



Hope Street Youth & Family Services
Evaluation of First Response Youth Service

Final Evaluation Report

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Acknowledgements

Lirata Consulting acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which this evaluation took place, the Wurundjeri and Wathaurong people. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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Executive Summary

The **First Response Youth Service** is a key service response for young people and young families experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Melton. The service was developed and implemented by [Hope Street Youth and Family Services](#), in partnership with other key organisations including City of Melton, to respond to a clear gap in service provision for at-risk young people in the region.

The First Response model includes three key elements: an **assertive mobile outreach service**; a ten bed **youth refuge**; and a **community capacity building** element connecting services and young people to the local community. Services operate 24/7. The service commenced operation in August 2018, with the new refuge opening in August 2020. Over the following three years, First Response provided 794 support periods to 515 clients. Ongoing operational funding has been secured from the Victorian government.

This report presents the findings of an **independent evaluation** of the First Response service, commissioned by Hope Street and led by [Lirata Consulting](#). Through interviews, focus groups and surveys, the evaluation gathered input from over 100 stakeholders including young people, staff, managers, service delivery partners, community partners, funders and others. The evaluation also undertook detailed analysis of quantitative and documentary data. Evaluation findings address the model, the refuge facility, service development and implementation processes, client outcomes, and Social Return on Investment (SROI).

Service model

The First Response service is operating consistently with currently accepted best practice in delivery of services to vulnerable young people, using frameworks including trauma informed care, young person-centred approaches, and strengths- and solution-focused approaches. The service demonstrates **innovative or leading practice** in the close integration between refuge and mobile outreach service; provision of specific facilities and support for young families; engagement and early intervention in schools and other settings; independent living skills development; and community engagement and capacity building.

Refuge facility

The First Response refuge is a modern purpose-built facility, and its design was shaped by extensive consultation and research. Unsurprisingly, the significant investment of time, money and thought in developing the refuge has resulted in a **high quality, state-of-the-art refuge environment**.

Young people and staff are generally very positive about the refuge design. It has provided a safe and positive living environment for clients, is sensitive to trauma, and supports effective service delivery. Particular design strengths include provision of separate buildings for young people, young families, and administration; the strong standard of amenity including private bedrooms and bathrooms; extensive safety features; the comfortable, wellness-focused interior design; connectedness to the natural environment; dedicated spaces for support provision, study and skills development; and accessibility to cohorts including First Nations and other culturally diverse young people, and LGBTIQ+ young people. Minor suggestions were provided for improvements to the refuge buildings.

Community support and engagement

A standout feature of First Response service development was its **astute engagement of community and strategic supporters**. Hope Street used a systematic approach to build support for the service through three key areas of activity: research and planning; awareness raising and consultation; and partnership building. These strategies generated a snowball effect in which City of Melton, The Ian Potter Foundation, the First Response Corporate Committee and other partners also became champions for the model. This led to high levels of community support and resulted in access to vital funding and in-kind resources.

Implementation and service delivery

The First Response service has been well implemented and demonstrates a **high standard of service provision**. Notable strengths include safe, positive and inclusive support experiences for young people; effective service delivery processes with a focus on accessibility, holistic case management and follow-up; and a safe and well-supported practice environment for staff members.

Contextual challenges included the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lack of resourcing and affordable housing options within the homelessness service system. Areas for further attention include managing challenges with staff recruitment and turnover, and continuing to upskill staff. Around half of external stakeholders consulted were dissatisfied with partnerships or referral processes; improvements were suggested to role clarity, written information, and the regularity and consistency of communication.

Effectiveness

The First Response service is **successfully assisting the majority of its client group to achieve positive outcomes** across a range of life domains:

- **Housing:** Following engagement, 65% of young people had an improved housing situation and 61% exited to safe and stable housing.
- **Education, employment and training (EET):** 34% of young people were assisted to engage in education and training, while 22% were assisted to engage in employment.
- **Financial security:** 47% of young people were assisted to access additional income, financial assistance or entitlements, and about 17% had increased income at exit.
- **Connectedness and service system engagement:** 95% of young people were assisted to engage with other community service. Following engagement, 50% had improved connections to their family and 70% had improved connections to the broader community. The majority of young people with criminal justice system involvement had reduced risk of future involvement.
- **Health and wellbeing:** 70% of young people were reported to have improved physical health and 78% to have improved mental health; 82% of young people had increased optimism about their future, and 86% were reported to have improved personal safety.
- **Parenting:** 56% of young parents or parents-to-be were reported to increase their parenting skills and over 90% were reported to have increased safety for children in their care.

Staff-rated attribution data across all areas suggests that **the First Response service contributed to positive outcomes**. Small numbers of negative outcomes were reported, in a few cases attributed by young people to the service. A comparison with selected Australian Institute of Health and Welfare indicators found that First Response is performing on par with youth homelessness services Victoria-wide, except in maintaining housing for young people who are housed prior to entry, where First Response has lower success.

Social Return on Investment

SROI analysis showed a positive result, with an estimated **investment to benefit ratio of \$1.00 : \$3.14** (range \$3.60 - \$2.20). The strongest return was for housing (32% of total value), followed by education, employment and training (23%) and health (20%). Government receives economic value (19% of total) through savings to the health system, reduced welfare payments and increased income tax receipts.

Overall conclusion

Hope Street and its partners are to be commended on the development and implementation of an accessible, evidence-based, high quality youth homelessness response in Melton. With moderate investment, the First Response service is achieving strong positive outcomes for young people at risk.

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1 Introduction

In 2018, Hope Street Youth and Family Services (Hope Street) opened a new mobile outreach service and youth refuge in Melton, the **First Response Youth Service** (First Response). This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the First Response service. The evaluation investigates the service model, the period of development of the service (2014-2018), service delivery processes (August 2018 - September 2021) and the outcomes and Social Return on Investment achieved.

1.1 Context

Hope Street is a community-based agency with a vision for *“a society in which all young people and young families have a safe place to call home”*. Hope Street provides a wide range of services across the north and west of metropolitan Melbourne, focusing on support and accommodation for young people and young families who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Hope Street works closely with the local communities to build awareness and action on youth homelessness, and to facilitate opportunities for young people.

The **First Response service** is an important new element in Hope Street’s service portfolio. First Response provides a mobile outreach program and a purpose-built youth refuge for young people (16-25 years) and their children, which operates 24/7. It also includes a community capacity building element designed to help connect services and young people to the broader local community. Approximately 515 young people were supported by the service between August 2018 and September 2021.

The **evaluation** of the First Response service was undertaken by Lirata Consulting (lirata.com) between May 2021 and May 2022. The evaluation was delivered in partnership with Hope Street and with Think Impact, who completed a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis. The purpose of the evaluation is to inform further development of the service, provide information to support future funding submissions, and contribute to the evidence base on effective services for young people at risk of homelessness.

This report presents findings on the five domains examined in the evaluation:

- **Model** – the key elements of the First Response service model, with a focus on those representing innovative or leading practice.
- **Facility** – the design of the youth refuge, and its impact on practice and client experience.
- **Process** – the strategies used to generate community support and engagement for the service, and the strengths and weaknesses of its implementation.
- **Effectiveness** – outcomes for young people across a range of areas including housing; education, employment and training (EET); financial security; connectedness and service system engagement; health and wellbeing; and parenting.
- **Economic** – Social Return on Investment achieved by the service for young people, the children of young parents, and government.

In addition to this final report, evaluation outputs include a *Literature Review*¹, and a *Brief Findings Report – Client Outcomes*² which provides more detailed findings on the Effectiveness domain.

2 Evaluation design

2.1 Key evaluation questions

The evaluation sought to answer six key questions, grouped into five domains (Table 1).

Table 1: Key evaluation domains and questions

DOMAIN	KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS
Model	1. What aspects of the First Response Youth Service represent innovative or leading practice?
Facility	2. How does the physical design of the refuge facility influence service delivery, participant experience and wellbeing?
Process	3. How effective are the strategies used to generate community support and engagement for the First Response Youth Service? 4. What have been the strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the First Response Youth Service?
Effectiveness	5. How effective is the First Response Youth Service in achieving its intended outcomes for young people?
Economic	6. How do the benefits provided by the First Response Youth Service compare with its costs?

2.2 Data sources and methods

The evaluation used a retrospective mixed methods approach; no substantial baseline data was available.

Table 2: Data sources and methods

METHOD	DESCRIPTION
Literature review	Review of government policy and research literature related to youth homelessness and youth refuges; themes are summarised in the <i>Literature Review</i> (Rogers, Shafaei & Planigale 2021)
Document review	Review of policy, planning, funding and reporting documents relating to the First Response service.
Surveys	Three short, online evaluation surveys were conducted: • Young Persons Survey distributed to past and current service users. Young people completed the survey online, or on the phone with a Hope Street staff member. 75 responses received. • Staff Survey sent to all current First Response service staff. 14 invited, 5 responses received. • Partner Agency Survey sent to external partners. 16 invited, 5 responses received.
Interviews and focus groups	Interviews and/or focus groups were conducted with the following stakeholders: • Hope Street management (n = 4 participants) • First Response staff (n = 5 participants) • First Response clients (young people) (n = 9 participants)

METHOD	DESCRIPTION
	External stakeholders (major funding partners, refuge building design stakeholders, community partners, service delivery partners) (n = 9 participants)
Excel outcomes tool	First Response staff compiled data for 134 de-identified clients on 79 quantitative and qualitative fields, drawing on service records, conversations with clients and staff knowledge. Staff also assessed attribution of positive outcomes to the service. Quantitative pre-post analysis was undertaken.
SHIP/SRS data	De-identified data on demographics, service activity and selected outcome areas was extracted from two service delivery databases: SHIP (for the refuge) and SRS (mobile outreach service).
AIHW data	Data was obtained from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW's) Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) dataset, and compared with indicators calculated from SHIP/SRS data.
Cost data	First Response investment data was provided by Hope Street for the financial years 2019-2021.

Evaluation of the model, process and facility drew primarily on stakeholder perspectives from interviews, focus groups and surveys. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the service, and SROI analysis, were completed using data from the surveys, Excel tool, SHIP/SRS databases, AIHW and cost data.

2.3 Limitations and data collection challenges

Challenges were experienced in gathering data from young people, including recruitment difficulties due to cohort vulnerability and housing insecurity, difficulties contacting previous clients, young people's reluctance to share personal information, the cultural and linguistic background and educational attainment level of some young people, and pressures on staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the service's operational requirements. Hope Street and the evaluation team worked collaboratively to navigate these issues and access the best available data for the evaluation.

Qualitative analysis provided a well-rounded view of the service drawing on methods capturing the perspectives of a range of stakeholders. Findings based on qualitative data are considered strong.

Limitations of the quantitative outcomes analysis using the Excel Outcomes Tool include retrospective data collection, reliance on staff assessment, and lack of a comparison group. Strength of evidence for findings based on this data source varies from low to moderate; results should be interpreted with this caveat in mind. Strength of evidence for findings from the AIHW data comparison is stronger, as it is based on a population level comparison of a standardised dataset.

The SROI findings build on the quantitative outcomes analysis plus client survey and interviews with young people. They have been reviewed by the evaluation team and by staff from the First Response team as proxies for young people (the end beneficiaries), but not directly verified by young people. Investment data has not been independently verified. The data quality relating to the length of time for which young people experience outcomes is low. This has been addressed in a sensitivity analysis.

3 The First Response service and its client group

3.1 First Response service – overview

There are three main elements to the First Response model:

- **Assertive mobile outreach** service – This aspect of the service provides short-term (six week) intensive case management services to young people to meet immediate needs, provide information, find housing, and to assist young people to access the services they need to develop and grow. The outreach service sensitively, proactively and repeatedly engages with young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, in places and spaces preferred by them. After hours support is offered. The outreach service commenced operations in August 2018.
- **Purpose-built youth refuge** – The 10 bed (eight single and two family) refuge provides emergency accommodation and case management support for up to six weeks while young people are supported to find safe and secure accommodation, address immediate needs, and develop aspirational plans. The refuge includes separate youth and family units. The purpose-built refuge opened in August 2020; prior to this a pilot service had been operating from two houses rented in the local community. The service operates 24/7.
- **Community development and capacity building** – Educating and informing the local community about causes and consequences of homelessness, what can be done to support young people and how the community and local businesses can assist. This element builds support for the service and generates links to other services, resources and support in the local community.

