

**Submission
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CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

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About ACYP

The Advocate for Children and Young People is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. The Office of the Advocate for Children's and Young People (ACYP) advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare, well-being and voice of all children and young people aged 0-24 years, with a focus on the needs of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014* (NSW), our functions include:

- making recommendations to Parliament, and Government and non-Government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services that affect children and young people;
- promoting children and young people's participation in activities and decision-making about issues that affect their lives;
- conducting research into children's issues and monitoring children's well-being;
- holding inquiries into important issues relating to children and young people;
- providing information to help children and young people; and
- preparing, in consultation with the Minister responsible for youth, a three-year, whole-of-government Strategic Plan for Children and Young People (Plan). The inaugural Plan was launched in July 2016.

In exercising functions under this Act the Advocate must do the following:

- focus on systemic issues affecting children and young people,
- give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people,
- consult with children and young people from a broad range of backgrounds and age groups throughout the State,
- work co-operatively with other organisations that provide services to or represent the interests of children and young people,
work co-operatively with the Council.

Of relevance to this inquiry, it is notable that the work of ACYP does not extend to service delivery, case management and/or complaint management.

Further information about ACYP's work can be found at: www.acyp.nsw.gov.au.

Introduction

ACYP welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry into the Child Protection and Social Services System. Over the past six years, ACYP has consulted with 35,000 children and young people in NSW.

In accordance with our Act, the Advocate has a responsibility to 'give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people.' Accordingly, many of the children and young people we speak to have a complex history of Out of Home Care, involvement with the criminal justice system, homelessness, discrimination and a variety of other challenges that have required them to be in contact with government and social services. In order to facilitate this function, the Advocate often undertakes targeted consultation with cohorts that society may consider 'vulnerable.' These cohorts may include but are not limited to; children and young people living in low socio-economic communities, children and young people in or with lived experience of OOHC, children and young people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homeless, children and young people within the juvenile justice system and Aboriginal children and young people.

In reality, the children and young people we have consulted with do not use the term vulnerable, potentially because it approaches the individual from a deficit model of practice and begins with them being disempowered. In our experience, they prefer the term 'doing it tough' or 'socially excluded', as they are often 'ordinary' children and young people that find themselves living with extraordinary challenges which is often only exasperated by their multiple disadvantage and experience.

Far too often, when the service system comes to discuss how to engage with children and young people who are socially excluded, they are labelled by the terms with which they entered the system a child in out of home care, a child in juvenile justice or a child who is homeless. This represents a systemic and cultural failure to recognise the individual's we are committed to serve, are just that; individual who have their own story, their own strengths and most importantly their own individual rights and voice. These consultations have reinforced the principle that it is critical children and young people are at the centre of any inquiry or reforms. Legislative, policy or practice review must not be undertaken unless they are informed by the experiences and views of the children and young people whose lives will be impacted by these changes.

From the offset, ACYP wishes to acknowledge the inquiries and examinations of this important topic that have come before, most recently:

- Family is Culture
- TFM Audit Report
- Keep Them Safe, Safe Home for Life and Tune Review

The critical importance of the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, and the profound and lasting impact that adverse childhood experiences can have on an individual throughout their lifetime, is well documented and will not be repeated/reiterated here.

ACYP supports previous recommendations that have:

- Encouraged further investment, independent oversight and child centred focus in all decision making
- Supports Aboriginal owned and controlled organisations in service delivery, and defers the submissions of these organisations in matters surrounding service delivery to Aboriginal children, young people, their families and communities...
- Advocated for greater funding and independent management/ oversight of services (TFM audit report)

These inquiries and reports have made a significant contribution to the conversation, however they have also identified some areas of improvement. It is these opportunities for improvement that ACYP wishes to move forward by bringing the voices and experiences of children and young people into a system redesign, by utilising existing data sets and by identifying best practice to improve the lives of our states most vulnerable.

