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Services to Young Offenders

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

In August 2000, the State Government introduced its Juvenile Justice Reform Strategy through the policy document—*A Balanced Approach to Juvenile Justice in Victoria*. The aims of the strategy were to:

- divert young offenders from entering the youth justice system
- better rehabilitate high-risk young offenders
- reduce the likelihood of reoffending among those released from custody, through better pre-release transition and post-release support programs.

Young offenders, aged 10 to 20 years, apprehended in Victoria, can be diverted from custody through various diversion programs and services and community corrections orders administered by youth justice units. Victoria operates a unique ‘dual track’ custodial sentencing system, where young people aged 18 to 20 who commit an offence that warrants a custodial sentence may avoid time in an adult prison by serving a sentence in a youth justice centre. Young offenders placed on community-based orders or in custodial supervision are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Human Services (DHS). Those who enter the adult correctional system are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Justice (DoJ).

DHS and DoJ provide a range of rehabilitation programs for young offenders in custody and on community-based orders. DHS also funds non-government providers to deliver a range of transitional and intensive post-release support services for young offenders who return to the community. These services include:

- information and referral
- employment assistance, education and training placements
- accommodation services
- family support.

DoJ, through the Magistrates’ Court of Victoria (MCV), delivers a range of court-based diversion programs aimed at early intervention and breaking the cycle of reoffending for young and adult offenders. These programs include the Drug Court, Court Referral and Evaluation for Drug Intervention and Treatment/Bail Support Program, the Court Integrated Services Program and the Criminal Justice Diversion Program (CJDP).

The focus of this audit was to determine the extent to which the diversion and rehabilitative services provided by DHS and MCV to young offenders:

- maximised diversion from the criminal justice system

- reduced the risk of reoffending
- improved rehabilitation and reintegration into the community.

The scope of the audit was limited to a selected range of services focusing on the younger age groups and those considered most likely to benefit from specialist interventions. The audit covered services to young offenders provided by:

- DHS through youth justice units and youth justice custodial centres and the Adult Court Advice and Support Service (ACAS)
- MCV through CJDP and the Neighbourhood Justice Centre (NJC).

1.2 Findings

Service planning

At the time of the Juvenile Justice Reform Strategy's introduction, over seven years ago, the State Government indicated that the achievements of the strategy would be evaluated and reported to the community. While selected data is available to suggest that some of the reforms have been effective, and a range of independent reviews and evaluations have been conducted, the strategy has not been evaluated and reported to the Parliament and the community.

The audit identified areas for improvement in the planning of services for young offenders including the development of:

- outcome measures and targets linked to key youth justice objectives
- performance measures and targets that link to key strategic and operational activities and initiatives for juvenile justice.

In recognition of this, DHS has recently commissioned research through the Australian Institute of Criminology and established a number of projects to develop more suitable measures at both a local and national level.

A more whole-of-government approach should be developed to planning youth justice services.

In relation to MCV, the court's planning documents need to clearly describe the diversion services and initiatives that aim to prevent young offenders from progressing through the justice system.

Service coordination

The audit identified some positive examples of coordination in youth justice services. For example, the location of a range of government services at NJC in Collingwood facilitates service coordination and the timely referral of young offenders to treatment and counselling services.

DHS has well developed processes to coordinate services for young offenders through:

- agreements and protocols between DHS program areas and other government agencies involved in the provision of youth justice services
- contracted community-based service providers.

Needs identification

The identification of young offenders' needs is largely effective. However, in the absence of criteria to assess the suitability of offenders to participate in CJDP, there is a risk of inconsistency in the identification of suitable CJDP candidates. The development of such criteria for Victoria Police would reduce the potential inconsistencies in determining the eligibility of offenders to participate in CJDP.

Case management and service delivery

Youth justice units and youth justice custodial centres use appropriate case management practices to: establish clear aims and

objectives for young offenders; match the level of interventions with the assessed level of risk; meet the needs of Indigenous offenders through Koori justice programs; support the reintegration of young offenders into the community.

