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Out of Sight out of Mind? Our Regional Children and Young People

Shelter SA is the peak body for housing in South Australia. Our remit is for State-wide policy and systems advocacy, community engagement and research. Often, rural and regional housing and homelessness services, and their clients, seem to be forgotten in policy discussions and decisions. Shelter SA has a regional engagement strategy to ensure that we systematically visit our regional members to seek their views and hear about the unique housing issues they experience, bringing back that intelligence to policy-makers.

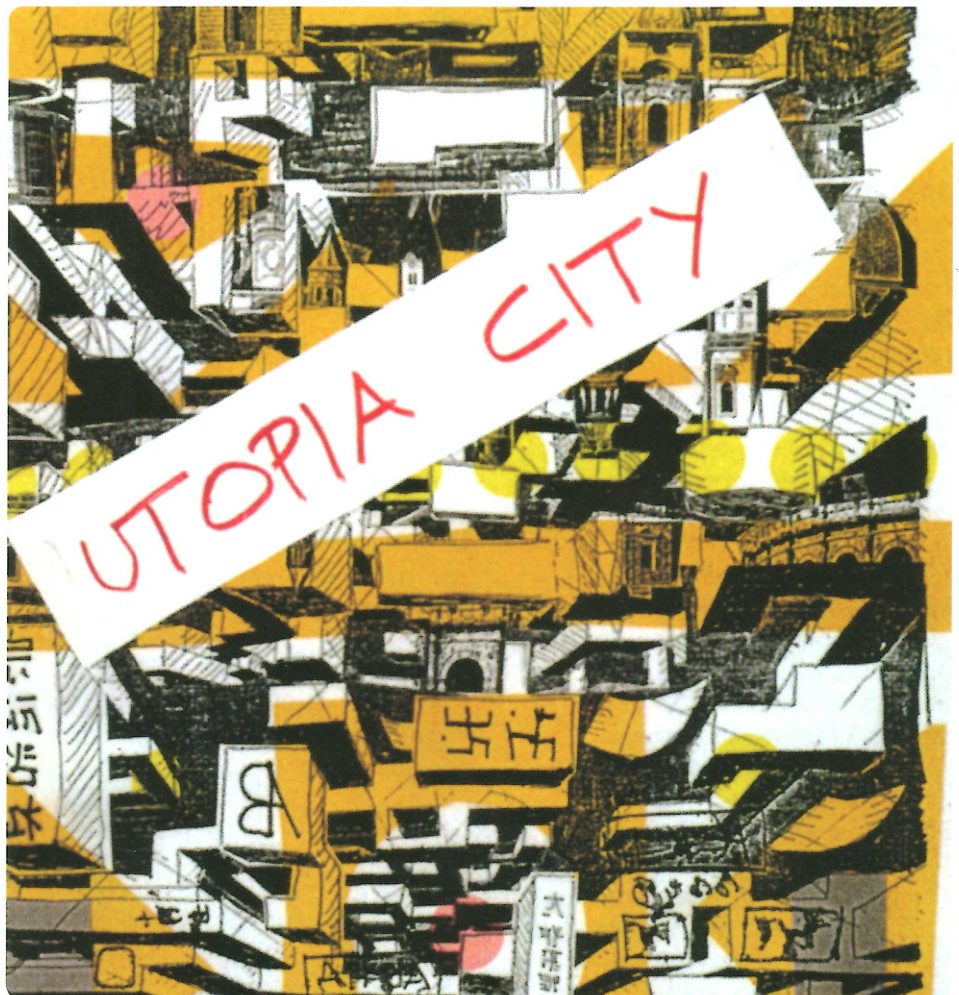
Since I have been at Shelter SA, we have visited Berri, Murray Bridge, Mt. Gambier, Port Lincoln, Port Augusta and Port Pirie to speak with locals. Without fail, the number one issue that is raised during these visits is the lack of crisis accommodation in the regions, especially for children and young people. Often the approach to accommodating a child or young person in an emergency is to send them to Adelaide, from as far away as 600km. Our regional workshop

participants agree that a response that removes a child from any supportive networks, friends and family they may have, their school and other familiar surrounds is not in the best interests of the child.

After each visit to a region, Shelter SA has written a report and shared it with the government of the day, as well as providing personal briefings to relevant ministers and bureaucrats. To date, unfortunately there has been no change in the approach to assisting children and young people who are at risk of homelessness, experiencing homelessness or involved with serious child protection issues, even though local workers do

the best they can. One of the regions reported handing out tents to young people when they have nowhere else to go. Surely we can do better?

During our regional visits, we have discussed many alternatives with the people we've spoken with, who have not only been workers, but other interested and concerned locals including police officers, church leaders, local government representatives, local members of parliament, teachers and citizens. Ideas that have been put forward to address the shortage of public housing and emergency accommodation include activating local spaces and empty homes,





window girl by Dean Briggs

opening night shelters in extreme weather, employing a concierge model for youth accommodation (rather than 24/7 staff model) and getting young people involved in renovating run-down public housing.

A unique idea that I've discussed with many people is that of tapping into family day care providers in the country areas. According to the South Australian Education Department, family day care is 'a child care service offering families affordable, personalised care by a qualified educator in a safe and nurturing home environment. ... Educators are monitored and supported by qualified family day care staff, working at a local level interacting with the children, educators and families'.¹

Family day care providers are trained, screened and supported to properly care for children and young people. The physical spaces

where family day care is provided, are set up for children and should be safe and appropriate for a young person needing shelter. Nobody has suggested that this response is suitable long-term, but as a form of respite, crisis accommodation and short-term shelter. For example, a child cared for in the family day care environment, over a weekend, could keep the client within their own environment and if safe, reconnect them with families, extended families or other caregivers and get them back to school on Monday.

It is simply a myth that people living on low incomes can find housing that is affordable in the country. All of our regional workshop participants complain about the demise of public housing in their towns and understand that the cost of even the cheapest private rental is out of reach for their clients. There are multiple barriers

for young people in the private rental market, they can experience discrimination and may not have a rental history or referees. Many of the regional centres have low vacancy rates and even some of the workers complain they cannot obtain a place to rent so young people are really disadvantaged.

Worryingly, service providers do not have any capacity to work with young people to teach them about renting or assist them to find a place to stay and there is no opportunity to work with them in a way that prevents a crisis. We cannot afford to continue to do nothing and while all people have the right to a safe home, we must improve how we work with children and young people as a matter of urgency.

Endnote

1. <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/parenting-and-child-care/child-care/services-and-programs/family-day-care>