Recommendations

1. In accordance with the recent announcement by the Victorian Government, ACYP recommends extending the age of leaving OOHC to 21. Young people should be provided with a guaranteed housing allowance, case worker and other financial support until that age.
2. Wherever possible, ACYP recommends that OOHC services for Aboriginal Children and Young People be conducted by Aboriginal Owned and Controlled Organisations.
3. Empower Aboriginal communities to have self-determination over child protection and safety matters.
4. That all OOHC and social services workers are provided with training in child rights and respectful engagement with children and young people.
5. That all workers within the OOHC and social services sector are trained in trauma informed care, or where not available are provided with resources to refer individuals to receive appropriate psychosocial supports.
6. In protection matters before the Children's Court, the views of children and young people are recorded in their own words and provided to the magistrate. An example of an existing tool that could be utilised to facilitate is the 'One - Mind of My Own' App created by Sixteen25.
7. That a toll-free number and text line is established for children and young people seeking information to help them navigate the social services and Government service system, connect with supports and ask questions about their rights. ACYP commissioned EY to do a cost-benefit analysis of this proposal. Should the Committee be interested in that, we would be happy to share it.
8. That the Department of Education and the Department of Communities and Justice, further collaborate to ensure that children and young people in OOHC are identified with appropriate school-based supports and those who have been disengaged from school are referred to alternatives to mainstream education.
9. That life skills programs, including driver's licensing programs are resourced to provide comprehensive end-to-end support for children and young people in the OOHC care and social services system.
10. That exit interviews are introduced to examine the ongoing support needs of children and young people leaving care.
11. That a child-centred advocacy role is trialled to provide specialist support to children and young people who are involved in the child protection system.
12. ACYP recommends greater service provision and staff training around working with specific cohorts, including Aboriginal, LGBTQIA+ and CALD.
13. Creation of a website specifically for young people in OOHC which listed rights and entitlements, any relevant policies or procedures, where to go for support and information, and opportunities in a single, easy to access location
14. Children and young people should be allocated an advocate that has ongoing responsibility to represent the preferences of the child or young person and monitor the suitability of their placement.

ACWA Out of Home Care Consultation

In order to ensure we accurately reflect a diverse range of views and experiences when undertaking our targeted consultations, ACYP often partners with key organisations within our specific cohort group. In order to facilitate consultations with those who have experience of the OOHC and social services system, ACYP participated in the 2018 ACWA Conference.

Background

On 21 August 2018 as part of the Association of Children's Welfare Conference 2018, ACYP held a one day conference for young people with experiences of living in out of home care (OOHC) and interacting with the social services system. Young people came together from across NSW to share their experiences of being in care, how the service system has both met and not met their needs, and where they would like to see improvements in the system.

Methodology

Forty young people with a care experiences were recruited through stakeholder networks from both metropolitan and regional areas within NSW. The definition of what constituted a care experience was intentionally broad and included experiences in kinship care, foster care, and residential care programs.

The young people ranged in age from 14 years – 25 years, with 20 young people under 18 years and 20 young people 18 years and over. There were 25 young women and 15 young men. The group was evenly split between young people living in the metropolitan area and those living in regional areas.

Young people were divided into five tables based on their age. These became their working groups. Four consultation sessions were run throughout the day. Young people worked on the open-ended questions listed below. Each table was given time to discuss and answer the question and then feedback to the larger group.

- What's working well for young people in OOHC?
- What's not working well for young people in OOHC?
- What do you think should be the priorities for young people in OOHC?
- What do young people need when leaving OOHC and transitioning into independent living?
- What can workers do more of to support young people in OOHC?
- What makes a good caseworker?

At the end of the day a summary of the answers to each of the questions was presented back to the main conference by two young people.

What's working well for young people in OOHC?

The young people described a range of different things that were working within the care system.

Connection to carers and case workers

The quality of connection to both carers and caseworkers had a significant impact on a young person's experience of being in care. Young people said support from caseworkers throughout the time spent in care was very important. This included from the time they were first taken into care,

being placed somewhere they felt safe with genuine, compassionate carers through to being involved in the development of leaving care plans and having access to material and financial support to transition into independent living.

“Like my case manager, she will go out of her way after hours to text me if I have a problem and that shows me a lot of respect because she’s just not going on the fact that it’s her job, she absolutely cares.”

Voice and participation in decision making

Young people said that having a voice and being part of the decisions that were made about them was another very important factor that positively influenced their care experience. They appreciated workers and carers who advocated on their behalf to ensure this happened.

For organisations that provide children, young people and their families with individual or case management services it is critical that their voices are heard. Children and young people tell us that they often feel they are not being heard or listened to which made them feel disrespected and invisible. Children and young people, particularly those with complex needs that may need support and encouragement to speak up, tell us they appreciate when effort is made to facilitate their participation in discussions and decision making. They ask for a better process of clarification, support and advocacy when important decisions are being made that will dramatically impact their lives, such as interventions by case workers, Police or Courts.

It is also important that children and young people are involved in decision making at an organisational level where those organisations make decisions that directly or indirectly impact the lives of children and young people. Organisations, such as out of home care providers, can harness a variety of different methods to ensure they hear the voices of the children and young people that are impacted by their decision making. These include one-off consultations, sitting on boards or committees, participating in youth councils or advisory groups, recruiting staff and participating in and undertaking research.

ACYP welcomes enquiries from the Committee or interested organisations about how to better facilitate the voice of children and young people in decision making in the NSW children protection and social services systems.