First Response aims to identify, engage and build relationships with young people; provide immediate responses to presenting needs, including crisis accommodation; help young people develop achievable plans and goals; facilitate access to required services; and build community awareness and support.

The First Response service is staffed by professionally trained residential and case management staff with a wide range of skills, knowledge and capacities. The refuge staffing model comprises the First Response Team Coordinator, two case managers and five residential support workers, while the mobile outreach service has four case managers and a community engagement worker.

The First Response service is funded primarily by the Victorian government and philanthropic funding. Support and resources have also been provided by the City of Melton and local businesses.

3.2 Client group

The First Response service provides support and development services to some of Victoria's most vulnerable young people and young families (aged 16-25 years) who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Services are targeted to young people with connections to the City of Melton and surrounding suburbs.

Young people in this cohort may be marginalised due to negative perceptions about their capacity to afford and sustain housing, and because of their cultural backgrounds, and gender and sexual orientations. Young

people may be vulnerable due to previous experiences of trauma, family violence, family breakdown, violence and exploitation, poverty, and unaddressed health needs, most related to untreated mental health (MH) symptoms and problematic Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) use. These young people also show impressive resilience and a range of strengths including the capacity to manage with little or no income, to retain connections to school or work during periods of housing instability, and to find resources for immediate needs, especially in times of crisis.

As at September 2021, the First Response service had provided 794 support periods to 515 clients. Table 3 summarises the service elements accessed by this cohort of young people, and provides a similar analysis for the groups of young people participating in various aspects of the evaluation.

Table 3: First Response clients by service type accessed

SERVICE ELEMENTS ACCESSED	TOTAL FIRST RESPONSE CLIENT GROUP	YOUNG PERSON SURVEY	EXCEL OUTCOMES TOOL	YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEWS
Mobile outreach only	335 (65%)	26 (35%)	75 (56%)	7 (78%)
Refuge only	118 (23%)	29 (39%)	37 (28%)	1 (11%)
Both mobile outreach service and refuge	62 (12%)	20 (27%)	22 (16%)	1 (11%)
TOTAL	515	75	134	9

Table 4 notes further characteristics of the First Response client group and evaluation participant group.

Table 4: First Response clients – further characteristics

VARIABLE	TOTAL FOR SERVICE OVERALL	YOUNG PERSON SURVEY	EXCEL OUTCOMES TOOL	YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEWS
Current service user	35 (6%)	15 (20%)	2 (2%)	1 (11%)
Exited < 6 mths	69 (14%)	17 (23%)	106 (81%)	4 (44%)
Exited 6 mths+	410 (79%)	42 (57%)	22 (17%)	3 (33%)
Male	252 (43%)	17 (37%)	58 (43%)	3 (33%)
Female	330 (57%)	29 (63%)	76 (57%)	6 (66%)
Mean age at entry	19.5 years	22 years	21 years	21 years

In the Excel dataset, the most common reasons for referral reported by staff were ‘housing crisis’ (34%) or ‘family/relationship dispute’ (21%). For clients who had exited the service, the mean service duration was 88 days for the mobile outreach service, 77 days for the refuge service, and 149 days for young people who received both services. This suggests that most clients receiving both services received them sequentially, likely first receiving mobile outreach services and then being referred to the youth refuge.

4 Findings: Service model

This chapter presents findings in relation to Evaluation Question 1: **What aspects of the First Response Youth Service represent innovative or leading practice?**

The evaluation identified that the First Response service is operating consistently with currently accepted best practice in delivery of services to vulnerable young people. In addition, there are six areas in which First Response is demonstrating innovative or leading practice:

- Close integration between refuge and mobile outreach service
- Specific facilities and support for young families
- Engagement and early intervention in schools and other settings
- Independent living skills development
- Community engagement and capacity building
- Youth refuge facility design (discussed further in Chapter 5).

4.1 Consistency with accepted best practice

The First Response Youth Service model builds on contemporary research to provide high quality services to vulnerable young people and young families experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. First Response incorporates a wide range of well recognised frameworks, service delivery processes and evidence-based responses to addressing youth homelessness.

The literature on provision of support to vulnerable young people provides a range of **theoretical frameworks** which are important to positive outcomes.³ Document review and interviews with Hope Street managers and First Response staff indicated that the design of the First Response service is informed by these frameworks, and specifically by adolescent development theory, trauma theory and trauma informed care frameworks, resilience theory, and intersectional theory.

The literature, policy frameworks and knowledge of contemporary youth service delivery also indicate a set of **practice and service design principles** that are understood to constitute elements of best practice. Evidence gathered during the evaluation indicates the First Response service is operating consistently with all of these principles (Table 5). While adherence to these approaches indicates a well-designed and delivered service, it does not distinguish First Response from other youth homelessness services in Victoria, as these approaches are now widespread in the sector. The First Response service is, however, differentiated from other services in a number of areas of innovative or leading practice (cf. Section 4.2), and by its purpose built, trauma-informed refuge facility (cf. Chapter 5).

Table 5: Best practice principles evident in the operation of the First Response service

PRINCIPLE / APPROACH	DESCRIPTION	EVIDENT IN FIRST RESPONSE SERVICE?
Safety	Ensure that service delivery processes and environments are safe, calm and trauma-aware	✓ Clear focus of service processes and refuge design

PRINCIPLE / APPROACH	DESCRIPTION	EVIDENT IN FIRST RESPONSE SERVICE?
Relationship-based practice	Build consistent, non-judgmental, trusting and practically helpful relationships as a key leverage mechanism for change	✓ Key worker model
Young person-centred approaches	Individualise service delivery to the unique needs and preferences of each young person; include young people as the central decision-makers about their own care and goals	✓ Young people empowered to set own goals
Aspirational goal setting	Explore young people's passions, interests and existing strengths and support young people to build on these	✓ Included in goal-setting processes
Strengths- and solution-focused approaches	Identify and activate the skills and resources young people have to address barriers and achieve goals	✓ Strengths-focused framing by staff
Holistic support	Identify the wide range of presenting needs young people may have and address these in an integrated fashion, including through collaboration with other service providers	✓ Holistic lens evident in assessment, planning and delivery of support
Motivational interventions	Use motivational interventions which help young people understand the impacts of their behaviour, and develop readiness to make identified changes where necessary	✓ Used in support provision
Flexible access and assertive outreach	Overcome barriers to access by providing flexible ways, time and places where young people can receive support, rather than requiring presentation at a central location during office hours. Persist in engagement to build trust and link young people to support.	✓ Mobile outreach service provides very flexible access options using assertive engagement approach
Continuity of care	Provide longitudinal, sustained support to young people including across key service transitions	✓ Close connection between refuge and mobile outreach; follow-up after service exit
Service user participation	Facilitate young people's involvement in service design and improvement, to strengthen services and build young people's empowerment and agency	✓ Processes for service user participation including in refuge design

One best practice approach for provision of homelessness services that is identified in the literature but not strongly present in the First Response model is a **Housing First approach**. Housing First seeks to promptly provide long-term housing which is not contingent on addressing other needs. A true Housing First response is not expected within a refuge based model, and is dependent on reliable access to affordable long-term housing, which is difficult for the First Response service as it is for much of the sector. It may be worth considering ways in which elements of youth-specific Housing First models (e.g. *Housing First for Youth*⁴) could be more strongly embedded in the First Response model as it evolves in future.

In addition to practice principles and approaches, the evaluation reviewed First Response's key **service delivery activities**. These include assessment and planning; immediate responses to identified needs such as food or clothing; provision of accommodation via the refuge and/or referral to other accommodation services; provision of casework support; skill development; provision of information; supported referrals to a wide range of other services; and advocacy. The available evidence indicates that these processes occur in an integrated and effective way, consistent with contemporary expectations of service delivery in the youth homelessness sector.

4.2 Areas of innovative or leading practice

The following key areas of innovative or leading practice were identified in the First Response model.

Integration between refuge and mobile outreach service

The First Response model demonstrates a high level of coordination and connection between the refuge and mobile outreach elements of the service. Strong communication between the two elements of the service is enhanced by outreach staff being co-located at the refuge. The refuge provides a dedicated emergency response bed for mobile outreach clients. The model also provides a 'mobile access point' which reduces the need for young people to travel to generalist access points. This integration strengthens pathways into and out of the First Response refuge (as well as the broader service system), improving access and continuity of care for young people. Although many homelessness organisations provide short-term accommodation as well as outreach services, First Response displays an unusually high degree of integration between the refuge and the continual, systematic outreach service component.

Specific facilities and support for young families

The First Response model demonstrates specific attention to the needs of young families. This is evident in the nature of the support provided to young parents, including a strong focus on healthy relationships, attachment, development of parenting skills, and children's safety and wellbeing. It is also evident in the refuge design which provides a separate purpose-built building for young families. Although most youth homelessness services consider the needs of accompanying children, in the First Response model the needs of young families are integral to the design.

Engagement and early intervention in schools and other settings

The First Response model includes an assertive outreach approach which reaches young people in a range of community-based settings. Staff attend schools, other youth services, government and emergency services, and community health settings to engage young people with identified homelessness risk factors. This early intervention approach exceeds standard practice in youth homelessness services.

Independent living skills development

Many youth services aim to support young people to develop the psychological capabilities (e.g. social skills, emotional regulation, mindfulness) and practical capabilities (e.g. budgeting, cooking, vocational capacities) required to live independently. The First Response model provides a particularly clear focus on this using dedicated resources including the purpose-built kitchen that enables participation in the meal preparation and many conversations around the bench top. Self-soothing opportunities are available in the study space, games room, and art and craft room, where young people can engage in music, painting, drawing, art and craft, developing capabilities they can take with them when they leave.

Community engagement and capacity building

First Response is a place-based response, using local data to inform planning and establish collaborative responses to needs. Hope Street has shown leading practice in engaging government, community and business groups to generate funds, access to housing and employment opportunities. The community engagement worker raised awareness about youth homelessness and how the local community could help. A number of evaluation stakeholders highlighted the importance of filling this role again and encouraging senior First Response staff to network with other community service providers.

5 Findings: Facility

This chapter presents findings in relation to Evaluation Question 2: **How does the physical design of the refuge facility influence service delivery, participant experience and wellbeing?**

The First Response refuge is a modern purpose-built facility. The facility design was informed by extensive consultation with key stakeholders, including service users, Hope Street staff and management, a youth ambassador, expert building design stakeholders and local community members. The design was also informed by current research in the field of environmental psychology field which considers how building design can improve service user experiences and healthcare outcomes.

Unsurprisingly, the significant investment of time, money and thought in developing the refuge has resulted in a high quality, state-of-the-art facility. Particular strengths noted in the refuge design include:

- Provision of separate buildings for young people, young families, and administration
- Strong standard of amenity including private bedrooms and bathrooms
- Extensive safety features
- Comfortable, wellness-focused interior design
- Connectedness to the natural environment
- Dedicated spaces for support provision, study and skills development
- Accessibility to a range of cohorts.

Overall, young people and staff are very positive about the facility design. It has provided a safe and positive living environment for clients, and supported successful service delivery. The design helps young people feel welcome and safe, is sensitive to trauma, helps to build positive relationships, and encourages participation in earning and learning activities. The human elements of the service model (cf. Chapter 4) have been most important in achieving outcomes for young people, but the refuge facility has provided an enabling environment in which these processes can operate most effectively.