Diversion coordinators refer offenders to other government service providers co-located at NJC for a needs assessment, referral services and interventions required to address their identified risks and needs.

Information systems

The Client Relationship Information System (CRIS) is a critical system for youth justice. The system does not currently provide sufficient analytical data to management on the effectiveness of interventions and services in rehabilitating young offenders and reducing rates of reoffending. DHS is currently improving the functionality of CRIS to enable greater data interrogation and more flexible and tailored management reporting. These improvements should focus on aligning planned interventions and services with the achievement of assessed outcomes for young offenders and for the youth justice program as a whole.

A whole-of-government approach should be adopted for data collection and analysis to support shared needs identification, planning and coordination of youth justice services.

Efficiency and effectiveness

It is difficult for Parliament and the community to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of services supporting the rehabilitation of young offenders and reducing reoffending, because of the limitations of outcome and performance measures.

The costs and resource utilisation for CJDP are managed within a simple service delivery model with an adequate level of information and control. However, the information does not focus on the efficiency of service delivery.

DHS has not conducted periodic research to assess changes in the rate of youth reoffending over time. Therefore, audit cannot provide any assurance as to whether the Juvenile Justice Reform Strategy has effectively reduced the likelihood of reoffending.

Given that reducing youth reoffending and improving rehabilitation are central objectives of the Juvenile Justice Reform Strategy announced in August 2000, addressing the limited information available on the achievement of these objectives should be a priority.

Recognising the need to measure outcomes achieved by individual youth justice programs, DHS recently commissioned the Australian Institute of Criminology to advise on appropriate outcome-based measures for the youth justice system.

We analysed DHS data and a subset of performance data for 10 to 17-year-old offenders. Consistent with the objectives of the Juvenile Justice Reform Strategy, we found a reduction in the number of young offenders serving custodial sentences in Victoria between 2000–01 and 2007–08. They are being diverted from progression into the youth justice systems. The data also show that access to pre-release, transition and post-release support programs has increased.

The MCV and DoJ need to embed outcome-based performance measurement to assess reoffending rates, the diversion of offenders from the justice system and the extent to which behaviours of offenders are modified.

Service improvement

There is a service improvement culture within youth justice services that is evident through the implementation of DHS's Service Excellence Framework. Service improvement mechanisms at youth justice custodial centres included the incorporation of young offenders and custodial staff input into the quality review process. Nevertheless, youth justice units and ACAS lack a structured approach to incorporating client feedback into continuous improvement processes.

Feedback from offenders and victims is obtained for CJDP. However, the information gained is not being used for continuous quality improvement in the delivery of the program.

The audit found that a number of independent reviews and program evaluations commissioned by DHS have led to significant service improvements. For example, reviews into security and operational practices have reduced the number of escapes from custodial centres and the Rehabilitation Review resulted in the implementation of the Victorian Offender Needs Indicator for Youth. DHS also has a number of current reviews underway into youth justice service delivery, focusing on service development and improving service delivery options. It is important that these reviews inform future innovation and service improvement in the system.

1.3 Conclusion

Among the staff and agencies providing youth justice services, this audit identified a high level of commitment and effort toward achieving the Victorian Government's Juvenile Justice Reform Strategy goals. The strategy itself has clearly articulated aims, objectives and outcomes for young offenders, which underpin statewide planning for youth justice units and youth justice custodial centres.

In the areas of the youth justice system we examined, and consistent with the aims of the strategy, there are indications of success, including the diversion of young offenders from custodial sentences, demonstrated good practice with respect to needs identification, case management and the delivery of rehabilitation programs, and increased access to pre-release, transition and post-release programs.

Reducing youth reoffending and effectively rehabilitating the behaviour of young offenders are central objectives of the strategy, however DHS could not conclusively demonstrate that these goals were being achieved. Critically, gaps in performance and outcomes measurement are impairing the ability of Parliament and the community to monitor the youth justice system as a whole.