Provision of holistic supports and services

Young people also felt that funding and resources allocated to assist young people in care to access things such as educational, psychological, and recreational opportunities to enhance their quality of life, promote healing, and support them to achieve their potential, were another aspect of the care system that was working well.

Connection to family and culture

Lastly young people valued being supported in maintaining connections to family members including siblings and extended family, peers, and culture regardless of where or with whom who they were placed. Connection to culture and extended family was especially important to young Aboriginal people in the care system.

What's not working well for young people in OOHC?

Unstable placements and turn-over of caseworkers

One of the recurring themes that young people spoke about that was not working was the issue of young people having multiple placements and multiple caseworkers throughout their time in care. They spoke about the emotional distress and powerlessness they felt as a result of this situation. The frequent turnover of staff in residential care and casework services caused difficulties for the young people in building trust and forming emotional connections with supportive adults. Rebuilding this trust and emotional connection was incredibly important, especially for those children and young people who had entered the OOHC system due to a violent or disruptive home life, where this trust and emotional connection may have been significantly eroded or altogether absent.

Genuine and respectful relationships between workers, carers and children and young people

The way workers treated young people was another area that concerned young people. They felt more resourcing should be directed toward training workers about the specific needs of children and young people in care. Many young people did not feel they were treated respectfully by workers. They described respectful treatment as when workers: listened to their views; were interested in them as a person and saw them as more than 'just a file'; demonstrated compassion and care through following up things they had said they would do and checking in regularly to see how they were going; gave them information about what was happening and including them in decisions; and were honest and transparent about what they could and could not do for the young person. This last point was highlighted by a number of young people who talked about how let down they felt by workers who they thought had not been truthful with them and who had made promises that they could not keep.

"They shouldn't give false hope or make nice of the truth, just to spare you, you know, how you might feel about the truth. The lies and loss of trust that us young people experience is worse than hearing the truth sometimes"

Provision of information

Young people did not feel they were provided with enough information about the rights and entitlements of young people in OOHC or where to go if they wanted to find more information. Having access to personal files and information was mentioned several times as being important in helping young people understand their identity and personal histories.

"People in care have trouble knowing who they are because they are not told why they are in care"

Young people believed that receiving accurate and reliable information about what was going on was strongly linked to being able to have a say in the decisions being made about them. They did not feel there were enough opportunities to include young people's voice in decision making.

Privacy and confidentiality

Some young people spoke about the need for better strategies for maintaining confidentiality about being in OOHC, especially in a school context. This included explicit things such as statements made by caseworkers in public about their "foster parent" or "DOCS caseworker" as well as in more subtle ways such as visiting a young person at school and wearing a uniform or name tag identifying their organisation.

Transition from OOHC

The group agreed that turning 18 and the transition from care to independent living had the potential to be a time of upheaval and distress. A number of young people felt leaving care plans were developed at the last minute and that they had limited input into what was included in them. They felt this process should be much smoother and inclusive, and begin long before they turned 18. They said support should extend beyond 18 as many felt anxious about who they could turn to once they left care. They did not feel confident about receiving adequate financial assistance or being supported to access affordable, long-term housing and therefore felt a great deal of insecurity about their future.

Provision of specialist services

The final point they made was that they did not think there was enough specialised support for young people with specific needs such as young people with disabilities, young Aboriginal people, and young LGBTQIA+ young people. There needed to be more workers with expertise in these areas and who came from similar backgrounds to better understand the young people needs.

What are the priorities for young people in OOHC?

The group had clear views about what they felt should be the priorities for young people in OOHC.

Safe and stable placements and accommodation

In relation to the kind of care provided, young people said there needed to be focus on ensuring placements are stable, safe, and with adequate monitoring of carers. A number of the young people shared personal stories about the damaging impact on their lives of negative experiences with multiple, poor quality foster carers and residential care placements.

To this effect, ACYP is encouraged by the emphasis DCJ places on ensuring stable and secure environments for children and young people as the key motivating factor behind any review of permanency planning. In realising this goal, it is crucial that any decision making in a child protection context is done by representatives that are fully trained in implementation of the Principles of participation set out in s10 of the *Children And Young Persons (Care And Protection) Act 1998*. Implementation of current legislative requirements by decision makers who are trained in current protections under the act is critical. This will enable the child or young person to contribute to the discussion about their family structure and who they feel safe and secure with.

Voice and participation in decision making

In addition, ACYP advocates for the recognition of a child or young person's right to participation in decision making subject to their evolving capacities. In this context, children and young people should be allocated an advocate that has ongoing responsibility to represent the preferences of the child or young person and monitor the suitability of their placement. This person could also facilitate the child or young person's wish to apply for a variation of a care order as they mature and there is a significant change in their circumstances.