While noting the positives of the facility, staff also suggested possible improvements to its design, most importantly a need for improved confidentiality and noise management in the on-site office space.

5.1 Strengths of the refuge design

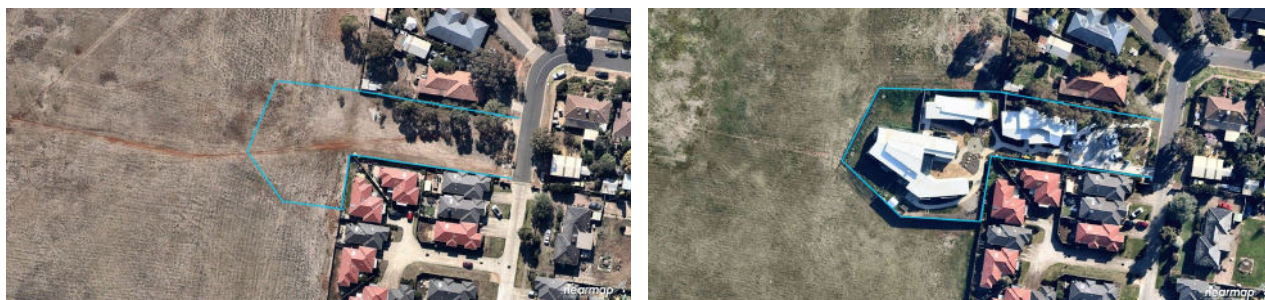
Document review, surveys, interviews and focus groups highlighted key strengths of the facility design. All staff survey respondents (n=5) agreed that ‘the purpose-built design of the youth refuge had a positive impact on service delivery to young people.’

Provision of separate buildings for young people, young families, and administration

The First Response refuge is integrated into the community amongst residential housing and includes three distinct buildings: an eight bedroom facility for young singles, a two bedroom facility for young families, and a separate office/administration facility used by staff (Figure 1). The separate facility for young families enables provision of dedicated equipment and play spaces for children, while also supporting child safety. The separate office space demonstrates privacy and autonomy of young people while still allowing for

strong engagement through strategically placed windows, walkways and gardens, and through the structured programs being operated.

Figure 1: First Response Refuge aerial view: development site (April 2018, left) and completed build (August 2021, right)



Strong standard of amenity including private bedrooms and bathrooms

The refuge building is built to contemporary standards of amenity which respect young people's privacy and dignity. The facilities provide a private bedroom and bathroom for each young person or young family. Other design features including ha-ha walls⁵ are also used to reduce visibility to bedrooms. These design elements are consistent with a trauma-informed model of care, and stakeholders noted that they assist in reducing young people's anxiety and increasing autonomy and self-esteem.

Of clients who responded to the Young Persons Survey, 68% (n=32) rated their privacy in the refuge as 'Awesome', 28% (n=13) as 'OK', and 4% (n=2) as 'Poor'. The high proportion of very positive ratings is impressive for a facility in which young people are living in close quarters. Young people appreciated the private amenities, separate buildings, and staff not being permitted to enter bedrooms unless under very particular circumstances.

Other elements of amenity noted by stakeholders included good internet access and a TV and gaming room.

Extensive safety features

The refuge design integrates a range of security features that enhance real and perceived safety for residents and staff. These include use of walls and gates, including concrete walls on the building perimeter; a single point of entry to the site using an intercom and gate monitored by staff; internal windows for unobtrusive observation; security cameras; inbuilt duress alarms; and good external lighting at night, including for staff. The private amenities noted above also contribute to safety for residents.

Safety was highlighted as a key design feature by all groups of stakeholders. Of clients who responded to the Young Persons Survey, 60% (n=29) rated their safety in the refuge as 'Awesome', 33% (n=16) as 'OK', and 6% (n=3) as 'Poor'. Young people like the modern facilities, including good technology, and feelings of safety created by security features such as the single entry point, fences and gates.

Comfortable, wellness-focused interior design

The refuge design incorporates environmental psychology principles which are considerate of previous trauma and aim to strengthen health and wellbeing. Staff noted that this therapeutic focus within the refuge design creates a calm, welcoming and supportive environment for young people. Aspects of this

include the open plan design which creates a sense of space; use of warm colours; stable temperature and good ventilation; natural light; and the use of soft furnishings and avoidance of hard surfaces, which helps the refuge 'feel like home' rather than an institution.

'Young people are often reserved, shy and don't have self-esteem [at the time they enter the service]. They change... this place helps them feel calmer, you can see it... see them getting healthy again, using the resources, also improved mental health.'

Staff member

Connectedness to natural environment

Attention has been paid in the refuge design to connection of indoor spaces to the natural environment. Stakeholders commented that views to gardens and nature create a sense of space and calm.

The site features open spaces between buildings, further enhanced by an open reserve area behind the rear boundary of the site. Gardens have been used to connect the buildings, including a welcome garden, a vegetable garden, and Aboriginal design features including use of local indigenous plants.

Dedicated spaces for support provision, study and skills development

Staff highlighted the value of the special-purpose spaces provided as part of the refuge design. These include:

- Study space, including built-in technologically enabled features; providing a focused space to undertake study, complete resumes and job applications, and develop job readiness skills
- Spaces for independent living skills development, including the purpose-built kitchen
- Strategically designed social spaces for young people, promoting opportunities for positive and safe social interactions
- Spaces for individual service delivery including counselling.

The presence of well-designed spaces for these purposes enables effective service delivery and skill development.

Accessibility to a range of cohorts

Attention has been paid in refuge design to the needs of particular groups of young people who may require support from the First Response service. Input was sought from young people and other stakeholders in the facility design stage to enhance accessibility and inclusion for a range of groups.

Feedback received through the evaluation indicates that young people of different backgrounds felt welcomed and included at the refuge. Young people believed that the youth refuge design sensitively considered the needs of First Nations and other culturally diverse young people and LGBTIQ+ young people; participants noted welcoming signage for these groups, and access to private bathrooms.

The refuge has a disability accessible design including wide entry and hallways, no stairs, and disability accessible toilets.

Young parents found the purpose-built design features for young families to be especially helpful. In addition to the separate building for young families, respondents commented on the availability of children's play equipment, toys and other resources, and space to play outside, including a sandpit.

Other strength areas

Other areas noted as strengths of the design include sustainable and durable buildings that minimise energy use and operating costs, and the presence of spaces (and activities) welcoming of broader community engagement and connections.

Comparison with other youth refuges

The physical design of the First Response Youth Refuge was compared against three other youth refuges currently operating in Victoria. These included two older 'non-purpose-built' youth refuges (Hope Street Brunswick West Youth Refuge and VACSAL Bert Williams Centre Youth Hostel) and a new, purpose-built refuge in Dandenong (WAYSS Youth Refuge). As expected, the comparison identified that the modern purpose-built design of the First Response refuge offers numerous advantages over the design of the two older refuges. The First Response refuge also compares favourably to the design of the WAYSS refuge in regard to provision of private bathrooms, dedicated spaces for independent living skills development, and connection to the natural environment.

While other youth refuges offer some contemporary design elements, none of the other refuges reviewed as part of this evaluation include all the features available at the First Response refuge. Hope Street management and staff are justifiably proud of the sector-leading design of the refuge facility.

5.2 Potential improvements to the refuge design

Young people did not provide any suggestions about improvements to the refuge design in either interview or survey qualitative feedback – *"everything is perfect, it has everything we need"*.

However, 6 of 10 staff respondents reported **concerns about confidentiality, noise and privacy**. These mostly related to the staff office space which they viewed as small, raising concerns about confidentiality – *"confidentiality was hard", "there isn't a lot of privacy", "it's very loud", "I need to leave the room when on calls"*.

Some other **minor improvements to the facility** were also discussed by staff, but were viewed as 'nice to have' rather than significantly impacting on service delivery. Some staff believed additional outdoor space for a gym, table tennis table or other recreation activities would allow young people to *"let off steam"*, while managers highlighted the potential value of undercover walkways between the three buildings during inclement weather, and additional landscaping to create further privacy.

6 Findings: Process

This chapter presents findings in relation to Evaluation Question 3: **How effective are the strategies used to generate community support and engagement for the First Response Youth Service?**, and Evaluation Question 4: **What have been the strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the First Response Youth Service?**

Hope Street used a systematic approach to build support for the First Response service through three key areas of activity: research and planning; awareness raising and consultation; and partnership building. These strategies generated a snowball effect in which other key partners also became champions for the model. This sophisticated approach resulted in high levels of community support for the project, and provision of vital funding and in-kind resources which enabled implementation.

The First Response service has been implemented to a high standard. Strengths include positive support experiences for young people, effective service delivery processes, and strong support processes and role sustainability for staff members. Contextual challenges included the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lack of resourcing and affordable housing options within the homelessness service system. Potential areas for further attention include continuing to upskill staff, managing staffing challenges, and the ongoing work of strengthening and maintaining service delivery partnerships.

6.1 Community support and engagement

First Response's processes for building support and engagement were initiated and led by Hope Street, but also involved significant contributions from other key partners including the City of Melton, The Ian Potter Foundation, and business leaders. These processes occurred between 2014 (initial identification of need) and 2020 (service fully operational), and aspects of it continue in the present.

Strategies used to build support and engagement

The strategies used to generate support and engagement for the First Response service fall into three main areas: research and planning; awareness raising and consultation; and partnership building (Table 6).

Table 6: Key strategies used to generate support and engagement for the First Response service

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES USED BY FIRST RESPONSE
Research and planning	Development of evidence base demonstrating need within the community and potential solutions; development of detailed plans and proposals to address the need	- Initial need identification recognising Melton as a growth corridor with few homelessness supports (Hope Street) 2015 research paper confirming gaps in service provision and need for place based response (Hope Street) - Development of First Response Youth Service Communications Strategy and Risk Management Plan (Hope Street) - Development of Business Case for leasing of land for refuge (City of Melton)
Awareness raising and consultation	Communication with a wide range of stakeholders to share	- Distribution of research paper to a wide audience (Hope Street) 'Town hall' community forum sharing evidence and identifying interest in local responses (City of Melton)

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES USED BY FIRST RESPONSE
	evidence, gather input, generate support and build a common agenda for change	• Extensive consultations with the local community, service providers, project partners, funders, young people and staff (Hope Street) • Corporate fundraising events sharing information about need, including presentations from Youth Ambassador (Hope Street, Sofitel and others) • Local media engagement including via the Melton/ Moorabool Leader, plus broader media engagement (Hope Street) • Regular presence at local shopping centre, participation in Djerriwarrh Festival, sausage sizzles (Hope Street) • Local door-knocking to introduce neighbours to the refuge during construction and discuss concerns (Hope Street) • Newsletter providing regular updates; YouTube videos showcasing the completed refuge and explaining its impact (Hope Street)
Partnership building	Establishment and maintenance of partnerships with a range of stakeholders to generate support, resources and relationships required for successful implementation	Development of key partnerships; communication and meetings: • Core partnership between Hope Street and City of Melton, through regular meetings of key stakeholders • Community Advisory Group including local businesses, shopping centre representatives, community members • Corporate Committee including business and strategic representatives, notably Sofitel; developing effective communication strategies to corporates and generating funding • 'Millennial Committee' of young people shaping communications and activities that would engage their peers • Funding partnership with The Ian Potter Foundation • Partnership with Brand Architects providing in-kind support for refuge design and build • Operational partnerships with local service providers, networks, police, schools, real estate agents, businesses

Effectiveness of strategies

Hope Street's systematic approach to generating support and engagement for the First Response service took time, but was very successful. The initial **research** provided a credible platform for later communications activities. This research demonstrated to a wide audience the need among young people in Melton, gaps in the service system, and the positive impacts that could be achieved through a place based service response. Early **engagement of the local Council** (City of Melton) as a partner was an important step towards broader community engagement. Stakeholders identified the 'town hall' forum as a pivotal event which generated a wide base of support and momentum around a clear call to action.

