoing integration of the support to staff and volunteers. Continued priority of support to volunteers by Community Service Agencies is essential, and yet with the increased challenges of the sector in both trauma history, numbers of children in OoFHC, and risk of burn out for staff, limited resources, etc, it is difficult to match the supply and demand.



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External supervision to staff teams and volunteers is essential in this sector to ensure that carers and staff are given opportunity to work through the areas that trigger the areas of their life that might be confronted through work with young people experiencing trauma. As the quality of support of adults in the Out-of-Home Care sector is maintained, then the children and young people will also benefit.

We see huge transformation that can take place with volunteer involvement in young people's lives, however this requires significant resourcing – both initially and ongoing. In the case where volunteers are sharing lived spaces with young people in Out-of-Home care, the training and support is essential; increased attention and resourcing to this component of young people's lives is needed.

### **Child Sexual Exploitation**

Dandenong Gatehouse are in agreeance with all areas of consideration within this section. Dandenong Gatehouse seeks to provide solutions in all these areas of child sexual exploitation. Dandenong Gatehouse receives referrals from Child Protection clients on a regular basis. **65% of referrals to Dandenong Gatehouse are Child Protection clients.**

- **Jurisdictions poorly identifying and reporting child sexual exploitation in OOHC**
  - Collaboration on this component of community response is improving, however still need further attention and work.
  - The ability to identify and report CSE is certainly in need of education, training and better systems in place amongst the sector
  - Laws pertaining to young women aged 16/17yo and laws for young women with Intellectual Disabilities are of particular impact to our young women
    - E.g. 16 or 17yo young woman might be found in a car with a male performing sexual acts. She is highly affected by commercial sexual exploitation, is found to be doing something illegal, however she is still a under the age of 18. There is much complication with this law in the context of CSE.
      - SOCIT are often a valuable part of the work of Gatehouse. There is however, more that can be done to strengthen the work of SOCIT and support to young women.
    - E.g. 19/20yo young woman with an ID might have the functional IQ of a 10 or 11 yo. She has a “boyfriend” in his 40s, whom is sexually exploiting her. She has no insight to the sexual exploitation, and thinks that “he really loves her”. Yet the violence and exploitation continues. The law would say



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that she needs to classify this as Family Violence, make a FV report and then she can be supported legally. However unless a young woman is supported in the area of CSE then she may well remain in that dynamic where she is exploited.

- Her engagement with Dandenong Gatehouse builds insight and resilience, and hence we see improvement in her scenario
- There is a strong representation of young women with Intellectual Disabilities at Dandenong Gatehouse.

- **Absence of recording CSE and consequential lack of data available to show incidence and prevalence**
  - Dandenong Gatehouse is growing in its capacity to identify trends through record keeping and data collection, since providing a service focused on supporting young women involved in commercial sexual exploitation. Limitations are present due to capacity and sustainability, however 12-24 months on, there is certainly data to identify service gaps, areas of strength and competency, and the need for business planning for a sustainable model.
- **Lack of coordination and cross-sectorial protocols, procedures, and responses particularly among OOHC service providers, child protection and the police**
  - Attention given to the issue of child sexual exploitation, needs to collaborated and a combined community effort. Gatehouse cannot do this alone, nor can the Police, DHS or anyone else.
  - Gatehouse places priority on collaboration with all supports in a young woman's life. If a young woman presents at the Centre without supports, Gatehouse will seek to create a support team around the young woman, inclusive of community supports and broader connections.
  - We operate from a strengths-base model and utilise the *Circle of Courage* framework.
  - General Practitioners, Schools (private & public), and local Councils must also be involved in this collaborative coordination and cross-sectorial protocols.
  - Dandenong Gatehouse values collaboration and mutual resourcing.
- **Lack of preventative measures**
  - Dandenong Gatehouse is very aware that social isolation is the main



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element contributing to child sexual exploitation. While there are many 'push & pull factors' contributing to risks of CSE and remaining affected by CSE, we see that strengthening the resilience and sense of belonging, self worth and self-efficacy of children is essential to good outcomes for young people.