Furthermore, ACYP believes that the voice of the child must be systemically implemented throughout care and protection matters. From the initial stage of these situations, a child or young person should be allocated a dedicated advocate that is solely tasked to represent the child or young person's

preferences and best interests in order to ensure their voice is as strong as that of other family members in initial decision making.

Furthermore, in situation outside care and protection matters, there should be continued and meaningful opportunities for children and young people to liaise with their workers and carers. This may be through regular consultation led by organisations like ACYP. An alternative is the introduction of an initiative such as the 'Mind of My Own' App by Brighter Futures in the United Kingdom. The Mind of My Own 'One' app is a tool to help make sure opinions from all children and young people are listened to. They can send messages to their worker for them to see when they are at work. They can tell them whatever they like, for example how you are feeling or something you want to talk about. It is an easy way to send a message to their worker and to record their thoughts and feelings. It means that they can play a bigger part in the decisions which affect them.

Connection to family and culture

As discussed earlier, maintaining connections to family, in particular siblings, friends, and culture is very important for young people living in out of home care. Extended support networks were described by young people as a protective factor in relation to their emotional wellbeing and sense of identity. Connection to culture and knowing where they came from was especially important for Aboriginal young people. Some of the young Aboriginal people present spoke positively about being placed in kinship care arrangements or with Aboriginal carers.

Greater psychosocial supports

Young people identified support and assistance to tackle mental health issues and promote healing from physical, sexual, and emotional trauma as vital to helping them reach their full potential. They specifically mentioned the need for support in relation to self-harming and risk taking behaviour as they acknowledged many young people in OOHC used these behaviours as ways to cope with the effects of past trauma.

Investment in life skills programing

Life skills training was another important area that they said needed attention. They felt that they missed learning skills such as cooking, nutrition, driving, budgeting and financial skills, and advice regarding education and careers which other young people might receive as part of living within a supportive family.

"I only knew how to boil an egg when I left care"

Getting help to meet the 120 hours requirement for learner drivers was an issue for most. They did not have the same access to vehicles and drivers that other young people had. As they pointed out, caseworkers and residential care workers could not take them driving in the organization's car however but for a number of the young people present these were the only responsible adults they had in their lives.

Lastly they spoke about the need for young people in care to be able to easily access resources for a range of different life circumstances. Examples included: assistance to be able to attend things such educational/vocational, sporting, or recreational opportunities; accessing emotional wellbeing or psychological support; material assistance for things such as clothing; provision of establishment

costs when transitioning to independent living; and financial assistance related to career development and beginning work. They also felt they missed out on developing a lot of independent living skills which young people learnt through living in families e.g. driving, cooking and nutrition, and budgeting and financial skills.

What do young people need when leaving OOH and transitioning into independent living?

Much of the discussion focused on Leaving Care Plans.

Young people were clear that these needed to be developed collaboratively with the young person and they needed to have resources allocated to them so that goals they identified could be achievable. Young people were also clear that Leaving Care Plans needed to be developed over a lengthy period prior to them turning 18 so that the transition out of the care system was a supportive, gradual process.

“When we turn 18 we don’t know what questions to ask to find out information and resources that we need. So we’re kinda like blindfolded and being sent into the world.”

Young people agreed that Leaving Care Plan’s needed to cover several specific elements which they feel contribute to successful independent living:

- Connection to services that would provide ongoing support once someone turns 18. Many young people spoke about the anxiety they felt as they approached 18 about being “cut off” and not knowing where to go to get help.
- Connection to family, community, and cultural networks, this was important during the time of transition because the development of support and social networks helped to reduce isolation that young people might feel when they left care.
- Support from caseworkers to get all the relevant documentation needed to live independently e.g. birth certificate, proof of age card, and passport. Obtaining these documents can be more complicated for young people leaving care as official documents and authorisations were often held by different services. Young people spoke about the emotional toll of having to deal with multiple government bureaucracies who were not always sympathetic towards the circumstances which lead to them not having this documentation. This emotional toll was also raised in the context of often having to repeat their story to new caseworkers and carers as they were moved through the system to numerous placements.
- Independent living skills training, in particular assistance to get a driver’s license, cooking and nutrition, budgeting and financial skills.
- Advice and support with education and career pathways such as making choices about further education and training, or assistance with job seeking such as resume writing, job applications, and interview preparation.
- Financial assistance to undertake educational and vocation training to improve employability prospects.
- Information about access and eligibility requirements for income support.
- Assistance to secure long term, affordable, housing and establishment costs to set up a home.
- Access to emotional and psychological counselling and support to ensure that the effects of past experiences of abuse and trauma do not to impact them in adulthood.

What can workers do more of to support young people in OOHC?