Tailored **communication and engagement strategies** targeted to key stakeholders resulted in financial and in-kind support for the development of the service. The establishment of the Corporate Committee and its role in connecting with corporate supporters and funds were a significant part of this process. Positive media coverage, the Community Advisory Group and local door-knocking campaigns were important in connecting with **local businesses and residents**. In addition to generating resources and opportunities, these activities built a shared commitment to support young people and help them remain connected to their local community. Engagement strategies also proactively addressed potential community concerns

about the project, resulting in strong support. Hope Street's sensitive, strategic and comprehensive **consultation processes** were useful in engaging stakeholders, gaining essential information and allaying concerns. The overall awareness raising and engagement process successfully **demonstrated Hope Street's capacity** to provide an effective and compassionate response to at-risk young people in Melton.

Hope Street's skill in **building key partnerships** was another key ingredient that led to success. Partnerships with the City of Melton, The Ian Potter Foundation, and the Corporate Committee were especially significant. Although Hope Street played a leading role in service development, these key partners became champions for the model and took action in their own right to move the project forward. This 'snowball effect' helped develop a wider web of supporters. Partnerships were essential in providing access to the elements needed for implementation, including funding, land, in-kind support and donations from local businesses, service delivery partnerships, and housing and employment opportunities for young people.

The success of the engagement and support building process was enabled by:

- The leadership of Hope Street's CEO, who was a key champion and thought leader communicating the need for a youth homelessness response in Melton and bringing together the stakeholders necessary to establish this
- Other contributing roles including Hope Street's Business Development role, community development worker role, and key roles within City of Melton
- Careful project planning and management by Hope Street
- The multi-pronged nature of the engagement strategy, targeting diverse stakeholder groups
- The strong place based focus of the strategy, which cemented local support.

'The CEO's leadership was important, she had a clear vision and brought people together'

Stakeholder

During 2020-21, the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions interrupted some aspects of the support and engagement activities. A number of stakeholders highlighted the need to initiate these activities again when opportunities allow.

The First Response service's place based model shows some elements of a **collective impact** approach⁶, notably a common agenda, an emphasis on strong ongoing communication, and some examples of mutually reinforcing activities. It may be worth considering the potential to develop a more broad-based collective impact response to young people's housing and wellbeing in Melton, extending from this core.

6.2 Implementation strengths

In addition to the capabilities displayed in generating community support and engagement for the First Response model (cf. Section 6.1 above), the evaluation identified three key strengths in the implementation of the model: widely reported and substantial positive experiences for young people accessing the service; effective service delivery processes; and strong mechanisms for staff support and role sustainability.

Positive experiences for young people

A high proportion of young people participating in interviews or surveys during the evaluation reported positive experiences of their engagement with the First Response service.

- **Inclusion** – 81% of Young Persons Survey respondents rated their experience of feeling welcomed and included in the service as 'Awesome'. Young people commented on sensitive consideration of cultural and gender identities by staff.
- **Goal achievement** – 77% of Young Persons Survey respondents rated their movement towards their goals via the service as 'Awesome', 16% as 'OK' and 7% as 'Poor'. Young people commented on receiving immediate responses to their needs as well as comprehensive support and linkages across a range of life areas.
- **Support relationship** – 58% of Young Persons Survey respondents rated their relationship with their case manager as 'Awesome', 36% as 'OK' and 6% as 'Poor'. Young people described their case managers as *"useful"*, *"motivating"*, *"helpful"*, *"knowledgeable"*, and *"encouraging"*.
- **Service access** – All young people interviewed agreed that First Response mobile outreach and refuge services were easy to access. Many young people stated they received services immediately after they were referred, while a few stated they waited for between 1-2 months. One First Nations mobile outreach client commented that accessing First Response services was better than previous experiences, *"it was easy, just a phone call"*.
- **Safety** – All young people interviewed agreed they felt both physically and psychologically safe while accessing the service. This was linked to the physical design of the refuge, the skills of staff, and respectful attitudes and behaviours from staff and clients.

'I liked the support worker that was managing my case... I do remember how she made me feel. She was very supportive, honest and overall welcoming.'

'They were so helpful with so many needs, for myself and my kids. They made a massive difference.'

Young people

The First Response service places a strong emphasis on service user participation and young person-centred approaches. This was noted by some young people, who appreciated their ability to participate in important decision making.

Service delivery partners also commented on the positive descriptions of the First Response service that they had heard from young people, and viewed service delivery as helpful, sensitive and effective in meeting young people's and young families' needs.

'Young people say it's much better than other refuges they have stayed at.'

Service delivery partner

Effective service delivery processes

Information from interviews with young people, First Response staff, Hope Street managers and service delivery partners indicates that First Response service delivery processes involving young people have been implemented to a high standard. There is evidence that:

- The mobile outreach service has provided **effective assertive outreach**, engaging young people who would otherwise be unable to access support; flexible after-hours outreach and the mobile access point to the Specialist Homelessness Services system are important in helping young people access services
- The service is **inclusive** for specific cohorts including young families and LGBTIQ+ young people
- Once young people engage with the First Response service, they receive **high quality support**
- First Response staff are **knowledgeable, skilled and passionate** about their work, and effectively use strengths-based, solution focused and trauma-responsive practice
- **Intake and assessment** processes are comprehensive, effectively identifying young people's needs while also enabling strengths-based discussions about existing talents and interests
- Support provision has been **holistic** and responsive to the wide range of needs of clients; this has been assisted by sounds integration between First Response and other services, with service delivery partners regularly visiting the refuge and often in close contact with case managers to support young people's needs and aspirations
- Once clients leave the service, First Response provides helpful **follow-up** to help sustain housing, retain support links and provide opportunities to address emerging issues.

Other enablers for these strong service delivery processes include the purpose-built refuge building, well-developed independent living skills programs and resources, and access to brokerage and material aid.

Strong support processes and role sustainability for staff

Via interviews and the Staff Survey, managers and staff reported strongly positive experiences in their roles in relation to the First Response Youth Service. All staff agreed that they **felt safe** in providing services, and that incidents impacting on safety were promptly addressed. This was aided by strong policies and procedures, the focus on safety and risk identification in assessment and planning tools, and the refuge design features noted in Chapter 5. All staff also reported **feeling supported** in their work within the service, receiving regular helpful supervision, and being able to access an Employee Assistance Program when needed. Team leaders play a key role in support, and after-hours support is available through an on-call service.

'Supervision has been really good and helpful, I'm grateful for [my supervisor] for organising it so regularly.'

Staff member

Staff appear to have a suitable level of role clarity. Staff Survey respondents all agreed that **caseloads are sustainable**. Staff are allocated a mix of high, medium and lower intensity clients, with team leaders thoughtfully considering the most appropriate case worker fit for new clients.

6.3 Implementation challenges

As expected in a complex new service initiative, First Response faced a range of implementation challenges. Some, such as difficulties with the original building contractor, were temporary blockages. The **COVID-19 pandemic** had a more long-lasting impact; during periods of restrictions it increased staff workloads, reduced the ease of collaboration, reduced capacity for some service elements (outreach, some aspects of living skills programs, other service provider visits to the refuge), and created tensions in balancing risks to individuals who had not observed COVID-19 restrictions, with the health and safety of others at the refuge. Stakeholders believed that Hope Street had managed these challenges well in the circumstances.

Another theme in feedback from young people, external stakeholder and staff was challenges with the level of **service resourcing and access to affordable housing**. 27% of Young Person Survey respondents (n=13) provided open text comments indicating that they would like more and better housing options via the First Response service, while 16% of respondents (n=8) asked for longer support periods, longer refuge stays, and/ or more effective support transitioning from the service. While these comments are understandable, they relate to broader system issues. Affordable housing options for young people are scarce due to housing market conditions and a long-term pattern of low government investment in social housing. Specialist Homelessness Services system funding falls substantially short of meeting demand, and within that system the First Response service fills a short-term crisis intervention niche. Nevertheless, the feedback indicates the importance of continuing to explore ways to expand housing and support options.

'I wish I was able to be supported for longer.'

Young person

Although young people provided many positive comments about **staff skills**, some respondents to the Young Person Survey suggested improvements in this area, including strengthening communication, relationship building, culturally sensitive practice and mental health support skills.

'Staff need to be more educated about the potential cultures that come in and out of the refuge.'

Young person

Some stakeholders commented on **staffing challenges**, noting longstanding difficulties in staff recruitment for operational and leadership roles. Funding constraints were identified as an issue for recruitment to direct service roles, while high staff turnover in senior roles had reduced capacity and consistency in project development and implementation.

Finally, some service delivery partners and external stakeholders noted **partnership issues**. Several service delivery partners were dissatisfied with referral processes, found the First Response website to be unclear, and raised questions about First Response's capacity to access emergency accommodation, including access to the local housing vacancy register. Two external stakeholders commented that the strong engagement and consultation they experienced during the project development phase had dropped off subsequently. Suggestions for improvement included clarifying the roles and responsibilities of mobile outreach case managers, refuge case managers and other service providers when clients accessed multiple services; clarifying service wait times; communicating realistic expectations about responsiveness during staff shortages; and strengthening regular communication processes with partners and networks.

7 Findings: Effectiveness

This chapter presents findings in relation to Evaluation Question 5: **How effective is the First Response Youth Service in achieving its intended outcomes for young people?**

The outcomes evaluation design is retrospective as no substantial baseline data was available on outcomes. Analysis of client outcomes draws on two main data sources: the Excel Outcomes Tool (staff-compiled data for 134 de-identified clients drawing on service records, conversations with clients and staff knowledge); and the Young Persons Survey, which received 75 responses from past and current clients.

Excel data was analysed to identify individual change trajectories, which were aggregated to cohort level to provide a summary of positive, neutral and negative outcomes for each indicator. Survey data was cross-referenced with Excel Outcomes Tool data and used to provide qualitative insight into outcomes.

Results from this analysis indicate that the First Response Youth Service is **successfully assisting the majority of its client group to achieve positive outcomes** across a range of life domains:

- **Housing:** Following engagement, 65% of young people had an improved housing situation and 61% exited to safe and stable housing.
- **Education, employment and training (EET):** 34% of young people were assisted to engage in education and training, while 22% were assisted to engage in employment.
- **Financial security:** 47% of young people were assisted to access additional income, financial assistance or entitlements, and about 17% had increased income at exit.
- **Connectedness and service system engagement:** 95% of young people were assisted to engage with other community service. Following engagement, 50% had improved connections to their family and 70% had improved connections to the broader community. The majority of young people with criminal justice system involvement had reduced risk of future involvement.
- **Health and wellbeing:** 70% of young people were reported to have improved physical health and 78% to have improved mental health; 82% of young people had increased optimism about their future, and 86% were reported to have improved personal safety.
- **Parenting:** 56% of young parents or parents-to-be were reported to increase their parenting skills and over 90% were reported to have increased safety for children in their care.

Staff-rated attribution data across all areas suggests that **the First Response service contributed to positive outcomes**. Small numbers of negative outcomes were reported, in a few cases attributed by young people to the service. Sample sizes for individual indicators vary depending on data availability.

A separate dataset of First Response SHIP/SRS data was compared with a Victoria-wide dataset and a Melbourne western suburbs dataset from the AIHW Specialist Homelessness Service data collection.⁷ Pre/post indicators compared included housing status, labour force status and education or training enrolment. This comparison found that First Response is **performing on par with the Victoria-wide SHS sector**, except in maintaining housing for young people who are Housed (At risk) when they enter the service, where First Response has lower success than the broader sector. In general, First Response results are a little worse than those for the AIHW Western Suburbs comparison services, apart from new enrolments in education or training where First Response results are slightly higher.