Although DHS has undertaken a range of independent reviews and program evaluations, there needs to be an improved focus on the implementation of data collection systems and performance measurement to establish the effectiveness of these services in achieving improved outcomes and the government's youth justice objectives.

While the delivery of CJDP is well managed, MCV was unable to demonstrate its effectiveness in diverting young people from reoffending. While CJDP is provided to all eligible offenders, young offenders constitute 15 to 20 per cent of all participants. Performance measures specifically relating to this group should be developed.

Multiple government and non-government agencies are involved in the delivery of youth justice services. Developing a more whole-of-government or 'joined up' approach to planning, coordination, data collection and performance measurement in Victoria's youth justice system needs to be a priority for all agencies in the system.

1.4 Recommendations

Service planning

- DHS should review the Juvenile Justice Reform Strategy to determine its relevance and the extent to which its objectives and outcomes have been achieved (Recommendation 3.1).

Needs identification

- MCV should provide Victoria Police with clear criteria to determine the eligibility and suitability of offenders to participate in CJDP (**Recommendation 5.1**).

Integrated case management and service delivery

Information systems

- DHS should enhance the management reporting capability of CRIS to identify:

- trends in the needs of young offenders
- the effectiveness of interventions and services in meeting the assessed needs of young offenders and modifying their behaviour
- the extent to which interventions and services contribute to the rehabilitation of young offenders and reduced recidivism (**Recommendation 7.1**).
- DHS, in conjunction with other State Government departments and agencies involved in the delivery of youth justice services, should develop a whole-of-government approach to data collection and analysis to support shared planning and service development. This should be complemented by arrangements to support effective information sharing within and across agencies (**Recommendation 7.2**).

Cost, efficiency and effectiveness

- DHS should:
- ensure that outcome measures being developed by the Australian Institute of Criminology adequately assess the effectiveness of youth justice programs and services in reducing reoffending and improving rehabilitation
- assess the feasibility of using the Victorian Offender Needs Indicator for Youth to enable the effectiveness of youth justice programs, services and interventions aimed at rehabilitating young offenders to be measured (**Recommendation 8.2**).
- MCV and DoJ should measure and report the number of young offenders accessing CJDP, the nature of service and intervention referrals that are made, and the number of diversion plans that are successfully completed (**Recommendation 8.3**).
- MCV should develop and implement outcome-based performance measures that assess the effectiveness of CJDP in:
- achieving a sustained rate of reduction in reoffending and diversion of offenders from progressing through the justice system
- rehabilitating offenders through referral to services and interventions that are aimed at changing their offending behaviours (**Recommendation 8.4**).

Service improvement

- DHS should implement a structured client feedback mechanism for youth justice units and ACAS that provides young offenders with the opportunity to provide input into the delivery of community-based services and supervision (**Recommendation 9.1**).
- DHS should develop its CRIS to systematically collect and analyse data demonstrating the extent to which system-wide initiatives are improving responsiveness in service delivery and the achievement of client, program and system outcomes (**Recommendation 9.2**).
- MCV should analyse information received on CJDP questionnaires, and report key findings (**Recommendation 9.3**).

RESPONSE provided by the Secretary, Department of Human Services

The department welcomes the report, as it reinforces the fundamental direction and operation of Victoria's youth justice system, and will assist in fine tuning the future direction and performance of the system. The recommendations in the report are generally supported by the department and careful consideration has been given to the potential implications arising from these recommendations.

General comments and detailed responses to the recommendations provided by the Secretary are located at Appendix A of the Report.

RESPONSE provided by the Acting Secretary, Department of Justice

The department welcomes the report and supports in principle its recommendations. The Secretary notes that some of the recommendations will need to be thoroughly considered before the department can commit to implementing them as they may have resource implications and will require collaboration with Victoria Police.

General comments and detailed responses to the recommendations provided by the Secretary are located at Appendix

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[Appendix A. Agency responses](#)

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