Young people recognised that in many services caseworkers are overloaded and this makes it difficult to provide the level of support that young people in the system need. They felt the system should be sufficiently resourced so there are more caseworkers with smaller caseloads which would allow workers to spend more time working with individuals.

They also identified how some caseworkers interact with the young people with whom they work as an issue. There were a number of areas that they thought should be addressed. As highlighted in the previous section, young people wanted workers to be respectful, empathic, and honest with them, even if honesty meant giving young people bad news. Young people spoke a great deal about how they appreciated workers who were consistent, checked up with them regularly, and who paid attention to the young person's interests and passions in other areas of their lives. The comment about wanting workers to "see them as more than a file" was mentioned a number of times throughout the day.

Lastly the importance of workers actively supporting young people to maintain cultural connections was discussed. To achieve this they felt all workers should receive cultural competency training, it should be a priority to place Aboriginal young people in kinship care or with Aboriginal carers, and Aboriginal children and young people in care needed to be connected with Aboriginal workers and Aboriginal owned and controlled services.

What information do you need more of?

Young people said one of the biggest issues for them was knowing what information they needed in the first place. They spoke about not feeling confident about what was involved in transitioning into independent living so they did not necessarily know what questions they needed to ask when they had the opportunity. Most spoke about finding out information in a haphazard way and often only finding out what they needed from making mistakes or ending up in crisis situations. One solution offered to address this issue was the creation of a website specifically for young people in OOHC which listed rights and entitlements, any relevant policies or procedures, where to go for support and information, and opportunities in a single, easy to access location.

Access to files and personal information was raised again as something young people felt was crucial to helping them make sense of their personal histories, to understand the background to why particular decisions about them were made, especially those that were made when they were young, and had the potential to help them heal from past experiences.

In relation to accessing information, several young people noted that young people in residential care can have particular difficulties accessing online information due to restrictions on internet access in these settings. This circumstance needs to be taken into account when considering provision of information via online methods.

What makes a good caseworker?

There was a great deal of feedback provided about what makes a good caseworker based on people's personal experiences. Many young people had positive experiences with workers that they wanted to share as examples of how things should be while others wanted to share how they would have liked their experiences with workers to be different.

Below is a list of what the group felt were the most important qualities for a caseworker:

- Someone who demonstrates they respect you. Good caseworkers do this by listening to what you say, acting on what you ask and following up on what is happening, advocates for you based on your individual circumstances, checks in with you, and is genuinely interested in you as a person rather than just another file. Young people gave numerous examples of times when they felt workers had gone out of their way for them and the lasting impact this had for them. They described these workers as being professional but also being able to maintain a connection to the young person which was warm, compassionate, and caring. These young people said the interactions were professional but felt more friend-like rather than a clinical worker-client relationship. They also appreciated when services took consideration to allocate them a worker who might have a similar personality or had similar interests to them.

“It’s nice to be able to talk to someone about your interests, especially if your carers or other people who visit you don’t.”

- Not passing judgement and having an understanding about how experiences in a young person’s life that might cause them to behave in a particular way. Young people who understood principals of trauma-informed care spoke about workers needing training in this area.
- Someone who does not make promises that they cannot keep and does not give false hope. Everyone in the room agreed on the importance of the need for this level of trust. They understood that there were limitations on what caseworkers could do and that often caseworkers had to give bad news. But they preferred workers were honest about this, even if it was bad, rather than trying to tell the young person things the workers thought would make them happy.
- Is considerate about how they present themselves when they are with young people, examples given were things such as being too focused on writing notes rather than looking at the young person or visiting young people at school wearing their agency uniform or name tag which placed young people in the compromising position of having to explain who the worker was.
- Understands the importance of cultural, family, community to young people in care and supports them to remain connected to these networks.

Review of the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People

Background

A core objective of the OOHC and social services system is to ensure the safety of children and young people. Likewise, the NSW Government's Strategic Plan for Children and Young People (2016-2019) committed to protecting children and young people from 'abuse, neglect, violence and serious injury' and ensuring they are provided 'affordable, accessible and timely services'.

At the time of submission, ACYP is finalising a review of the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young people 2016-2019. This review includes reports on all of the new initiatives committed to under the plan, and the 30 indicators of progress. The data has been sourced from agencies responsible for the respective initiatives and indicators across the NSW Government.

Under the theme of Safe, there were a number of initiatives and indicators that were developed by the Interdepartmental Advisory Group, in conjunction with children and young people that focused on improving the OOHC and social services sector. For the Committee's reference, ACYP has extracted the relevant initiatives from our Review. Should the committee require any further information, ACYP would be happy to liaise with the relevant agencies to elaborate further.