A more detailed analysis of client outcomes is provided in the *Brief Findings Report – Client Outcomes*.⁸

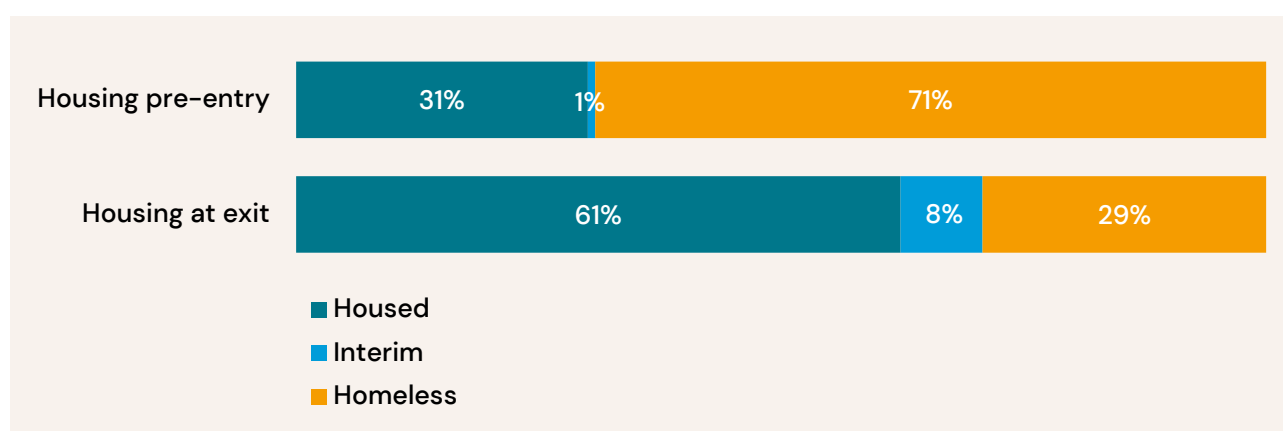


7.1 Housing

The proportion of clients accessing safe and stable housing with the assistance of the service is an important indicator of success for homelessness services. Of 125 First Response clients for whom analysis was possible, 59% (n=74) **accessed safe and stable housing**⁹ while in the service. Of the 74 young people who accessed safe and stable housing nearly 90% (n=64) were in private rental. 58% (n=45) had been homeless prior to service entry. This group represents strongly positive outcomes achieved by the service. 96% of positive outcomes on this indicator were rated as at least partly attributable to the service.¹⁰

Figure 2 shows the overall pattern of change in accommodation type for the cohort. The **proportion of young people housed increased** from 31% (n=40) prior to service entry to 61% (n=81) at exit, while the proportion experiencing homelessness dropped from 71% (n=92) pre-entry to 29% (n=38) at exit.

Figure 2: Comparison of housing status for cohort at pre-entry (n=130) and at exit (n=133)



66% of clients (n=87) were assessed to have a **reduced risk of homelessness at exit** compared to pre-entry. 87% were either homeless or at high risk prior to entry, compared to 31% at exit.¹¹ Overall, around 65% of young people (n=84) had an **improved housing situation on exit**, while 30% (n=39) remained in a poor housing situation, and the housing situation of 2% (n=3) worsened. 97% of positive outcomes on this indicator were rated as at least partly attributable to the First Response service.

Responses to the Young Person Survey indicated that 83% of respondents (n=68) believed involvement with First Response Youth Service assisted them in having a **safe and suitable place to live**. However, 3 young people (2%) who were Housed (At risk) at entry were homeless by the time of exit.

'I finally got my first ever rental after trying for over a year for myself and my children and I can't thank [Hope Street] enough.'

Young parent

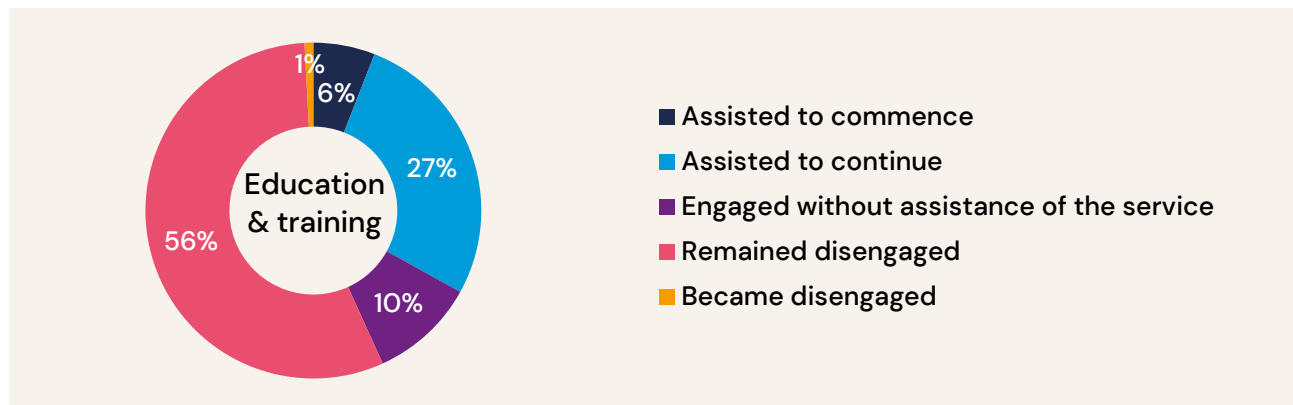
Comparison with AIHW data showed that the First Response service performed roughly on par with the SHS sector Victoria-wide in housing young people who are homeless (First Response 33%, AIHW Victoria 34%), but somewhat worse than the AIHW Western Suburbs comparison services (42%). On maintaining housing for those who are Housed (At risk) at entry, First Response results (80%) were somewhat lower than those from the AIHW Victoria data (88%) and AIHW Western Suburbs data (91%).



7.2 Employment, education & training

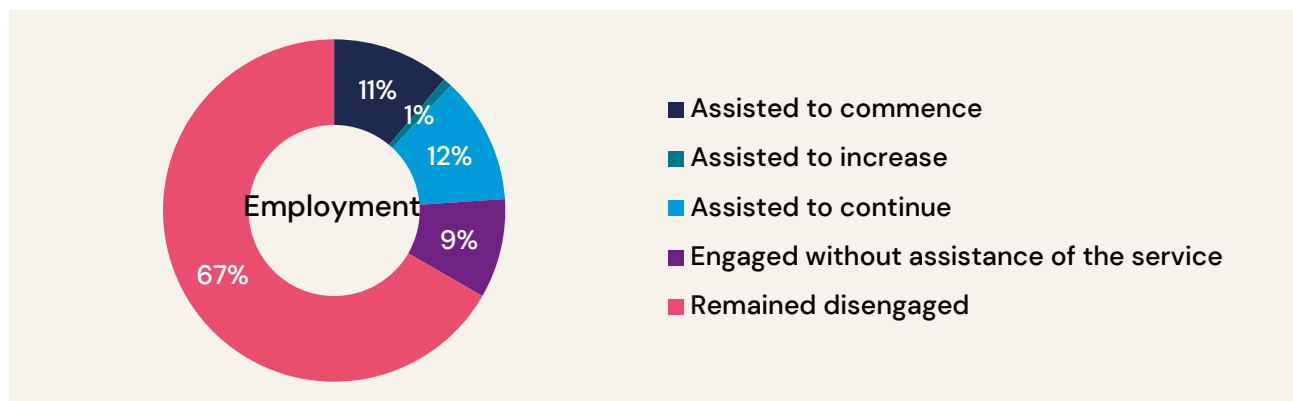
Of 117 First Response clients for whom data was available, 33% (n=39) had been able to **commence or continue engagement in education or training** with the assistance of the First Response service. A further 10% were engaged in education or training, without the assistance of the service.¹²

Figure 3: Role of First Response service in enabling participation in education or training (n=117)



24% (n=28) had been able to **commence, continue or increase their engagement in employment** with the assistance of First Response. A further 9% were engaged in employment without assistance of the service.

Figure 4: Role of First Response service in enabling participation in employment (n=117)



42% of Young Persons Survey respondents (n=66) believed involvement with First Response assisted their **participation in school or study**, while 46% (n=65) believed it assisted their **capacity to get or keep a job**.

'I was able to get a brand new laptop which was so helpful... I completed 2 courses using this device and now have a job in one of the fields I studied.'

Young person

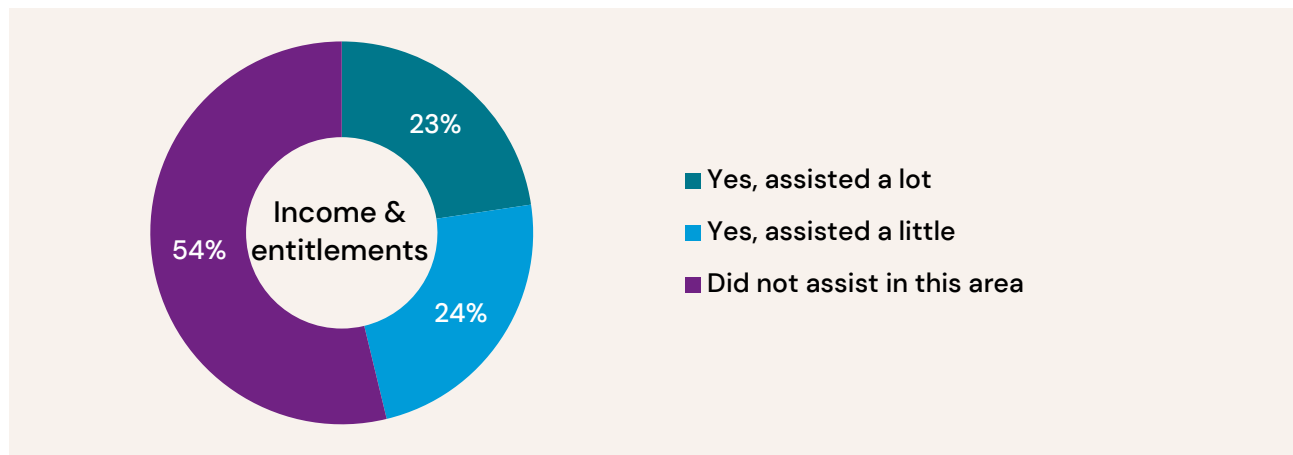
In supporting young people to enrol in education or training who were not already enrolled, First Response results (4%) were slightly higher than AIHW Victoria data (3%) and AIHW Western Suburbs data (2%). In new employment starts, First Response (7%) was on par with the broader sector. However, on maintaining employment for those already employed, First Response results (18%) were lower than AIHW Victoria (25%) and AIHW Western Suburbs (27%).



7.3 Financial security

Of 106 First Response clients for whom analysis was possible, 47% (n=49) were assisted to access **additional income, financial assistance or entitlements** (Figure 5).¹³ Of 25 young people who had **no income prior to entry to the service**, at least 12 (48%) had income at the latest data point – an important positive outcome for these young people. At least 10 of these had accessed Centrelink payments and at least two had accessed wage/salary income. At least four young people accessed additional entitlements. 81% of positive outcomes were rated at least partly attributable to the First Response service.

Figure 5: Role of First Response service in access to additional income and entitlements (n=106)



There were a variety of reasons why some young people were not assisted with income or entitlements. Some were already receiving maximum government income entitlements, some were employed, and some support periods were too short to allow meaningful assistance in this area.

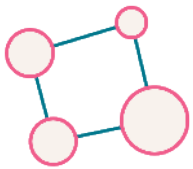
'They helped me a lot more with funding, I was able to get money on my Myki to travel to my course... Assisted with me getting my own Medicare card.'