- Re-emphasising a previous point, prevention of CSE is a community effort, and all areas of society must be involved in this conversation.
- Dandenong Gatehouse has seen that the conversations with organisations such as below, have been a significant value add to the work with young women referred to us.
  - YSAS
  - VACCA
  - SECASA
  - SECADA
  - DHHS
  - Foundation House
  - Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY)
  - Out of Home Care placement providers (eg. Wesley, MacKillop, Salvocare, Anglicare, Berry St, Oz Child)
  - Homelessness services (e.g. WAYSS, Wesley)
  - Disability Services (e.g. Berry St, DHHS)
- **Need to address barriers to children disclosing sexual exploitation**
  - Social isolation is one of the most significant contributors to sexual exploitation.
  - Dandenong Gatehouse has created a "safe place of belonging" (our slogan) to give young women a place to
    - come and feel safe,
    - escape the chaos,
    - talk to a team member
    - have something to eat or rest
    - feel connected through Group Work, open door Centre
    - feel connected through outreach if the young woman is unable to access the Centre
  - Increased engagement with SOCIT has been identified with young women engaged with Dandenong Gatehouse. We believe this is due to the nature of social inclusion that operates at Gatehouse. As a young woman feels connected to something positive outside of her exploitative relationships and context, she can grow in her confidence that SOCIT interviews play in



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her life. She has someone to go with her, support her before, during and after. She has someone to link her in to broader supports & activities in the community.

- Dandenong Gatehouse aims to build insight. Insight can take a long time to build, however at times it happens faster than anticipated. As insight develops, builds and strengthens, the young woman's capacity to embrace change in other areas of her life that leave her vulnerable to risks of CSE, also grows.

#### **Strengthen regulation and oversight mechanisms**

Recruitment and retention of carers is a statewide challenge. Increased resourcing of community service organisations to provide adequate care, training and oversight is essential.

Reassessment of carers on a regular basis is an idea that could aid both carers and CSOs, and most importantly provide great support to young people in OOHC

#### **Improve information sharing**

CRISSP is a great way to have information shared for those CSOs connected to a service agreement with DHHS

Dandenong Gatehouse provides Child Protection with information for the worker to case note, however there is information that would be helpful for Gatehouse to also know to better support and engage the young women. This information is noted on Gatehouse systems. A centralized system could be of benefit.

#### **Child Safe organisations**

Child safe elements such as outlined in the executive summary would be of benefit to the community, and most importantly young people involved in sexual exploitation, if promoted and structured in the OOHC sector.

Being mindful however, that child sexual exploitation is also an issue more broadly than the OOHC sector, therefore it would be encouraged to also consider how the child safe elements can be implemented within local council, schools, churches and other places



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within the community such as theatre groups, scouts, etc.

#### Improve support for children and carers

Improved support for children and carers in the OOHC sector is something that Dandenong Gatehouse is committed to being part of the solution for. We would value opportunity to be part of the development of a nationally consistent framework for service delivery within the OOHC sector, particularly in the area of trauma-informed advocacy and support service.

Gatehouse was able to identify within 2-3 months of establishing the Young Women's Centre, that education and training for carers and practitioners was essential, and has been developing ways to participate in that training space for the past 12 months.

A wider variety of placement options for young people is not only a positive option, but essential. Whilst there are certain frameworks and approaches to care and placement that work for majority of young people, no young person is the same, and subsequently a suite of options is essential. Reduction in number of 'strangers' in a child's life is something to keep on the agenda, and Gatehouse is committed to a model of consistency for trust to be built and safety to be maintained. These are key components of reducing risks of commercial sexual exploitation.

Children in kinship/relative care certainly requires as much, if not more, support. Trauma is not resolved just by living with family, and family members do not necessarily have the resources (or relationship with the child) to support the young person with a history of trauma. Placement within a family or close friend setting, is however most ideal.

Support to young people aging out of the OOHC system is a strong passion of the Dandenong Gatehouse team. Increased support for individuals when leaving the OOHC system could include a phase of support for those 18-21yo, and also a more intentional support for those identified still at high risk 3 months prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. These issues will not disappear quickly and often require extreme amounts of workload to get a young person "over the line"; they still need support for much time after this time. Supports such as these implemented, would support the broader community in the long term as well.

The average young person **without** DHHS involvement remains at home until late



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20s/early 30s, so it seems unfair that the young person with a history of trauma and abuse might be at risk of homelessness at the age of 18. There is no house waiting for the young person the morning of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday at a front door. Whilst there is significant decrease of this type of story in the system these days, it does still occur.

Access to leaver records, means that we much also improve our case noting in the sector to ensure that we capture the positive elements of a young person within case notes, as well as the young person's strengths, successes, what they did well, and how they are growing. There is always something positive to say about a child.

Dandenong Gatehouse would welcome a broader discussion on any or all of these matters in the future.

Regards,

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