Increase support into early adulthood for young people leaving out of home care (OOHC) to address the high levels of homelessness, unemployment and incarceration and low levels of educational attainment

The NSW Government's leaving care and aftercare programs are structured so each young person in care receives an individualised response that meets their needs as they transition to independence up to age 25, and beyond where necessary.

The legislative responsibility to support young people who exit Out of Home Care (OOHC) until they reach 25 years of age to improve their safety, welfare and wellbeing exists under section 165 (1) of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act (1998)*.

The term 'leaving care' simply refers to the expiration of the order allocating care to the Minister. Any young person leaving care is able to remain with their carers after the age of 18 if both the young person and their carer agree. In addition, OOHC placements may also be extended beyond 18 while the young person completes their Higher School Certificate.

The Department of Communities and Justice is testing a new approach to support improved outcomes for care leavers through the Futures Planning and Support (FP&S) model pilot.

The FP&S service model features three intensities of support:

1. Connection service - proactive contact for all young people leaving and who have left care to promote access to services, supports and opportunities to engage and connect with culture and community.
2. Futures Coach - advice and mentoring for those young people who lack protective factors to help them make decisions about their futures and to access supports and opportunities which can improve their prospects for the future

3. Intensive Case Worker – case management to ensure those with multiple and more complex needs have access to more intensive supports to address their needs

Brokerage funds are also available for care leavers who are receiving support from either a Futures Coach or an Intensive Case Worker, specifically to assist them to achieve their goals.

FP&S service model is designed for young people leaving, and who have left, out of home care (OOHC) and is being piloted on the Mid North Coast.

The design for the FP&S model followed a literature review of evidence based service models, and the design process involved a large number of stakeholders including care leaver groups, Aboriginal stakeholders and service providers.

The FP&S pilot is funded for three years at a total cost of \$8,135,249 (excl GST).

The successful service provider for the pilot is Burrun Dalai Aboriginal Corporation in partnership with Uniting. The partnership will provide care leavers with more choice of Futures Coaches (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) in the pilot.

The Permanency Support Program includes Leaving Care and 15+ Reconnect packages. These packages provide additional funding across three years (ages 15-17) to:

- Provide additional casework hours to engage the young person and help them explore their goals and plan their future
- Provide services to support the young person in their transition e.g. job readiness training
- Develop independent living skills e.g. obtain a driver's licence
- Connect with family, culture and community
- Establish a personal support network with people other than paid professionals.

Through collaboration with other agencies DCJ continues to enhance care leavers' access to entitlements and opportunities. This has included securing free entry to the Safer Driving Course provided by Transport NSW, expanding eligibility to Revenue NSW's Work and Development Order program for clearing fine debt and access to free Smart and Skilled scholarships through TAFE and university scholarships with the University of Western Sydney. Work is continuing to have other agencies recognise care leavers as a vulnerable cohort and to provide them with concessions or additional services.

DCJ partners with non-government organisations to provide programs to address care leavers' needs or help them grow in confidence and skills. These may include living skills, counselling, and reconnection with family and significant people in their lives. An example is the Ladder Step Up program in Western Sydney which is an education, employment and training program delivered in partnership with DCJ and the AFL industry.

A Care Leaver's Charter of Rights has been developed in collaboration with Youth Consult for Change, a group of young people who use their own experiences in care to give expert advice to improve the care system. The charter contains powerful messages from young people about what is important to them as they transition from care and what they expect from the system and their caseworker.

Implement the Care Leavers Line – 1800 number and mailbox where those who are in or have left care can find information and advice

The NSW Government has implemented the Care Leavers Line, an 1800 number and mailbox where people who have left care or are about to leave care can access information and advice. Operated by DCJ, the Care Leavers Line assists people as they transition out of care. The Care Leavers Line can be reached on 1800 994 696 or by emailing careleaversline@facss.nsw.gov.au.

New funding of \$190 million over four years to reform the child protection and out-of-home-care systems through targeted early intervention and building on Safe Home for Life child protection reforms. This includes expansion in evidence-based intensive intervention programs targeting family preservation and restoration

In 2016, the NSW government committed an additional \$560 million over four years for children and young people in, or at risk of entering, out-of-home care. This included funding to reform the child protection and out-of-home-care systems. Further, in the 2017/18 budget, \$52 million was allocated for implementation of a new service model as part of the Tune Reform 'Their Future Matters' to improve family preservation outcomes. And in the 2018/19 budget, \$39.2 million was allocated to help keep families together through evidence-based models, as part of Their Futures Matter Reforms. This includes improving family preservation through Multi-systemic Therapy for Child Abuse and Neglect and Functional Family Therapy for Child Welfare services to help at least 900 families a year.