Young person

Of 122 clients, 17% (n=21) were assessed to have **higher income** at the latest data point compared to pre-entry. Most of these had received new or increased government payments; three had moved to a wage or salary as their primary income. 72% (n=88) had no known change in income, while 3% (n=4) had a reduction in income, including one who changed from a wage to Youth Allowance, and one who shifted from Youth Allowance to no income.¹⁴

In addition to income and entitlements, data was collected on whether the First Response service assisted with other aspects of financial security. Data was not comprehensive, however the results indicate that:

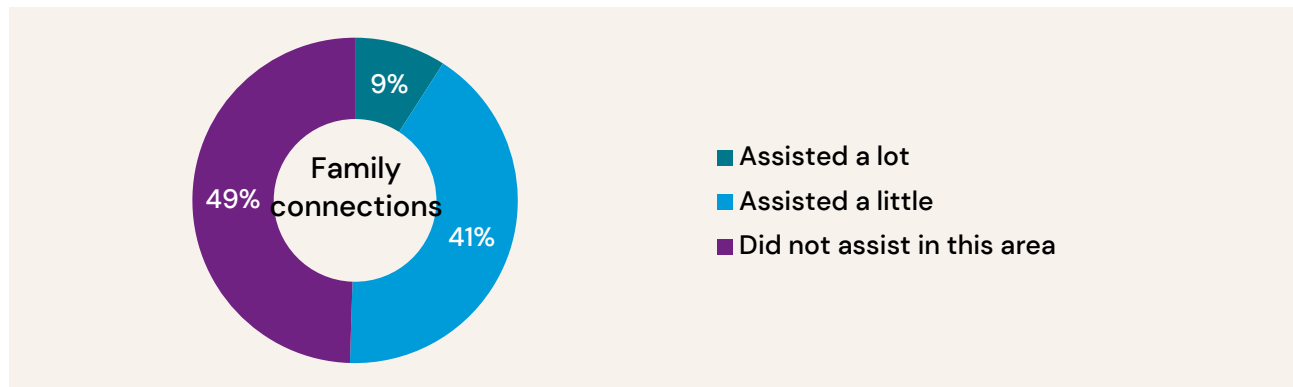
- At least 11 clients were assisted to **increase savings**
- At least 2 clients were assisted to **clear fines or infringements**
- At least 2 clients were assisted to **reduce other debts or exploitative credit**.



7.4 Connection & service engagement

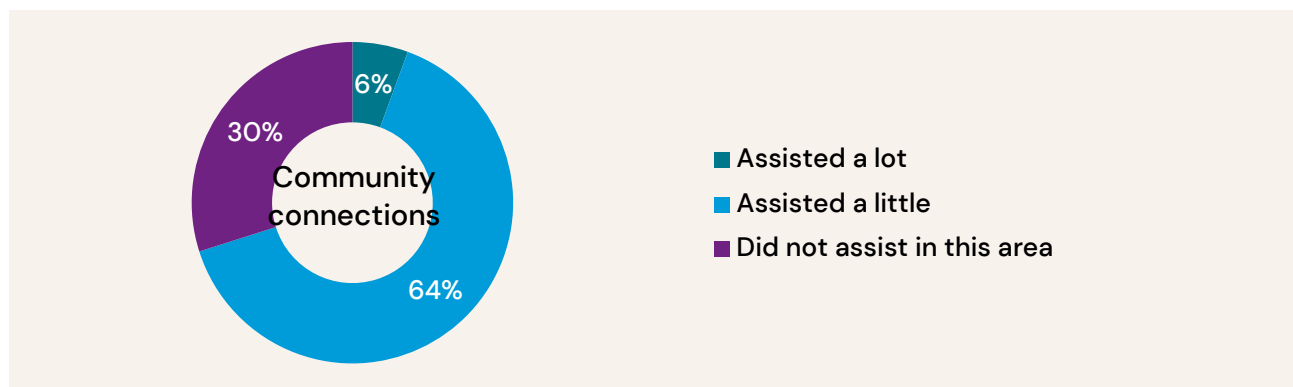
Of 99 First Response clients for whom analysis was possible, 50% (n=50) were reported to have **improved connections to family** after receiving assistance from the service (Figure 6). Consistent with these figures, 49% of Young Persons Survey respondents (n=67) reported **improved connections with their family**. All positive outcomes on this indicator were rated at least partly attributable to the First Response service.¹⁵

Figure 6: Role of First Response service in improving young people's connections to family (n=99)



Of 107 First Response clients, 70% (n=75) were reported to have **improved connections to pro-social peers or community** after receiving assistance from the service (Figure 7). 63% of Young Persons Survey respondents (n=67) reported **improved connections with friends or community** which helped them.

Figure 7: Role of First Response in improving connection to pro-social peers/community (n=107)



Of 134 young people, 95% (n=126) were assisted by First Response to **engage with at least one other community-based service**, including 43% who were assisted to engage with two or more services. 81% of Young Persons Survey respondents (n=67) reported **improved connections to people or services**.¹⁶

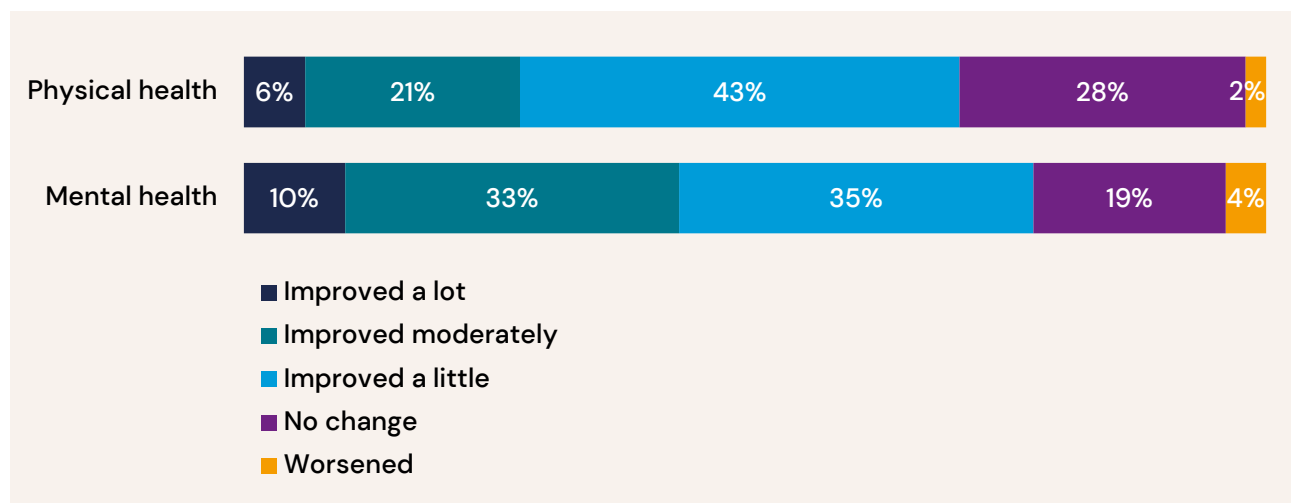
14 young people (11% of sample) were identified as having some current involvement and/or history of **involvement in the criminal justice system (CJS)**.¹⁷ Of this group, 3 young people showed a reduction in CJS involvement during service engagement, but 2 showed an increase. 8 young people were assessed as having **reduced risk of future CJS involvement** following First Response engagement; only 2 were assessed as having increased risk. All positive results were rated as being partly attributable to the service. First Response's work to improve young people's life circumstances contributes to boosting protective factors and lowering risk factors for CJS engagement. While promising, the assessed reduction in risk of future CJS involvement is based on a small sample and would benefit from further research.¹⁸



7.5 Health & wellbeing

Of 101 First Response clients for whom analysis was possible, 70% (n=70) were reported to have **improved physical health** and 77% (n=78) were reported to have **improved mental health** after receiving assistance from the service (Figure 8). All positive outcomes on these indicators were rated at least partly attributable to the First Response service.¹⁹ Consistent with these figures, 68% of Young Persons Survey respondents reported improved general health and 75% reported improved mental health. 82% of respondents (n=56) **felt more positive about the future** following engagement with First Response.

Figure 8: Young people by change in physical health (n=100) and mental health (n=101) following First Response service engagement



Data was also analysed for several indicators relating to young people's safety and risk:

- **Personal safety:** Of 69 young people, 86% (n=59) were rated as having reduced risk to personal safety after receiving assistance from First Response.²⁰ 71% of Young Persons Survey respondents (n=49) felt the service had improved their sense of safety, while 3% (n=2) felt it had decreased their sense of safety. 96% of positive outcomes were rated at least partly attributable to the service.
- **Problematic alcohol or other substance use:** Of 13 young people with identified risks in this area, 5 were assessed to have reduced risk after receiving assistance from the service, while 1 had increased risk.²¹ 53% (n=17) of Young Persons Survey respondents who answered a question on this topic reported that the service helped them to better manage problems with drug or alcohol use, and none felt the service had made these issues worse.
- **Suicidality:** Of 16 young people with identified risks in this area, 9 were assessed to have reduced risk after receiving assistance from the service, while 1 was assessed as having increased risk.²²

All positive outcomes relating to problematic substance use and suicidality were rated at least partly attributable to the service. Sample numbers are low and results should be viewed cautiously.

'Hope Street help me when I was at my lowest I didn't want to be around any more and they help me find myself and helped me find ways around mental health.'

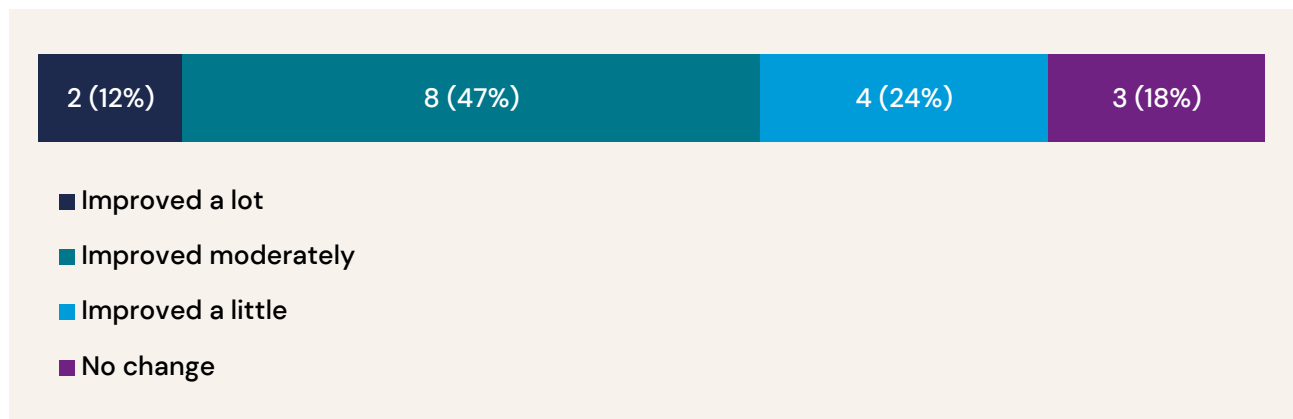
Young person



7.6 Young parents & children

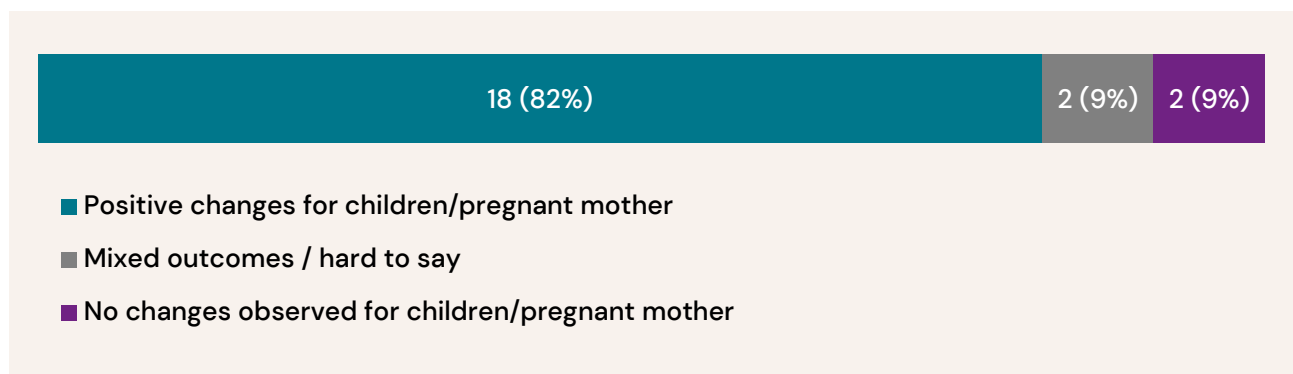
Data on changes in parenting skills was available and applicable for 17 First Response clients who were parents, pregnant or parents-to-be (all referred to as 'parents' in the following discussion). Of this group, 14 young people (83%) were reported to have **improved their parenting skills** between service pre-entry and exit (Figure 9).²³ All positive outcomes on this indicator were rated at least partly attributable to the First Response service. Of 27 young parents who responded to the Young Persons Survey, 48% (n=13) reported improvements in parenting their child linked to involvement in the First response service.