ACYP supports the work that is being done to emphasise the use of early intervention and family preservation techniques in circumstances where it is in the best interests of the child. ACYP notes the critical importance of facilitating early intervention services and supports at a time where there is enormous potential to positively change the trajectory of a young life. This includes the points of intersection to which the Inquiry refers to including transitions from different stages of education, and transitions into and out of justice.

It is important to remember when undertaking permanency placement planning that restoration for many in the community is more expansive than just a child or young person parent/s. This has been especially relevant in the targeted consultations that ACYP has conducted with Aboriginal children and young people. Aboriginal children and young people have been clear that what was working for them was connected to culture and place and this must drive programming and response to aboriginal children and young people. Due to the significant importance and benefit of culture to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people, ACYP does not support the removal of Aboriginal children from their culture and community and advocates for a greater integration of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (Principle) in all matters involved with the OOH system.

ACYP commends this interpretation in partnership with an emphasis on working with the child or young person to understand who they consider connect to and safest with. It is critical that any review ensure the voice of children and young people is interlaced throughout the care and restoration process.

New funding of \$370 million over four years to meet increased demand for out-of-home-care through funding additional out-of-home-care placements.

The \$560 million committed in 2016 also included \$370 million over four years to support an expected increase in the number of children and young people in need of out-of-home care.

In response to the increasing number of children in out-of-home care, the Permanency Support Program was introduced in late 2017. The Permanency Support Program represents one of the most significant reforms to the NSW child protection and out-of-home care systems in decades. The Program aims to:

- maintain children and young people at home, minimising entries and re-entries into care
- find permanent homes for children and young people currently in care through restoration, guardianship and adoption
- address the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the care system by maintaining connections with family and kin, community, language, culture and country, and
- invest in higher quality support and provide more targeted and therapeutic support to address individual needs.

The Permanency Support Program reform shifts from the placement-based service system to a child and family centred service system. Through targeted support packages the specific needs of individual children, young people and their families are able to be met. This is important in achieving better safety, permanency and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people.

During 2018-19, close to 9,000 funding packages were provided for children being case managed by service providers, which is approximately 50% of children in out-of-home-care.

Decrease the percentage of children and young people re-reported at risk of significant harm by 15% by 2019. (Premier's Priority 2016-2019)

The baseline used for this indicator was 40.4% according to the 2014/15 cohort.

In 2016-17, nearly 120,000 children were reported to the child protection helpline, of which 72 per cent were at risk of significant harm. From June 2016 to June 2017, FACS caseworkers helped more than 10,000 children reported at risk of significant harm to achieve their goals.

By June 2018, 36.2% of children were re-reported at risk of significant harm, a reduction of over 10% from baseline.

In recognition of the continuing work that must be done, this indicator has been transferred to the 2019-2023 Premier's Priorities with a new target set to decrease the proportion of children and young people re-reported at risk of significant harm by 20% by 2023.

ACYP also recommends that there be a creation of a state wide communication strategy that will demystify and de-stigmatise the process of reporting and investigation. In our consultations with children and young people they have expressed a desire to understand the process that is triggered by a report and to be kept informed about the progress of their case. Greater participation of children and young people in the assessment process in circumstances, where it is safe to do so, must be included as part of the systemisation of the voice of children and young people in care and protection matters.

Increase the number of OOHC agencies that meet the minimum standards for accreditation as a designated agency on time.

Under Clause 47 of the Children and Young Person's (Care and Protection) Regulation 2012 (the Regulation), the Children's Guardian may, by notice in writing to an agency, defer determining the

agency's application for accreditation renewal. Under clause 62 of the Regulation, a deferral extends the agency's current period of accreditation until a determination of its application for accreditation renewal is made.

Agencies must meet the accreditation criteria in order to be accredited or to renew their accreditation. The criteria are the *NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care* (the Standards), approved by the Minister under clause 48 of the Regulation. Agencies must satisfy all 23 of the Standards in order to become accredited or for their accreditation to be renewed.

Determinations are usually deferred when an assessment of an agency's practice indicates that the agency does not have the capacity to meet all of the Standards prior to the expiry of its current accreditation period. An agency may be deferred if one or more of the Standards are not met. Deferring a determination provides the agency with additional time to provide evidence of compliant practice and enables them to continue to provide statutory out-of-home care.

Where the Children's Guardian has concerns about risks to children and young people placed in a deferred agencies, a request may be made to DCJ to suspend further placement referrals of children and young people to that agency. The Children's Guardian may also impose additional conditions on the agency's accreditation.

As of 30th June 2016, the Children's Guardian deferred determining five designated agencies application for accreditation, and four Designated Agencies were deferred as at June 2019.