Figure 9: Parents, pregnant or parent-to-be clients by change in parenting skills following First Response service engagement (n=17)



Of 22 young parents accessing the First Response service, 82% (n=18) were reported to have **increased safety for their children** following engagement (Figure 10). Of 16 with children in their care while in the service, 15 had improved safety for their children following service engagement. All positive outcomes on this indicator were rated at least partly attributable to the First Response service.

Figure 10: Parents, pregnant or parent-to-be clients by changes in children's safety (incl. children in utero) following First Response service engagement (n=22)



'Hope Street helped me navigate through different decisions I had to make. They helped me with baby things, food vouchers and moral support.'

Young parent

8 Findings: Social Return on Investment

This chapter presents findings in relation to Evaluation Question 6: **How do the benefits provided by the First Response Youth Service compare with its costs?**

A Social Return on Investment analysis was conducted to identify and value the results achieved by the First Response service for three material stakeholder groups: young people, the children of young parents, and government. The SROI analysis was conducted by Think Impact, building on outcomes analysis conducted by Lirata. Theory of Change diagrams were developed to identify outcomes and contextualise SROI results for these groups. Key data sources included the Excel Outcomes Tool (n=134) completed by staff, Young People's Survey (n=75), young person interviews (n=7), and investment data from Hope Street.

8.1 Summary SROI analysis

SROI results were positive. The analysis forecasts that for every dollar invested²⁴ in the First Response service, \$3.14 of social value was created (Figure 11). This suggests that Hope Street is creating positive social value from their investments in First Response Youth Service.

Figure 11: Summary results of SROI analysis

Social return on investment ratio \$1.00 : \$3.14	Social value of outcomes: \$16,975,467
	Investment: \$5,400,514

The total investment in First Response since inception is \$5,400,514, not including capital costs (Table 7).

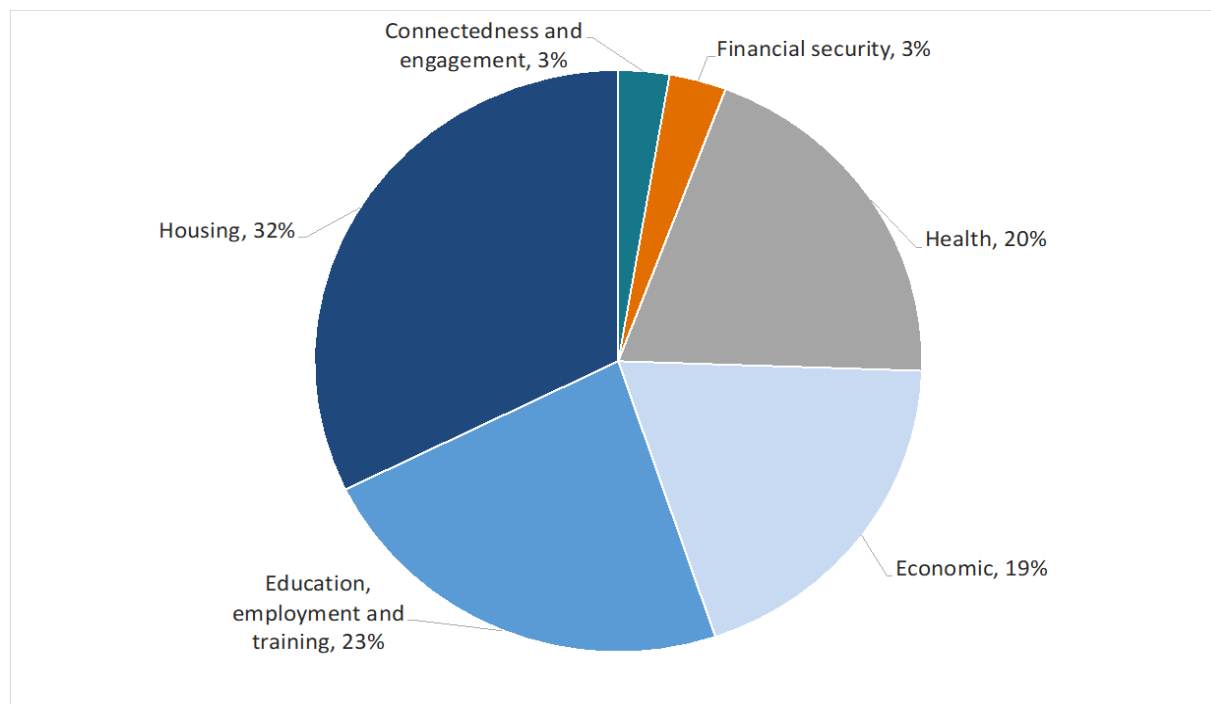
Table 7: Breakdown of First Response investment before and after refuge was built

INVESTMENT	FY21 (\$)	FY20 (\$)	FY19 (\$)
Building depreciation	84,041	–	Break down available upon request to Hope Street
Refuge and mobile expenses	421,209	330,914	
Lease costs	–	32,069	
Vehicle depreciation	24,687	–	
Other vehicle expenses	16,009	16,321	
First Response direct staffing costs	1,243,333	1,301,105	
First Response indirect staffing costs	502,914	387,908	
In-kind contributions (furniture)	61,000	–	
TOTAL	2,353,195	2,068,318	980,000
GRAND TOTAL	5,400,514		

8.2 Domains of value

The SROI analysis identified six domains of value: housing; health; employment, education and training; economic; connectedness and engagement; and financial security. The value by each domain is illustrated in Figure 12 below.

Figure 12: Percentage of social value by outcome domain



Positive SROI results were evidenced in all domains. **The strongest return was for housing with 32% of the total value** provided by this domain. Both the 'employment, education, and training', and the 'health' domains also indicated strong social value being achieved (each around 20% of the total value). In addition, **the government receives economic value through savings to the health system, reduced welfare payments and increased income tax receipts** (just under 20% of the total value).

8.3 Range of value

The length of time that outcomes last for young people, their children and government largely depends on how long housing outcomes last, however the quality of evidence relating to the length of time that permanent housing outcomes lasted was low.

Some interviews and survey data suggested that housing outcomes may last at least two years. Responses from young person interviews to the question 'How long do you think these changes will last?' included:

'This is my second year.'

'Probably quite a while. I would say for the foreseeable future.'

'2016–2018.'

'From a year and half ago I did not have any contact with [the service] ... So far I still have my own independence. And the strength they gave still has positive outcomes.'

'Have already been in the house for a year. And just signed another year lease with them. People that originally owned the house have sold it. Not sure what the intentions of the new owners are.'

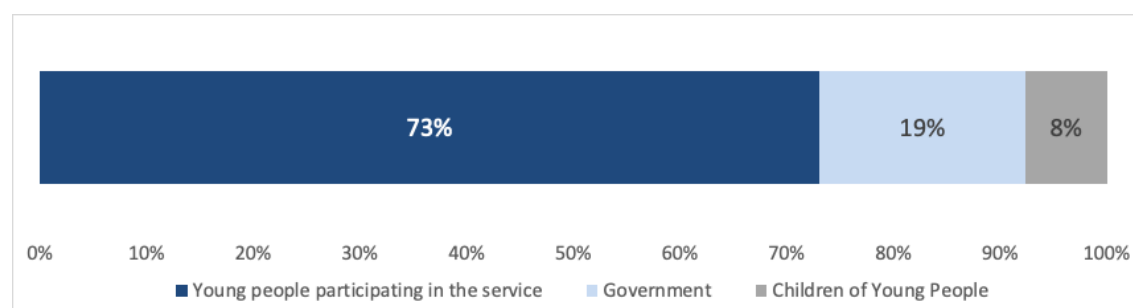
Young people

On this basis, two years has been used as the base case for the SROI. However, it is acknowledged this will vary greatly depending on individual circumstances. If housing and other outcomes flowing from housing last two and a half years, the SROI return increases to \$3.60 for each dollar invested. Conversely, if the housing and other outcomes last only one year, the SROI return falls to \$2.20 for each dollar invested. **Findings in this range show that even if the length of time that outcomes last is reduced by half, there is still a positive social return on investment.**

8.4 Who receives the value?

The SROI analysis focused on valuing outcomes for three material stakeholder groups: Young people (First Response clients); children of young people receiving First Response services; and government. Figure 13 shows that **young people receive the most value from First Response, experiencing 73 per cent of the total social value**, followed by government (19%) and the children of young people (8%).

Figure 13: Percentage of value by stakeholder group



Value for young people

The outcomes for young people who received First Response services are suggested to flow from developing a trusting relationship with First Response staff that enabled them to create an individualised support plan and access safe accommodation at the First Response refuge or elsewhere.

Many young people stated that the 'best things' about Hope Street were 'help and support' (53%) and 'staff/workers' (55%). As one young person stated at interview:

'[Staff] are understanding about your situation, they help out the best they can and don't muck around.'

Young person

Young people were then linked to a range of services to meet their individual needs. Upon exiting the service, **63 per cent of young people had an improved housing situation.** Others commenced or were encouraged to stay in education or employment. Many young people experienced improved mental or physical health outcomes including a small number with reduced suicidality or reduced risk of substance use problems.

In interviews young people stated that their most valuable outcome was housing.

'[Without First Response] we probably will be homeless for considerably longer amount of time.'

Young person

Responses to the question 'What is the most important change to you?' included:

'Getting a house. Opportunity to get house on my own.'

'Probably the support to get my own rental. Because I could not have that before. With their support I could have that.'

'Being able to have my own space. My sibling and I were in a share house. And I was able to have my own house for my own family.'

Young people

The value of outcomes for young people who received First Response services are summarised in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Value of outcomes for young people

OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE	VALUE (\$)	% OF VALUE
Young people have appropriate, safe housing	3,921,252	31.6%
Young people have increased employment opportunities	2,866,865	23.1%
Young people have improved mental health	2,496,162	20.1%
Young people have increased educational outcomes	1,022,692	8.2%
Young people have improved physical health	861,379	6.9%
Young people have improved physical safety at refuge	624,215	5.0%
Young people have increased financial resilience	515,984	4.2%
Young people have improved family relationships	57,051	0.5%
Young people have improved parenting confidence	24,638	0.2%
Young people have improved peer/community relationships	13,981	0.1%
TOTAL	12,404,217	100%

Value for children of young people

Value for the children of young people flowed from increased physical safety and from their parents gaining improved parenting confidence and skills. While quantitative data regarding this outcome was collated by First Response staff, the interviews provided qualitative evidence that these outcomes are occurring. When asked what would have happened without First Response, young people responded:

'I am not sure; I might be alone with my children on the street.'

'I could not imagine. I was eight months pregnant, they delivered what I needed.'

Young people

Outcomes for children of young people are summarised in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Value of outcomes for children of young people

OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN OF YOUNG PEOPLE	VALUE (\$)	% OF VALUE
Children have improved physical safety	932,107	72%
Children have improved relationship with parents	363,760	28%
TOTAL	1,295,867	100%

Value for government

State and federal governments primarily accrue value due to the reduced costs of youth homelessness. Prior research²⁵ has identified these costs as healthcare costs, including the costs of mental and physical health services, and justice service usage costs. In addition, when young people gain employment that they would not otherwise have had, the government has reduced welfare costs and receives an increase in income taxes.