Committing \$40 million over four years for youth homelessness initiatives that adopt an investment approach and prioritise young people leaving out-of-home-care with high risk of homelessness

In January 2016 the former Premier, Mike Baird, held a Roundtable to discuss strategies for achieving the Premier's Priority "Reducing youth homelessness" target. The Roundtable was attended by representatives from Specialist Homelessness Services, out of home care (OOHC) and other youth services, peak bodies and other NSW government agencies. Importantly the Roundtable also included young people with a lived experience of homelessness, bringing client perspectives to the consultation process.

Strategies put forward by the Roundtable attendees included prevention, improving support and increasing long-term accommodation options.

Diverting young people leaving from OOHC from entering the homelessness system was a prevention strategy proposed by the group. In May 2016 the Estimates Review Committee allocated funding to the development and implementation of the Premier's Youth Initiative.

The Premier's Youth Initiative (PYI) is a pilot program that provides services to young people leaving statutory out-of-home care (OOHC), who are identified as being vulnerable to experiencing homeless or at risk of homelessness on exit from care. The program aims to build the long-term capacity and resilience of young people in order to permanently divert them from the homelessness service system.

Young people who receive PYI have access to a personal advisor, education and employment mentoring as well as help to find long-term accommodation. The program assists them to develop

strong personal networks and skills to navigate multiple adult support service systems and increase their capacity to manage crises and change as they transition to independence.

PYI is offered to young people in OOHC aged 16 years and 9 months to 17 years and 6 months, exiting OOHC and likely to be homeless or at risk upon leaving care are screened for eligibility to the Premier's Youth Initiative. The program has 446 client places and is active across most of the state. Note, taking into account entries and exits, PYI may deliver to more than this number of young people over the period, however the program has capacity to place 446 clients at once.

The PYI Client Satisfaction survey aims to provide an opportunity for client feedback into the PYI program, ensuring client voice is embedded in the program's service improvement process. It allows service providers to assess how clients view the services they are receiving and identify potential areas for improvement. The survey also allows the Department of Communities and Justice to see how clients are engaging with the PYI program at a District and state level.

The questions used in the PYI Client Satisfaction Survey are obtained from the Client Feedback and User Satisfaction Question bank, in the Premier's Youth Initiative: Continuous Quality Improvement Plan. The bank consists of questions based on the Client Satisfaction Inventory (CSI), and the General Practice Assessment Questionnaire (GPAQ).

The PYI Client Satisfaction survey is administered quarterly with all services and service providers receive their individual results, as well as the state wide results. Results are discussed with DCJ, and used to help identify opportunities for change.

The PYI program is currently under evaluation with the final report due later this year. To ensure client perspectives have been captured in the evaluation process, focus groups have been undertaken with a sample of clients. The focus groups were conducted with clients aged 18 years and over and sought feedback on a number of areas, including their experience engaging with their PYI provider, whether their needs were met and how the service could be improved.

Targeted Earlier Intervention Reform Program – redesign the service system to ensure that families receive the support they need and do not reach crisis point

Over the period of the plan a substantial redesign of the service system for families was planned and consulted on. The resulting Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) program commenced on 1 July 2020. The program delivers flexible support to children, young people, families and communities experiencing or at risk of vulnerability. The TEI is a client centred, outcomes-focused program, that is easier for families, young people and communities to navigate.

Services are delivered under two broad streams:

- Community strengthening – activities that build cohesion, inclusion and wellbeing across all communities in NSW, and empower Aboriginal communities
- Wellbeing and safety – activities that provide targeted support to children, young people and families, and provide opportunities for personal development.

The TEI program supports increasing use of evidence in service design and delivery, to ensure the Program achieves outcomes for children, young people, families and communities over time.

TEI services funded from 1 July 2020 have been commissioned based on local priorities, arising from local consultation processes with communities and service providers, and supported by a range of data sources.

The TEI program will report client outcomes data through the Data Exchange. The outcomes data will be used by individual services and at the program level to better understand what works for children, young people, families and communities in the early intervention space, and will allow greater responsiveness to changing local needs.

Conclusion

The children and young people in the child protection and social services system that ACYP have consulted said they wanted a service system that is aware of the importance of involving children and young people in decision-making. In addition they wanted staff specifically trained to engage with them effectively to achieve positive outcomes that meet their individual needs whilst keeping them safe.

ACYP acknowledges that there has been a significant investment by the NSW Government in reforming the system through initiatives, such as those under the Plan. As an organisation, we envisage that the intentions and core objectives of these initiatives will be a continued area of work for the Office and our organisation is committed to collaborating with the Government, non-government, business and community sector to develop a child protection and social services system that works in the best interests and for the needs of all children and young people.

If it was of interest to the Committee, as experts in their own lives, ACYP would be happy to facilitate a consultation with children and young people with lived experience of the OOHC or social services system.