Outcomes for government are summarised in Table 10 below. In the data collected there was not enough evidence for reduced justice system costs and so this has not been included.

Table 10: Value of outcomes for government

OUTCOMES FOR GOVERNMENT	VALUE (\$)	% OF VALUE
Reduced healthcare costs	2,812,277	86%
Reduced welfare costs	356,877	11%
Increased taxes	106,228	3%
TOTAL	3,275,382	100%

9 Conclusion

This evaluation has examined the development of the First Response Youth Service and its first three years of operation. The evaluation gathered strong input from many stakeholders involved with the service, including young people, staff, managers, service delivery partners, community partners, funders and others. The evaluation also undertook detailed analysis of quantitative and documentary data.

Overall, evaluation findings are strongly positive for the service. First Response is operating consistently with currently accepted best practice in delivery of services to vulnerable young people, using frameworks including trauma informed care, young person-centred approaches, and strengths- and solution-focused approaches. The service demonstrates **innovative or leading practice** in the close integration between refuge and mobile outreach service; provision of specific facilities and support for young families; engagement and early intervention in schools and other settings; independent living skills development; and community engagement and capacity building.

The First Response refuge is a modern purpose-built facility, and its design was shaped by extensive consultation and research. Unsurprisingly, the significant investment of time, money and thought in developing the refuge has resulted in a **high quality, state-of-the-art refuge environment**. Young people and staff are generally very positive about the facility design. It has provided a safe and positive living environment for clients, is sensitive to trauma, and supports effective service delivery.

A standout feature of First Response service development was its **astute engagement of community and strategic supporters**. Hope Street's systematic approach to this included research and planning, awareness raising and consultation, and partnership building. This built high levels of community support and resulted in access to vital funding and in-kind resources. The First Response service also demonstrates a **high standard of service provision**. Notable strengths include safe, positive and inclusive support experiences for young people; effective service delivery processes with a focus on accessibility, holistic case management and follow-up; and a safe and well-supported practice environment for staff members.

Sound service implementation has enabled the achievement of **positive outcomes for the majority of First Response clients**. Over 60% of clients improved their housing situation; over 70% improved their physical and/or mental health; around half were assisted to access additional income, financial assistance or entitlements, and a sizeable minority were assisted to engage in education, employment or training. Almost all clients were assisted to access additional services and supports. SROI analysis demonstrates an estimated **investment to benefit ratio of \$1.00 : \$3.14** (range \$3.60 - \$2.20). The costs associated with the service are substantially outweighed by benefits to young people, their children, and government.

Like any complex new service initiative, First Response has experienced its share of **challenges and has areas for improvement**. Contextual challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic, constrained service resourcing and lack of affordable housing affect First Response along with all other homelessness services. Areas for further attention include continuing to upskill staff, managing challenges with staff recruitment and turnover, and the ongoing work of strengthening and maintaining service delivery partnerships. Minor suggestions were also provided for improvements to the refuge buildings.

In summary, Hope Street and its partners are to be commended on the development and implementation of an accessible, evidence-based, high quality youth homelessness response in Melton. With moderate investment, the First Response service is achieving strong positive outcomes for young people at risk.

Endnotes

- ¹ Rogers, N., Shafaei, A. & Planigale, M. 2021. *Hope Street Youth and Family Services. Evaluation of First Response Service: Literature Review*. Melbourne: Lirata Consulting.
- ² Rogers, N., Goldzieher, M., Planigale, M. & Shafaei, A. 2022. *Hope Street Youth & Family Services. Evaluation of First Response Youth Service: Brief Findings Report – Client Outcomes*. Melbourne: Lirata Consulting.
- ³ For further discussion, refer to Literature Review (Rogers, Shafaei & Planigale 2021).
- ⁴ Gaetz, S. 2017. *THIS Is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
- ⁵ A ha-ha wall is a recessed design element that creates a vertical barrier on one side to enhance security, while preserving an uninterrupted view of the area beyond from the other side.
- ⁶ Kania, J. & Kramer, M. 2011. “Collective Impact.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* Winter 2011: 36–41.
- ⁷ The comparison between AIHW and First Response data involves a three-way comparison between the following datasets:
 - a) **First Response** dataset, sourced from SHIP and SRS database records held by Hope Street for the First Response Refuge and the First Response Mobile Outreach service (n = 484 individuals over three financial years)
 - b) **AIHW Victoria** dataset, sourced from the AIHW’s publicly available datacubes, and covering the entire SHS sector in Victoria (n = 41,838 individuals over three financial years)
 - c) **AIHW Western Suburbs** dataset, sourced from a custom AIHW data request, and covering 47 agencies in the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Melton, Brimbank, Wyndham and/or Maribyrnong in Melbourne’s Western Suburbs, with services broadly similar to those of the First Response service (n = 3,083 individuals over three years).

Indicators compared were: Housing first reported vs. Housing last reported; Homelessness status first reported vs. Housing last reported; Labour Force status first reported vs. Labour Force status last reported; and Education or training enrolment first reported vs. Education or training enrolment last reported. Filters applied to all datasets included: Exclude individuals aged less than 15, or those aged 25 or older; exclude data from states and territories other than Victoria; exclude individuals without Closed Support. Additional filters applied to the AIHW Western suburbs dataset included: Exclude data from agencies other than the 47 nominated agencies; Exclude data from individuals whose location the week before they presented to the agency at the first support period of the financial year was NOT in one of LGAs of Melton, Brimbank, Wyndham or Maribyrnong.

Findings from the AIHW comparison should be interpreted with caution because the two AIHW datasets include data from a wider range of service types and target cohorts than the First Response service; population sizes for the First Response and AIHW datasets are very different; and the AIHW Victoria dataset also has a substantially higher proportion of unknown/invalid data values than the other two datasets, adding some uncertainty to findings from that dataset. For more detail refer to supplementary working paper: Planigale, M. 2022. *Comparison of outcomes for young people accessing the First Response Youth Service with those accessing the broader Victorian Specialist Homelessness Service Sector*. Melbourne: Lirata Consulting.

Findings relating to the AIHW comparison are not comparable to findings from the Excel Outcomes Tool as they are based on a different dataset and different indicators.

- ⁸ Rogers, N., Goldzieher, M., Planigale, M. & Shafaei, A. 2022. *Hope Street Youth & Family Services. Evaluation of First Response Youth Service: Brief Findings Report – Client Outcomes*. Melbourne: Lirata Consulting.

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- ⁹ For purposes of this analysis, 'safe and stable housing' also includes safe and stable interim accommodation. The positive outcomes group includes those who moved into a new accommodation setting that was safe and stable, and also those who remained in the same accommodation setting and for whom issues of unsuitability and instability were mitigated.
- ¹⁰ Young people in Victoria face a range of barriers in establishing themselves in safe and stable housing, including: low income and an absence of savings (especially for those reliant on Centrelink payments); inability to sign leases (for those aged under 18); discrimination in the housing market; histories of trauma and abuse, family breakdown, family violence, and substance use and/or mental health problems; and an absence of social networks that offer resources that could be used to access and maintain housing. Young care leavers face heightened barriers and may be mistrustful of care and other welfare systems. These factors should be kept in mind when assessing the level of success in housing outcomes enabled by the First Response service.
- ¹¹ For the homelessness risk analysis, those who were homeless were considered to be in the highest risk bracket. Others were rated as having high, medium or low risk of homelessness. **High risk:** There are issues present (for example, substantial rental arrears, impending eviction, family conflict, loss of income, mental health crisis) that are actively impacting the person and likely to cause them to become homeless within the next 3 months; options to respond to these issues are limited and may not be successful. **Medium risk:** There are issues present which could lead to the person becoming homeless in the next 12 months, however the person is not currently in crisis and there are options available which could assist to mitigate these issues. **Low risk:** There are no known issues that make it likely that the person will become homeless in the next 12 months; if there are issues present, they are well managed and stable.
- ¹² When interpreting EET results, it's important to remember that depending on their personal situation, education and employment goals may not be applicable in the short term for all young people. For example, a young person who is employed may not seek to be engaged in education also; a young person with health issues may need to focus on managing those; a young parent may be focused on care for their children rather than EET. In addition, EET outcomes often take time to occur. Comments from First Response staff indicate that for some young people, the support period duration was too short to allow meaningful EET outcomes to be achieved. In some cases, service engagement provided encouragement or resolved other issues, which may set the scene for EET outcomes down the track. With these considerations in mind, the evaluation team's view is that the EET outcomes reported by the service are reasonable.
- ¹³ Additional income or entitlements means income, entitlements or material aid that a client was not previously receiving, or is now receiving to a larger extent than previously.
- ¹⁴ Analysis was based on data on the types of income and entitlements received prior to entry and at latest data point. Dollar figures for client income were not available. 8% (n=10) of clients remained on no income at latest data point.
- ¹⁵ That data suggests that for around one in ten clients, the First Response service played a major role in improving young people's connection to family; for another four in ten the service provided a secondary contribution through its general support work. For some young people re-connection with family was inappropriate; others had no immediate family. Supplementary data showed that 70% of clients (n=73) had been assisted to reduce or better manage conflict in key relationships.
- ¹⁶ The most common service types that young people were assisted to engage with were housing and homelessness services (89% of clients), employment services (11%), mental health services (8%), and family or parenting services (5%). Some young people already had strongly established connections to other services and the community, while others were not yet ready to address other needs and improve social connections due to presenting trauma and other recent difficult life experiences.
- ¹⁷ For the purposes of this analysis, involvement with the criminal justice system refers to involvement as an actual or suspected offender, person accused of or charged with a crime (whether found guilty or not), or person subjected to other police/corrective action. It does not refer to involvement with the criminal justice system as a victim of crime. At the time of first entry to the First Response service, 12 young people were known to have current CJS involvement. 1 young person was rated as having an extensive history of involvement with the CJS; 7 were rated as having a moderate history; and 6 were rated as having minimal or no prior history of CJS involvement.

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- ¹⁸ Risk of CJS involvement is linked to each young person's life circumstances including living arrangements and presence or absence in their life of supportive family members. For some young people, support period duration was too short to reliably observe change on this measure.
- ¹⁹ While most young people were supported to address their health and wellbeing needs, there are a range of reasons that others did not show improvements in these areas. First Response staff use motivational interviewing to build client capacity for change, however it is acknowledged that some young people are not yet ready to address their health needs. For these clients, the process of engagement with First Response represents an initial opportunity to begin reflecting on the impacts of things like problematic substance use. Other young people presenting to the service may have been in a later stage of change and have already made substantial behaviour changes related to their physical and mental health.
- ²⁰ Personal safety risk here includes level of vulnerability to violence, coercion, abuse or exploitation by others, and includes family violence risk.
- ²¹ Problematic substance use includes alcohol as well as other drug use. Increased risk may include increased frequency of substance use, increased quantities consumed, more risky behaviour such as sharing equipment, or more severe effects on the person's health or life.
- ²² Assessment of suicidality considered suicidal ideation, plan or attempt. Staff rated this indicator but young people were not asked about it as part of the evaluation.
- ²³ For some young parents, improvements in parenting skills or children's safety were not observed as they already had strong skills and personal safety for their children was already established. Some others were currently experiencing acute health and other needs, or had previously traumatic experiences which reduced their capacity to address these issues at the time of their engagement with the First Response service.
- ²⁴ Capital costs are not included in line with SROI Standards as we are not including asset resale values. Including these capital costs would skew the SROI ratio by inflating the investment side of the equation.
- ²⁵ Mackenzie, D., Flatau, P., Steen, A. & Thielking, M. 2016. *The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia: Research Briefing*. Melbourne: Swinburne Institute for Social Research.

